

The Firehole in the Fall

Ray Bergman

We first fished the Firehole River of Yellowstone Park the latter part of September — and never saw more beautiful or accessible dry-fly water. The road paralleled it for miles. You could watch for rising fish as you drove along, and most of the current was just fast enough to provide a nice float.

It was filled with weeds dense enough to do credit to a warm-water lake. Wet-fly fishing was difficult and in many places impossible because the sunken fly was continually getting hung up. But most of the weeds were slightly under the surface, and between them ran many channels where the water flowed at medium speed and where the trout liked to lurk and feed. Also they seemed to be partial to small weed pockets in the centers of thick beds. As long as you kept your line floating or fished them with a short line, you could float your fly over the weeds without any trouble; but if you made too long a cast and the line sank the slightest, you got an infernal drag. This ruined the float of the fly, and besides sometimes the line tangled up with the weeds. My first day on this stream was spent with Vint Johnson of West Yellowstone. Being comparatively new in this country at the time, Vint had been there only once, so knew very little about it. The only other information we had to go by was that gleaned from a short talk with Ranger Scotty Chapman, who knew the stream quite well. But this was sandwiched in during a party at Scotty's home, so it didn't register as well as it should have.

Vint and I didn't do very well. For at least three hours we fished with various flies in sizes 12 and 14, got perhaps a couple of dozen rises each, but never hooked a fish. Vint did prick several, but so far as I was concerned I never felt one of the rises I had.

Late that afternoon we were still struggling with the problem when some of Scotty's words of the night before penetrated the fog in my mind. "Use small flies," he had said. I started searching frantically for my emergency box of midges. It wasn't in my coat. I dashed up to the car, which was near by. It wasn't there. Nothing to do but search through the boxes I had on hand in hopes that a stray 16 or 18 could be located. I found one size 16 Adams.

As soon as I put this over the nearest rising fish I was fast — solidly. Also I took the next two fish I cast to, one of them a two-and-a-half pounder. The next



Photograph of Firehole River by Tom Wendelburg

In Praise of Bergman's "Trout"

A young boy fumbling with his first fly rod trudged home from the nearby stream, head down and again fishless. The line and leader were hopelessly, it seemed, tangled in the reel. What had gone wrong this time? Why did his line insist on landing a disorganized pile on the water? Why did he never see anything but spooked and speeding fish headed for cover?

He carefully edged his rod through the spring-loaded screen door, remembering the stern warning administered with the recent gift. A well-worn book rested next to the papers on the kitchen table, its maroon cover marred by the stain from a lemonade spill. It was Ray Bergman's *Trout*. The boy rested his rod in the corner, picked up the book and began to read.

The answers were there as they have been for hundreds of thousands of fly fishermen ever since *Trout* was published

in 1938. And although Bergman himself died several years ago, the basic angling wisdom recorded in *Trout* is timeless which explains why it is one of the best-selling angling books in publishing history. It was his best-known but not his only contribution. He also authored more than 300 angling articles during his 26 years as angling editor for *Outdoor Life*, as well as two other still-pertinent books, *Just Fishing* and *Fresh-Water Bass*.

The following selection on Montana's Firehole is from the 1964 edition of *Trout*, although it is essentially the same as that in the first 1938 version. This selection was probably based on Bergman's experiences during the Twenties, but the advice he gives for this particular stream would be well-heeded this fall — or any other. A new edition of *Trout* will be published this fall — an event certain to make it one of anglingdom's best-sellers. John Merwin.

fish looked considerably larger, and I struck too hard for the 4X gut and lost the fly. By this time it was four-thirty in the afternoon, and, as if arranged by schedule, the trout stopped rising; so we went back to camp.

That night we told Scotty of our experiences. He smiled as he said: "You sometimes need very small flies on the Firehole, as small as 16's and 18's would probably be better."

Fortunately I found my box of midges. They were in a duffel bag at camp.

