

# Fly Fishing

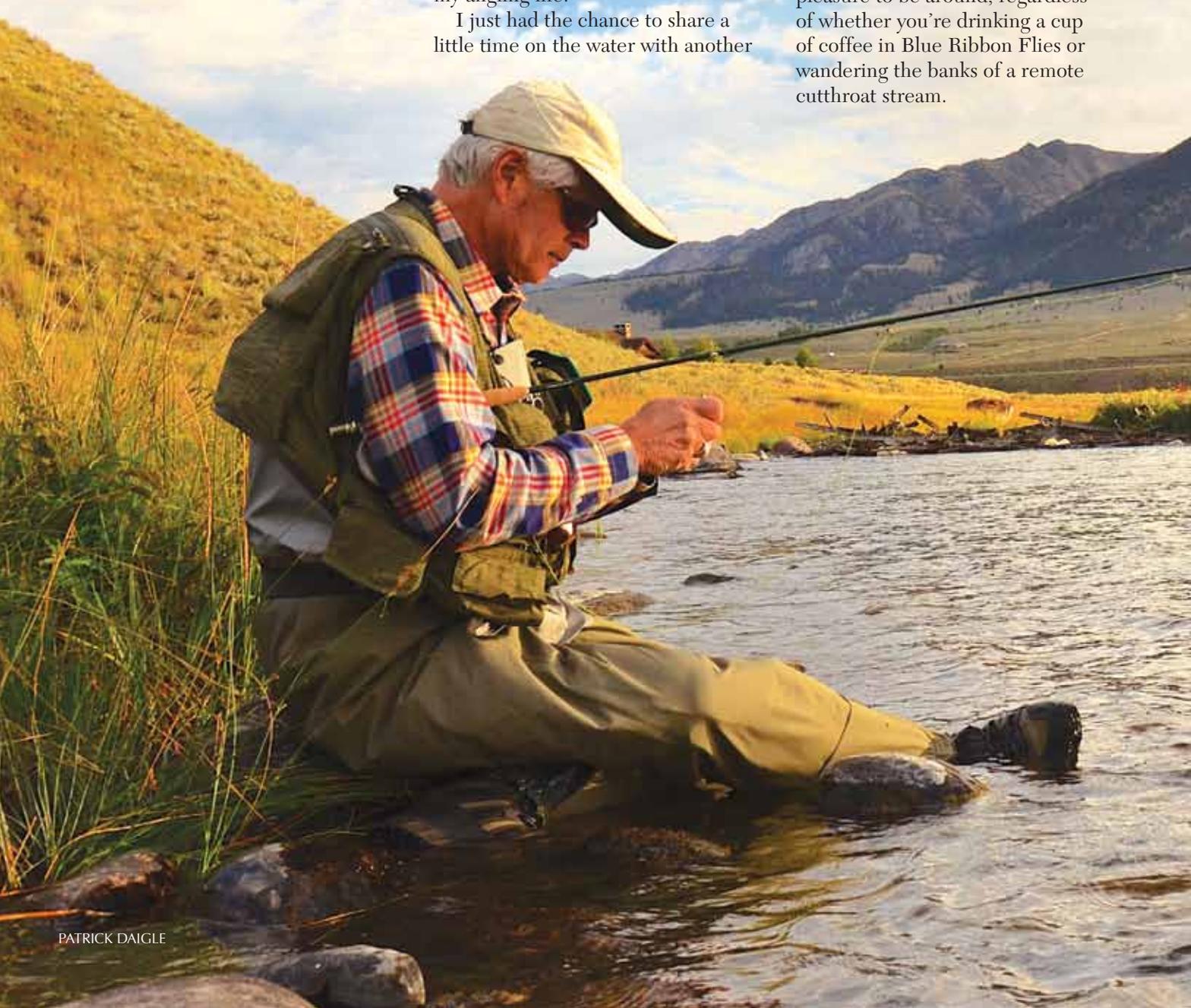
By Todd Tanner

*Legendary flyfisherman Craig Mathews is working diligently to ensure that future generations will have the same angling opportunities we now take for granted.*

Some years ago I had the opportunity to write a *Sporting Classics* feature about Leon Chandler. Leon was known as America's Ambassador of Fly Fishing and he was one of those rare people who far surpassed his press clippings; supremely talented, yet ever humble, generous and gracious. Spending a few days with Leon was one of the highlights of my angling life.

