Fly Fishing the Wind River Range
by Scott Smith

It was a Friday evening and the end of a long week was upon me. I’m not sure what made the week seem so long, possibly the reflection of the past weekends venturing to the beautiful trout streams in neighboring Idaho, or it may have been the agonizing anticipation of the weekend ahead. Nonetheless, this time I wanted to venture to somewhere special and away from the crowds. It was mid-July and most of the larger rivers of the region were just beginning to ease from runoffs swollen fury. The Henry’s Fork had provided as always, a wonderful beginning to the mountain summer, yet I found myself needing something different. It was the perfect time to head to the Wind River Range.

Almost simultaneously I envisioned the adventure and all planning easily followed. I had been camping out of my pick-up frequently so there was no need to pack, just don’t forget the 3-weight. A quick stop at Albie’s and my journey south out of Jackson had begun. The energy within me was strong and the excitement was almost unbearable. Of course, I had felt it many times before, it is the reason why we all fish. Rockin out to some WSP and enjoying the scenery and wildlife kept me from daydreaming too much. Before I knew it I had passed through Pinedale and was headed straight for the range. The road stopped abruptly and what lay ahead was pure wonder, more water than anyone could fish in a lifetime and, luckily for me, my campsite all to myself.

Truly a magnificent mountain range, the Winds are Wyoming’s longest and highest. The Winds have a north to south orientation and are roughly 100 miles in length and in some areas over 30 miles wide. The small town of Dubois sits on the northern fringe leaving Pinedale to the west and the larger town of Lander to the east. Within this expanse lies the Bridger-Teton National Forest and in my opinion some of the most rugged wilderness in the lower 48 states. The topography of the region is a hikers and fisherman’s paradise. The region is made mostly of solid granite rock and can retain water much like a porcelain tub. Around every corner is another basin to explore and most do hold resident trout, some in large proportions.

The tricky part about exploring these mountains from an angler’s perspective is their elevation. The town of Pinedale alone sits at 7200’ and by the time most reach a backcountry access they’re topping 8000’. Combine this with an area that is known for its harsh winters and you have a small fishing window. As with most mountain ranges, ice and snowpack play an important role for the local fisheries. Contrasting the winter, summer here can be quite warm and for long periods very dry. In doing so the snowpack and localized weather can adversely effect when and where the area fishes well. In an average year you can expect low and mid-elevation snow to runoff by late May. Ice break-up on low elevation lakes can occur at the same time or somewhat later. This period is a key time in the window of opportunity. The sun’s energy penetrates deep into the water system and triggers spring growth in all aquatic life and the trout begin to feed voraciously. Ice on the alpine lakes can last as long as late July. After all the ice has melted and only snowfields remain, the systems water table begins to drop in July. This is the second important period in the summer cycle. Water temperatures will generally reach the highest during this time and can stimulate insect and fish activity making for some fantastic fly-fishing. On many remote drainages you can experience 100 fish days during this
time. By fall the region is becoming bone dry and some larger creeks have turn to mere trickles. This is my favorite time to fish the region, when the water is low, gin clear, and cooling. Often you can sight fish for cruising trout in the 20” range, an experience that can top the list in fly-fishing.

Each period of the Winds fishing season is characterized with some wonderful insect hatches that are of great importance for success. Hatches occur when conditions are favorable for that species, generally dependant on temperature and light. The first hatches to see in this region are of the Blue Dun variety (BWO). BWO can catch fish on top soon after ice-out and before the rivers rise too much. I would recommend having several variations of the BWO in sizes from #16-#20. My favorites for this area are of the hairwing variety due to their high floating and visibility properties. Smaller fish in tumbling waters cannot resist, nor can the big cruisers in the sloughs. As the water begins to drop in early July insect activity begins to pick up and the big boys come on stage, the Drakes. These large mayflies come in basically three colors, green, brown, and gray. I have watched huge rainbows gulp these miniature sailboats in without hesitation. The gray drakes are the most common of this region and hatch periodically through July. Extended bodies are a must in the #10-#14 sizes, hang on!

Amidst all that is happening you will definitely find some caddis and stoneflies. In my opinion caddisflies are a fly fishers staple, in other words don’t leave home without them. Various patterns, sizes, and colors will work, especially in the faster streams. Small stoneflies known as “Sallies” can be a trip saver. The patterns with the red tails seem to do well, an egg sac in theory they induce strikes. Now, if you are like myself and some days love to turn many fish, the stimulator can do just that in the Winds. You can pop good fish in the pools and fast riffles through the day and fish it in the evening on the slicks as a grasshopper or larger stonefly.

To round out the hatch arena look for Pale Morning Duns (PMD) in late summer. These medium sized pale yellow mayflies are gorgeous and fish love ‘em. In addition to all these mentioned aquatic insects you’ll find just as many terrestrials and like anywhere else trout live you better be prepared with ants, hoppers, and beetles.

Now you are probably asking, I have got this beautiful assortment of trout flies, so what type of trout am I likely to catch? This is where the Winds capture my heart and in one word, diversity. This area is blessed with six species of trout including rainbow, brown, brook, golden, cutthroat, and lake trout. However, most drainages do not hold all six, many do hold a great variety and if you try hard enough, its not out of the question to catch all six in one day. Rainbows and browns are widely distributed along the lower elevations. Lake trout are mostly confined to the deeper lakes along the foothills, like Fremont, Halfmoon, and Boulder lakes. You can catch Colorado cutthroats in the upper Green River or the brilliantly colored golden trout in the higher alpine lakes along the range. Brookies can be almost anywhere and in fat proportions.

So maybe you are thinking of a day or even an extended trip to the region and ask what one should bring and where to go. Well, I would approach the first question much like any other backcountry outing, be safe and prepared, and yet travel light. Here, although it is summer, be prepared for a somewhat wintry outing. A water purification system and adequate food are necessity. A couple of smaller fish for the frying pan is acceptable and with that in mind do keep a clean camp, this is prime bear country. Be able to cover a lot of territory; one drainage may take you ten miles into the unknown and experiencing a whole new level of fly-fishing. My rod of choice would be a 3/4wt, in 8’ to 9’ lengths and multiple sections for easy packing. Leaders and tippet are not as important as the Henry’s Fork but do keep it practical. Smaller flies require smaller tippet (4x-6x). Leaders in the 7’-9’ range are reasonable. Lastly, have two medium fly boxes, one for your dries that were mentioned earlier and the other for nymphs and small streamers. Any beadhead nymph can be deadly here, do not be afraid to use them, especially if you sight a fish not actively feeding on the surface.
One of the greatest aspects of this rugged region is its abundance in outstanding fisheries. Often we are puzzled with the question where to go? In the Winds it truly does not matter, you can experience exceptional fly-fishing on almost any given drainage on any given day. My answer to the question is to be creative and design your trip. Lake or stream, day or overnights get back to the basics of fly-fishing and you will encounter the rewards of this classic wilderness.