It was two days before I again saw the Firehole. It wasn't my fault. If I'd had my way, the following morning would have found me there long before the fish even thought of rising. Vint Johnson was responsible. Disregarding my feelings, he approached my wife and sold her the idea that we should never think of leaving the Yellowstone without having seen Old Faithful, Fishing Bridge, Yellowstone Lake, the Canyon, and several other nationally known wonders — or whatever you call them. Just as if we couldn't come back another time to see these things, which would always be there. When trout are rising, fish for them; these are my sentiments. Old Faithful puts on a display every hour or thereabouts and never fails, but you can never tell about fish.

My wife fell for Johnson's sales talk. Even Ranger Scotty Chapman sided in with them — so what chance did I have? On the second day of this sight-seeing tour we were on our way to see Old Faithful. On the way we skirted the Firehole River. Vint was driving. This had been arranged beforehand. Both Grace and Vint mistrusted that if I did the driving we'd probably stop as soon as I saw a rising fish from the corner of my eye. This left me free to look about to my heart's content, but it didn't do me any good. Several times I nearly jumped from the car, but my hard-hearted companions wouldn't stop long enough to give me even an "eyeful."

To make matters worse Old Faithful had spouted some five minutes earlier, so we were told when we reached there. This meant a wait of some forty-five minutes before the next show. The time was posted but I've forgotten just what it was. I thought it would be a good idea to get in some fishing while waiting, but Vint said we should see other things instead. So again I was dragged hither and yon while we looked at boiling springs



Photograph by Alexander Lowry

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of various shapes, sizes, and colors and queer formations here and there.

Once in a while I got a glimpse of an enticing stream and expressed a wish to stop but it didn't do any good. It wasn't my day—it belonged to Vint and my wife. Finally we came to the Morning Glory Hole—one of Johnson's favorites. This meant that we stopped to look it over. Now I didn't mind. We had been following the course of the Firehole on the way there, and I had noted that it wasn't very far away when we stopped.

Pretending that I was enjoying the whole thing immensely, I looked into the Morning Glory Hole with the others, made a very few complimentary remarks, and while they were mentally losing themselves in the blue depths of the hole, sneaked away to take a look at the Firehole.

What I saw made my temperature rise several degrees. Grace and Vint might have been in raptures over the Morning Glory, but I was having an angler's dream of heaven. The scene had everything: reasonably shallow water, ideal flow of current, rising trout, and beautiful surroundings. A few casts distant upstream a boiling spring diffused its stream in picturesque white billows against a romantic background. As I looked a sudden snow flurry scattered a cluster of large flakes over the landscape. They sparkled gaily in the rays of a brilliant sun that momentarily peeked through the clouds. It was spectacular and thrilling but what thrilled me most was dimples in the water. No matter where I looked there were feeding trout! And me without a rod in my hand!

To go back to see Old Faithful was almost too much. I kicked over the traces and told them to go by themselves. But again they won and I meekly got in the car without having cast a single fly. "You'd never forgive yourself," said Vint dramatically, "if you left here without seeing Old Faithful." As if I couldn't see it the next time I went to Yellowstone—which I did many times.

We got back to the world's wonder about five minutes ahead of time. I figured this time should not be wasted so set up my rod. Before I got through I had the satisfaction of watching Vint doing the same. He wasn't as blasé about the fishing as he made out to be. Maybe he had planned this whole thing just to devil me.

Then Old Faithful performed, and I was glad, momentarily, that Grace and Vint had been so high-handed in their curtailment of my fishing. But even so, I was raring to leave the moment the force of the eruption had subsided—and Vint didn't do anything to hinder me this time. I suppose he felt that he had fulfilled his duty in bolstering my geographical knowledge first hand, and now figured I could play.