I just had the chance to share a little time on the water with another

fly fishing legend, Craig Mathews of West Yellowstone, Montana, and it turns out I've been doubly blessed. Craig, like Leon, is one of the giants of our sport. A fisherman and fly tyer extraordinaire, Craig's reputation as one of America's most thoughtful and intuitive anglers is well deserved. And like Leon, Craig is the kind of person – warm, genuine, considerate – who's a pleasure to be around, regardless of whether you're drinking a cup of coffee in Blue Ribbon Flies or wandering the banks of a remote cutthroat stream.



When Craig won *Fly Rod & Reel's* award as 2005 Angler of the Year, Nick Lyons called him “a spectacular and versatile fly fisher, a keen conservationist, and one of the most passionate anglers I know.”

Lyons went on to say, “He is a hard man not to like – always pleasant, soft spoken, eminently knowledgeable, and one of those gifted teachers who do their work by gentle verbal hints (when you want it) and by example. His enthusiasm for fly-fishing is infectious; he’s remarkably modest for someone so successful on the water – especially in a field known for bloating egos to the size of the *Titanic*. The range of

his abilities is just stupendous.”

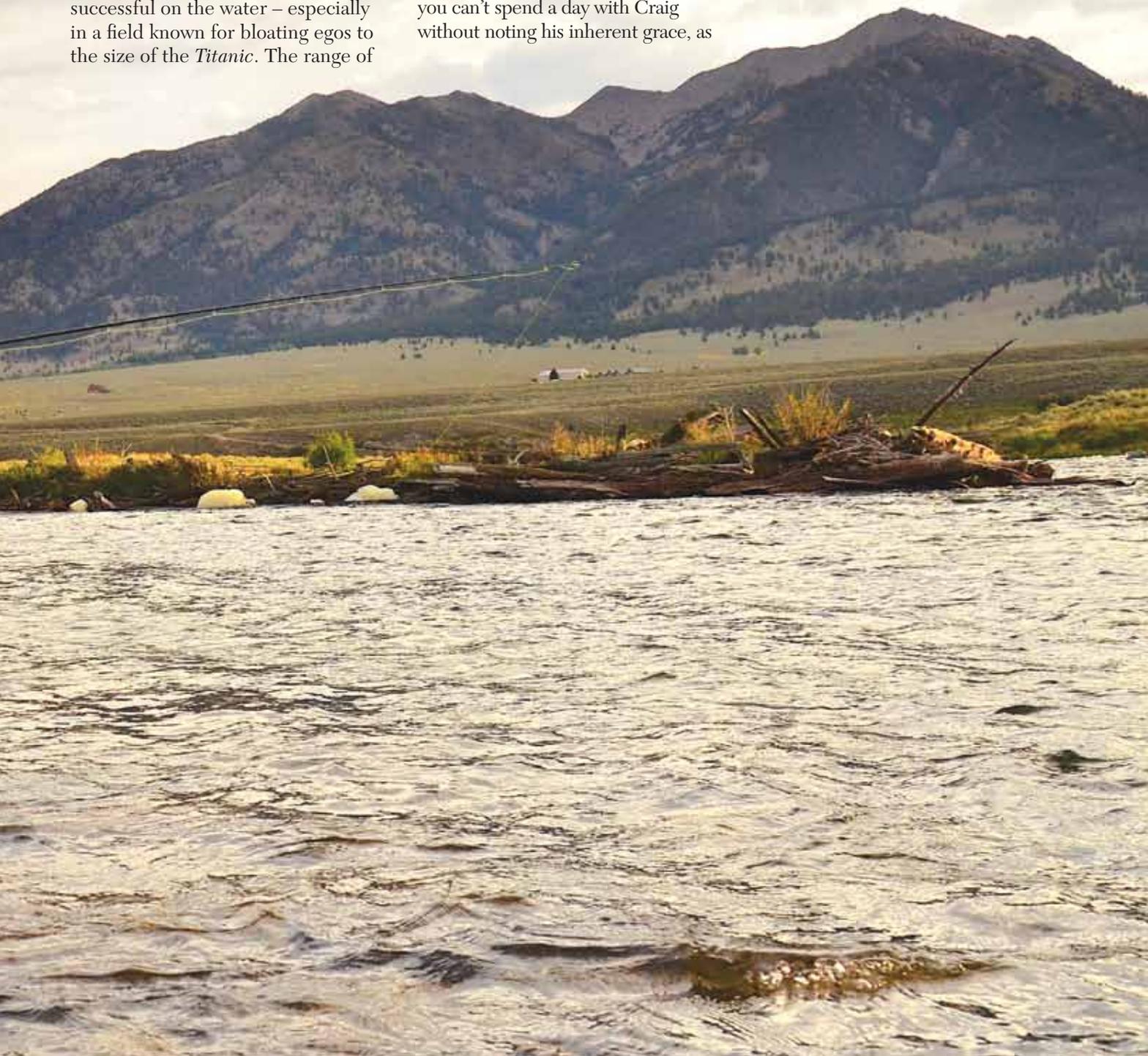
There’s absolutely no doubt that fly fishing attracts its fair share of big egos and incessant self-promoters. Yet at the same time it washes away the anonymity from folks like Craig, who would have excelled in any endeavor, yet who shine brightest when they wade deep into life with a fly rod in hand. In fact, fly fishing and Craig Mathews seem made for each other.

