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Fly Fishing

By Todd Tanner

Take a big map of the United States. Spread it out on the table. Now take your finger and put it down on the state of your choice. Montana. Pennsylvania. Texas. North Carolina. California. Alabama. Wisconsin. Colorado. It doesn't matter. Under your finger, or within a nail's width, you're likely to find something wonderful. Something important. Something truly American. The implicit promise, if you can drill in close enough with your naked eye or your magnifying glass, of public water. Chances are that it's right there, a faint blue line or a little blue dot that signifies a river, a lake or a reservoir in that particular location.

Immerse yourself in your fly fishing, and in the beauty of the outdoors. And while you do, hold tight to our legacy of vigilance and stewardship.

Call it luck or call it a blessing or call it what you will, the vast majority of us have the ability to grab our fly rod, jump in our rig and head for a stretch of water that, given the modicum of a fishing license and an open season, affords us the opportunity to cast away to our heart's content. There's something wonderful

about that fact; something that tempts the imagination and soothes the soul.

Here in the U.S. we have the freedom to fish. And for a few dollars – for the cost of a license, which is truly nothing more than a little skin in the game – we can search out a famous river or an unknown creek, a sandy beach or a lonesome prairie reservoir, and indulge our whimsy; scratch our

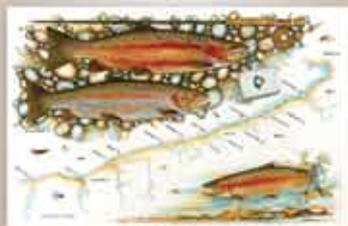


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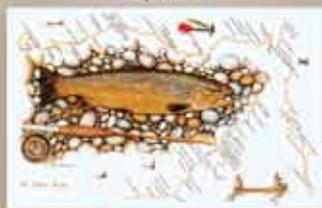
"Mayflies"



"Steelhead Alley"



"Taylor River"



"Au Sable River"

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itch; become one with whatever it is we seek – whatever powerful magnetic pulse pulls us back time and time again to water fresh or salt.

Freedom. That's what it's all about, isn't it? The freedom, unheard of in so many other countries, to tie fly to tippet and wander down to the river's edge, looking upstream, looking down, stepping in a flow that belongs not to one man or another, not to some foreign prince or a nameless, faceless corporation, but to us – to you, and to me. And every time we visit a public fishing access site, or a stretch of river running through State land or Forest Service land or BLM land, or a public beach, or a pond or creek where the owner is generous enough to allow public access, we ought to take just a second and reflect on how lucky we are, and how many other folks, scattered the world over, don't share in our good fortune.

A few weeks ago, on an overcast February day with the temps in the upper-30s, I decided that I'd better sneak out and test some fly-fishing gear. And even though our small streams close down here in Montana over the winter, and even though most of our lakes and ponds freeze over, I still had 10 or 12 different stretches of fishable water to choose from within a half-hour of the house.

I picked the Flathead River, and drove up through the rich, black-earthed farm country that surrounds Creston. When I pulled into a public parking area not far from Columbia Falls, there was a spectacular cascade of multi-colored ice frozen to the riverside cliff – the water leeching out of the side of the mountain must be rich in minerals – and a couple of trout were rising sporadically in the slow-water eddy right next to the road.

I didn't think about it at the time, but in retrospect I should have stopped and bowed my head and given thanks to the Good Lord for such bounty, and for a country that affords us the freedom to go where we like and do what we want. Our landscapes here in the United States are sown with uncommon freedoms and limitless possibilities, and we should know better than to take our

good fortune for granted.

Freedom, though, is only one side of the American coin, and I'd be remiss if I didn't direct your attention to the other. Far too often, we hear the clarion call of "Freedom! Freedom! Freedom!" with no mention of its equally important partner: responsibility. In order for freedom to take seed, and for it to endure, we need to recognize the deep, abiding, morally and ethically informed imperative of personal responsibility. For with the freedom to visit a Montana trout stream comes the responsibility to protect it; with the choice to fish a Louisiana tidal marsh or a backwoods Minnesota lake comes the necessity of caring about those waters.

We have – and I don't think this is too strong a word – an obligation; an obligation to protect the places we fish; to defend the rivers and lakes and oceans we love, and which have given us so much over the years. We share a responsibility to shepherd and caretaker the natural world, and to declare ourselves stewards of The Good Lord's creation. And this responsibility isn't something to be taken lightly, or held casually at arms-length. It's not something we can frame and hang on the wall, or leave gathering dust on a shelf. If freedom resides in our soul, then responsibility rests in our heart, and the only way to preserve freedom, in all its glory, is to balance it with the ferocity of our stewardship.

Now perhaps that's more than any of us can do. Perhaps such perfect balance is too ephemeral; maybe the heat of such intense passion is more than any of us can sustain. But what we can do, each of us, is to recognize the need for balance – to embrace both freedom and responsibility – and then act as the need arises.

So if I might be so bold as to offer a word of advice: enjoy your freedom. Revel in it. Immerse yourself in your fly fishing, and in the beauty of the outdoors. And while you do, hold tight to our American legacy of vigilance and stewardship. Freedom and responsibility are forever intertwined. We cannot have one without the other.

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