The trout were still rising when we got back to the Morning Glory Hole of the Firehole. This is my own name for this bit of water and is not official. Vint wanted me to have the pool to myself, so he went downstream to look things over while I stayed to see what could be done. I went down to the tail. Just as I got there the skies darkened abruptly and a thick wet snow pulled upstream on the wings of a gale. In the thick of it I saw trout rising a few feet above the lip of the tail. It was an ideal setup for approach. The tail of the pool was a smooth glide that ended in a jagged natural dam about three feet high. With the gale lashing the smooth water, and my position being so much lower, I advanced within

several feet of the little falls without disturbing the fish. Then I knelt in the wash of the falls and could easily see the water above without being seen.

Despite Scotty's admonition about small flies and our experience of two days previous, I started fishing with a 12. I really thought the first experience had been a freak and that it was unnecessary to keep on using the midges. Some three dozen casts later I changed my mind. Although the trout kept rising to naturals, they would have nothing of my size 12 Adams, which was about the color of the naturals. The stream was covered thickly with these grayish flies, but they were so tiny that I could hardly see them.

I had tied a couple of size 16 Adams the night before, so put one on. This brought some three or four half-hearted rises but no hooked fish. So once again I brought out the box of "unseeables" that I hadn't used for more than a year. Having no Adams in this size, I tied on a Blue Dun. I couldn't see this on the water, but I think I got several rises to it because I felt one when I struck by guess. I could see the Black Gnat quite well, but nothing took it. I didn't bother trying any more of these dull patterns. I tied on the Royal Coachman, and on the very first cast I took a good trout.

Once again this old-time pattern proved its worth. I could see it better than the others, and despite the fact that the naturals on the water were gray, they took it better than those artificials which seemed to match the naturals from my point of view. It is quite likely that in this case, owing to certain light conditions, the Royal looked more natural than the others, but of course this is something I can only guess at. The fact is, I know that every rising fish I saw in the tail end of the pool took the Royal Coachman size 18, and that is conclusive proof it was O.K. for the time and the conditions no matter what the reason was.

Incidentally, all through this stay in the Yellowstone the best fishing seemed to be between ten in the morning and four-thirty in the afternoon, with the last hour slower than the rest of the time. This was no doubt because of the coldness of the weather. It froze nearly every night, and as soon as the sun left the water, the air had the feel of a December day in southern New York. For me it was ideal. I've become old enough to appreciate the comforts of a warm camp early in the morning and a good dinner at a reasonable hour in the evening. But I forgive my wife and Vint. They were thinking only of me, and I must admit that I would have been embarrassed many times after getting back if I hadn't seen the things they insisted I should see. Just imagine having someone say: "So you've just come back from the Yellowstone. Wasn't Old Faithful simply gorgeous? What did you think of the Canyon compared to the Grand Canyon of the Colorado?"—and so on. Those who ask these things are never true fishermen, and they would have been horrified if I had had to say I hadn't seen them.

Since this first visit to the Yellowstone I've fished the Firehole many times. On some trips we've stayed in the vicinity for more than three weeks at a stretch and often stopped at the Glory Hole for a look. But I've never chanced to reach there when there were large trout moving and rising, although they were taking well in other parts of the river.

This same thing has happened to me in many other streams throughout the United States, and I am sure my

readers will agree that, when a fishing opportunity comes up and the trout are taking freely, then one should take advantage of it and not spend time looking at scenic wonders that remain the same at all times. Even most geysers erupt at regular intervals, but the rise of good-sized trout is most uncertain. It can never be predicted accurately. Oh, you may arrive at a splendid formula and for considerable time have it live up to your expectations, but just about the time you get cocky about it you are heading straight to a fall.

All in all, during the season of the year I usually fished the Firehole, I found that small dry flies, say those running from 14 through 18 or even 20, were a necessity on many occasions. Usually the somber patterns were best.

It wasn't until my second season on the river that I found how to get the greatest sport from fishing it. You see it contains many rather flat and slow-moving stretches. Out in the current, often between heavy weed beds, trout were invariably rising, but most of them were small, ranging from keepers to fourteen inches, although at times the big fellows also rose in such places.

