

Living It Up

Anglers will get hooked on the fly-fishing at Montana's Paws Up resort

I AM NOT a fisherman, but I do subscribe to the theory that if you find yourself in Yankee Stadium, you certainly will be a baseball fan for at least that afternoon or evening. Thus my visit to the Resort at Paws Up, a property encompassing 37,000 acres of mountain streams and rolling prairie in Montana's Big Sky Country, includes a day of fly-fishing.

The former cattle ranch, which is located just northeast of Missoula, at 3,800 feet above sea level in the Blackfoot Valley, opened as a resort last summer despite some



permit problems that now are mostly resolved. Paws Up offers 18 rustic, spacious, widely spaced cabins; miles of hiking, horseback riding, and cross-country skiing and sledding trails; a mountain top clay pigeon shooting range; a nearby golf course; and a menu featuring elk, pheasant, and buffalo. But for most visitors, the resort's primary attraction is its seven miles of spectacular real estate along the Blackfoot River, which served as the site and title reference for the 1992 film *A River Runs Through It*.

My fly-fishing instructor, Jeremy Kehrein, a 30-year-old Wisconsin native who pursued fish from Saskatchewan to Tierra del Fuego before joining Paws Up,

carries a tackle box containing dozens of flies—all shapes, colors, and sizes. Kehrein can rattle off such names as blue dun, water cricket, great dark drone, gold-eyed gauze wing, and cow-dung fly as though they were the players in a ball team's lineup. And he knows which member of his fly roster will attract which fish under which conditions.

Casting is not nearly as complicated as fly selection. Before we shove off down the Blackfoot in our raft, Kehrein teaches me the basics, and after an hour, my casts are flying far. He also demonstrates how to "mend," to flip the rod sideways so that the fly remains downstream of the line, which tends to drift faster with the current. Otherwise, Kehrein explains, the fish will spot the line in the water and know something is up.

Fish are smart, or at least logical. They like to hide amid rocks so that eagles, ospreys, and other predators cannot see them. They also gravitate toward back eddies, where they can rest, and toward foam, because it collects nutrients. My guide therefore instructs me, once we are on the river and casting for real, to direct my line into the eddies and the foam.

The advice proves valuable, as I catch a fishing within five minutes. Kehrein grabs it in his net, gives me a high five, and throws it back in the river. The fishing is strictly catch-and-release on the Blackfoot, which continues to recover from a spill of mining tailings that occurred more than 15 years ago.

That first fish will be the last one I catch this cold, windy day—conditions that are not ideal for fly-fishing. Kehrein, who fails to catch a single fish, shrugs when we finally pack it in. "I'm a guide, not a god," he says. "And the beauty of fishing isn't the fishing, anyway; it's where it takes you. Trout only live in beautiful places, and you're here because this is one of them."

Indeed, for a novice angler at least, the resort's setting is as much of a lure as is the fly-fishing. —ROY WALLACK

Paws Up's 37,000 acres include a seven-mile stretch of the Blackfoot River, where guests can test their fly-fishing skills.

THE RESORT AT PAWS UP

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