

Words:  
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THE CLOSEST FLY SHOP to my northern Michigan hometown is an hour-and-a-half away by interstate. It's rare to see someone else on these watersheds of Hemingway and hex hatches, but when I do, it's usually an uncle or an old high school math teacher or the guy who changes my oil. There are no statues of flyfishermen, no coffee shops or breweries with fishy names (or, for that matter, any coffee shops or breweries at all), no flyfishing festivals or vehicles with trout stickers.

Moving west—where the rivers are bigger, busier and featured on more magazine covers than the rivers of my home—has been a weird and nerve-racking experience. Simply driving by the storied Madison or Henry's Fork or Deschutes, rivers seen in Hollywood movies, is reason enough to start sweating. After years of admiring such places from afar, it's overpowering to see the holy waters right there before me, to experience all at once this thing I've grown to worship from afar.

So, naturally, I blow it. Call it stage fright. Everything I've ever learned about fishing goes out the door when in the presence of these rivers—these wide, famous, busy waters.

In the West Yellowstone area, I fished the Madison and Firehole for two long days and didn't catch a damn thing. Not a whitefish, not a fry. I lost more flies in two days on those two rivers than in the last year of fishing no-name, log-jammed creeks for 11-inch cutthroat. I got snagged on everything and nothing. I threw awful casts. On day two, hope waning, I hooked up with a

decent (relative, of course, to all the other fish I wasn't catching) brown in a hole above a small waterfall. I promptly let it run over the waterfall and dash 20 yards downstream while I shimmied over precarious logs and slimy rocks to chase it. Eventually I let the fish run a little too far, going over yet another small waterfall, the line going slack. A friend said it was the worst fight he'd ever seen. I didn't disagree.

This is an all-too-common occurrence now that I call the West home. At every new, renowned river—the Bitterroot, the Gallatin, the Roaring Fork—I choke. I get nervous. I get snagged. I choose the wrong flies. I promptly lose those flies. It's like I completely forget what I'm doing, what I've spent years learning on tiny, cedar-choked northern Michigan streams where I don't have an audience—places where I spent years acquiring trial-and-error knowledge, took mental tallies of every submerged log, noted every fly-stealing bush and memorized the zip code of every leg-consuming beaver hole.

These Western rivers have yet to see my composure at its best, their logs and beaver holes and bushes a stage I've yet to frequent, an act I've yet to perfect. Eventually I'll feel at home on these rivers I once only knew through social media images of people holding hogs. Eventually these rivers, like the waters I grew up on, will be familiar and unthreatening—but first, practice. First, snagging and tripping and choking. Only then will these big rivers feel, finally, like home. ☞

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Monte Becker gets the laundry done on a gin-clear river in southern Chile. Photo: Tim Romano