The first year I always noted that each time I waited along the banks of such stretches, or got into the stream in order to reach the feeding current tongue on the other side of the weeds, I invariably frightened sizable fish from the shallow water close to the bank.

One stretch in particular intrigued me, although I made out very poorly there. That first year I fished it perhaps a dozen different times and never succeeded in taking a trout better than a pound.

Let me describe this piece of water so that you will better understand the fishing that I experienced later on. Looking upstream, a slow-moving and shallow current hugged the left bank, which was mostly grassy and for the greater part treeless. Weed growth started about fifteen or twenty feet out and spread over to the edge of the main current almost in midstream. This formation held fairly constant for several hundred yards, so that there was plenty of fishing territory to play with.

In advancing above the tail I scared a lot of trout from the shallow water to my left, looking upstream. Immediately most of the trout for thirty feet above stopped rising; only those over at the extreme right and under the bank where the water looked extra deep kept dimpling away. Just about this time the heavy snow squalls that had been pestering us all day suddenly ceased and the sun changed drab colors into golden, pulsating life. The right bank proved very friendly. Practically every cast brought a rise, and about every third rise I hooked a good trout.

Then I came to the log jam, and above it I could see a rise that just spelled "size." It was a difficult place to fish from below, and I didn't want to get too far above for a down- or across-stream cast because other good fish were rising there. First I tried some loop casts. They seemed to fall well, but finally I got caught in the log; so I quit that. Figuring the fish was worth trying for, I cautiously worked upstream until opposite his lie, waited until he rose again, and then cast so that the fly dropped on the water about a foot above the log. It was perfect. I expected to see the trout rise and take my fly. I expected to see the fly disappear in the little hump this fish made. It disappeared all right—but under the log instead of a hump—and the trout never rose again,

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at least not while I was fishing this stretch of water. Fortunately my movements had not disturbed the fish in the water above, and here I was successful again. Then came an experience that was new to me. By this time I had reached within casting distance of a sizable boiling spring and could see its waters mingling with those of the stream. Close to the wrinkle caused by the meeting of the hot spring and the cold water I saw a trout rise. It was only a dimple, but from the suction I thought it a good fish. Conditions couldn't have been better for a good float of the fly. When the little Royal dropped to the water it drifted along in a lifelike manner until it reached the place where I had seen the dimple, and then it disappeared. I raised the rod and was fast to what felt like the best fish of the day. Vint came along just as the hook went home, and some minutes later I had the satisfaction of having him take my picture as I held up the seventeen-incher with white steam of the boiling spring for a background. It wasn't the best fish of the day, but it was the first time I had ever taken a trout where I could have boiled it within a few feet.

The catching of this fish seemed to be the signal for the rise to stop. Although both Vint and I fished hard for another half hour, we didn't rise another fish, nor



Late-Season Fishing in Yellowstone

You've got until October 31 this year to catch the Firehole's fall fishing. That's the close of the season there according to the information officer at Yellowstone Park. Most of the river is fly-fishing-only, with a limit of two fish better than 16 inches. A one-and-a-half mile section of the river in the geyser basin area has been closed to all fishing. (It seems that the Park Service people were trying to keep the tourists on the boardwalks while the anglers enjoyed free access to the area, a happy but un-democratic situation.)

Jack Dean, a fisheries management biologist at Yellowstone, told *Fly Fisherman* in early July that Yellowstone had a late spring, which caused the river to remain cooler than normal into the summer and produced better fishing than usual in the warmer months. He said the fall fishing will pick up in early September after this year's shorter-than-normal summer slump.

Dean also told us there had been an earthquake recently in the Gibbon-Madison River area which opened a mountain spring above the Gibbon and was causing heavy clouding of both rivers. He didn't have any forecast for clearing water and anglers planning on heading directly for either of those streams should check first. J.M.

did we see one rise. But after all it was time for this to happen, being about four-thirty on a cold afternoon.