Norman Maclean once wrote, “all good things – trout as well as eternal salvation – come by grace . . .” Well, you can’t spend a day with Craig without noting his inherent grace, as

well as his vast, unbridled passion for the great outdoors.

That passion manifests itself in any number of different ways: his skill at the tying bench, his understanding of trout stream entomology, his facility with a fly rod or a Tenkara rod, his unmatched knowledge of the greater Yellowstone area, his willingness to engage with every angler who walks through the doors at Blue Ribbon Flies, his insightful fly fishing books, even his uncanny knack for putting elk meat in the freezer.

In my mind, though, one essential





element really stands out. Craig is an incredibly fierce advocate for the streams and rivers of Yellowstone country, and for the vast western landscapes that support everything from trout and grayling to elk and mule deer.

As *Sporting Classics* readers know, I have a hard time understanding how anyone can be a true sportsman without also being a conservationist. Our love for hunting and fishing and our commitment to stewardship go hand in hand, to the point where it's hard to see where one leaves off and the other starts. Craig, as much as anyone I've ever met, embodies that conservation ethic. But rather than share a laundry list of all his conservation awards and accolades, I'd like to tell you about a conversation we had sitting on the tailgate of my pickup.

As you might have heard, Craig and Yvon Chouinard of Patagonia started "1% for the Planet" back in 2001. It was a great idea; businesses who join the organization agree to donate one percent of their total sales to nonprofit partners. Then those nonprofits do the heavy lifting to protect our woods and waters and ensure healthy habitat for fish and game. But for the concept to work, sportsmen need to support the businesses that, in turn, support conservation. Otherwise the whole plan falls apart.

So there we were, kicking back after fishing a gorgeous little trout stream – two guys who love to fly fish, who love to hunt, who love the rugged mountains and remote valleys of Yellowstone country – but instead of trading stories and sharing secret fishing holes, Craig wanted to focus on the vital connection between sportsmen, outdoor businesses and conservation.

We talked in detail about how to keep our trout streams running cold and clean, and how to bridge the gap between our urban anglers – who, unfortunately,

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don't always understand the importance of conservation – and our ongoing efforts to protect fish and wildlife habitat.

I don't know that we came up with any epiphanies – hell, it's awfully hard to take a society that prays at the alter of endless growth and bend it back toward a saner, more traditional way of living. But Craig is right. We're only going to hold on to our fishing and hunting if we learn to work together.

**L**ong story short, if you're a fly fisher, you need to support companies that care about our woods and waters. The next time you buy a new fly rod, purchase it from a business that donates a percentage of its profits to conservation. Your next pair of waders should do more than improve your fishing; they should also help preserve habitat. Give your money a chance to do something special for our sporting heritage,

and for our kids and grandkids, by supporting the manufacturers and retailers who help fund America's conservation efforts.

I'll close with a point I've been pondering for the last dozen or so years. We've been blessed to live in the golden age of angling, with the finest fly fishing gear the world has ever seen and an unparalleled ability to travel in pursuit of trout or tarpon or whatever species happens to tug at our heartstrings. But there's a flip side to that coin, and it's the knowledge that humanity tends to walk heavy on the land. Unless we change the way we treat our landscapes, future generations won't have the same angling opportunities that you and I take for granted.

I can't speak for anyone else, but as the father of an eight-year-old son, that's a bitter pill for me to swallow. When I think about

all the conservation work we still have to do and all the threats we still face . . . well, I tend to get a little depressed. But spending a day with Craig Mathews helped restore my faith in humanity. Not because he has all the answers, but because he works so hard to protect our fish and game, and our kids and grandkids. Let's hope that the Good Lord didn't break the mold when he made Craig, because we need more folks – a lot more – just like him.

The next time you find yourself in West Yellowstone, Montana, stop by Blue Ribbon Flies and ask for the fishing report. Then, after you've found out where the trout are rising and restocked all your fly boxes, tell the tall guy with silver hair that you appreciate what he's done for fly fishing, and for conservation. I can't make any promises, but I suspect you'll make him smile.



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