And now I'm going to tell you why I feel that Old Faithful robbed me of some good fishing. I went back to this pool twice that season and never saw another trout. If we hadn't gone to see the geyser, I might have had a lot more to say about the Morning Glory Hole of the Firehole.

Somehow my thoughts centered on that particular water all during the following winter. I couldn't think of trout without seeing the fish rising there, or the big ones wallowing out from the bank. So it was the first place I headed for when we reached Yellowstone Park the following year. Trout were rising in it, exactly as they had been on the last day I'd unsuccessfully fished it.

Starting below the good water I carefully waded up along the left-hand side of the weed bed, stopping when I got within reasonable casting distance of the lowest rising fish at the left-hand bank. Conditions seemed just right. The light was ideal, and a quartering wind came downstream at just the right angle and with just the right force to make a perfect loop without effort. Besides, the wind was strong enough to make a slight ripple on the water at the bank.

But something was wrong. Trout kept rising, but always just out of reach of the greatest distance I could cast and yet make the fly drop with perfect form. If I moved forward the few feet necessary to reach a fish it either stopped rising, or moved further up and began rising there. If I made a longer cast to reach the fish it was much worse. The trout not only stopped rising but usually got out of there in a hurry, making an exciting wake as they departed.

This finally resulted in my putting down every fish that had been rising along the bank to my left. By this time I had reached the upper limits of the feeding range along the bank, but there was still good feeding territory at my right. It extended at least another hundred feet upstream. A dozen of the actively feeding fish were within easy casting distance and were in the open water about six inches from the edge of the weeds, so I began fishing for them.

But I was disgruntled over my dismal failure and so made a poor first cast and promptly put down the half dozen fish that were working close by. This put me in an even worse state of mind, and just as surely as if I'd thrown stones at these fish they quit rising. With ire increasing every second I made a few more devastating casts, with the result that all fish within two hundred feet on all sides of me stopped feeding and the surface of the water became lifeless, without evidence of feeding fish.

I waited for a half hour and decided that I'd made a complete failure of my attempts at catching any fish that morning. It took about ten minutes to work out of the stream and walk to the car. When I got there I turned to look back. Then my eyes opened wide. Now that I had got out of the water, it looked as if every fish in it had started rising again; impudently, it seemed to me.

The ride to camp served to quiet my nerves. Before I had driven half of the twenty miles back to the village of West Yellowstone I was determined on returning to Weedy Flat, a name I'd given the place, that very afternoon. A new idea on how to outwit these fish had come to mind.

How different the reality! It was an afternoon I have

always remembered, not from the success I achieved, but from the utter blankness as far as fishing was concerned. When I got back not a fish was rising. I spent several hours diligently casting over waters that I felt sure contained many sizable fish, and took exactly three trout that would at best have made only good bait.

It was two days before I got another chance to fish this water. I reached there about ten o'clock in the morning, which is about the time these trout started working. As I was setting up the rod the rise started, and by the time I got ready it was at its best.

Having what I thought was a fine idea, I selected a position near several good pockets among the weeds and also within casting distance of a choice bit of the left bank. Keep in mind that "left" and "right" in this description are based on looking and fishing upstream, not on the correct "left" and "right" of a stream that are based on the flow of the current or directly opposite.

Then I waded into the thickest of the weeds, where my legs would be hidden, and patiently waited. Of course all the fish for yards around quit rising when I did this, but after about fifteen minutes they started again. Things were working according to my calculations. The first fish to rise within range was one working in a weed pocket. He took my fly on the first chuck but the resulting fight, for it was a large fish, put all the other fish down. This necessitated another wait for action to begin again, a period of perhaps a half hour. When the next rise started the fish came up at the far side of the weeds, so I had to cast across the weed bed and drop the fly directly at the opposite edge.

The first cast was directed to the fish farthest downstream, or nearest to me. He took it and was landed. This time luck seemed to favor me. One after another I took four more, the last one weighing over three pounds. Fortunately, because these fish all fought on the right side of the weeds until tired out and then were slid over the weed tops to be released, the rest of the trout on the other side of the stream did not stop rising.

After the excitement attending the large fish had subsided I glanced to the left bank and saw several good fish dimpling there. I put the fly over the nearest one. It was, in my estimation, a perfect cast followed by a perfect float. But before the fly actually touched the water, the fish had fled for cover. I tried for the fish some four feet above this one. The same thing happened, except that this time I saw the wakes of three fish leaving the

place. There were still a few more rises within casting reach above this. After I had made this third cast there were no more fish rising along the left bank. It was exasperating and challenging.

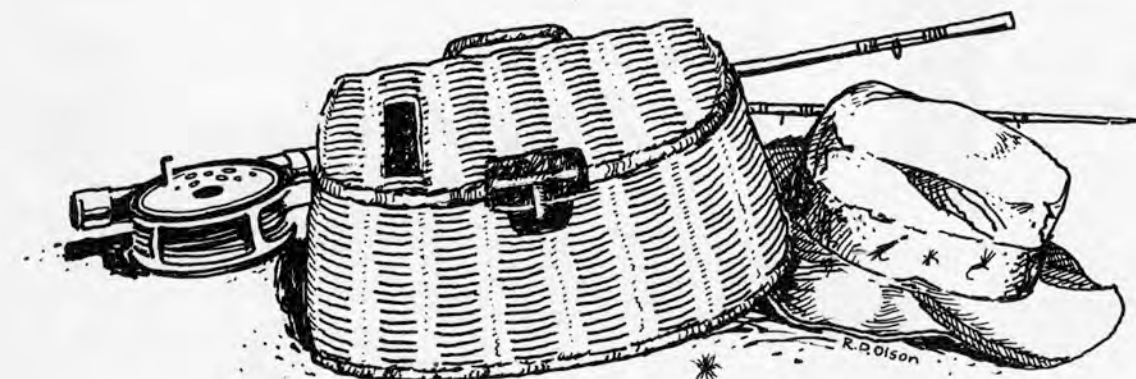
We went upstream a few miles and tried a nice stretch of fast water. I took several twelve- to fourteen-inch rainbows and one fifteen-inch brown, but all the time I kept thinking of that grass-covered bank which harbored a lot of good fish I had been unable to catch.

The fish in the fast water quit taking so we drove back to Weedy Flat. Trout were rising there, I believe all the fish located in the area. But now I used common sense, something I should have done at first. Instead of wading out into the stream and repeating the mistakes that had proved ruinous, I approached the bank with great caution, crawling on my hands and knees for the last twenty feet. Then on reaching the water I cautiously peeked upstream. About twenty feet above, a nice fish was rising. It was an accomplished trout. It never broke the water when taking a fly. A suction hole appeared on the surface, making a dimple and a tiny ring, and that was all.

This trout was close to the bank and I knew that if in casting I waved the rod over the water it would immediately ruin my chances. So I moved back a foot or two and, guessing at the place where I'd seen the fish rise, made the cast over the grass. Only the end of the leader and the fly went to the water, and it had hardly got there when I saw the leader on the grass twitch I struck and was fast to plenty of fun in the way of a two-and-a-quarter-pound brown. I played this fish out without getting off my knees and took utmost care in landing and releasing it, not showing my person enough to be seen over the tall grass. This paid dividends, because the trout that had been rising just above this one was still on the job when I got ready to fish again.

I took three more good-sized browns before making an error and putting the rest down. But I was satisfied, I knew that from this time on I could take trout from under or close to the bank by fishing from the very bank under which they fed.

The method of fishing this bank proved most successful in many other stretches. Time after time I took splendid specimens from locations that were usually ignored, and from which most of the good fish were scattered by anglers who, having eyes only for the principal current of the water, never considered the possibilities offered near the banks. ■



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