

My Zirdle Runneth Over

By Nico Earhart

By all criterion used to judge a morning of fishing, the first half of the day had been going swimmingly. After a slow start, we had been pulling up lunker after lunker for the better part of three hours; 18" to 20" inch suckers as thick as a fire hose. We had stopped for a casual lunch on the riverbank before running some postprandial whitewater and then off we would go for an afternoon of more hook-ups. But then we hit the rapid and I find myself in the middle of the milky, turbulent waters of the Wind River, floating downstream as my raft moves ahead of me, my Dad and our guide still hunkered down safely in the belly of the vessel. Then she takes a violent lurch upstream and I'm joined in the rolling deluge by both of them as boils and currents drag me below. My ankle bashes the side of a submarine rock. Waves threaten to pull me under. I flail my arms in a petty attempt to catch a breath while the pale rock walls of the canyon blur into an unblemished lapis sky. But, I'm getting ahead of myself.

The previous day my Dad and I had cut out from Denver, heading north through Ft. Collins and past Cheyenne, along the gradual slope of the eastern Rockies before reaching Casper and heading due west. From there it's another hour-and-a-half through sagebrush plains and into the low-slung foothills of the Big Horn mountains, finally arriving in the town of Thermopolis, Wyoming. Pronghorn antelope lined the sides of State Highway 24, miles of unchecked pastureland running to the horizon. Jagged and obscured peaks of the Wind River Range glinting in the sunlight, stubborn clumps of snow still clinging to life on the highest peaks, waiting for

winter's return. Eventually, we reach the shore of the Boysen Reservoir, entering the Wind River Indian Reservation, passing into the canyon of the same name. The valley is steep and winding, the river spooling away to the side of the highway. Across the gorge, a BNSF rail track guides locomotives out of the valley and into the Pacific Northwest. The reservation is a mix of Arapahoe and Shoshone peoples scattered across a swath of land occupying two million acres, managed by both the tribes and various extensions of the Federal government (Bureau of Reclamation, Bureau of Land Management). We'll be staying at the lodge which sits on reservation land, a part of the Wind River Canyon Whitewater & Fly Fishing operation, owned by a half-Shoshone, half-Arapahoe man named Darren Calhoun, who began guiding on the river over 25 years ago. We would first have to head into Thermopolis and take care of some paperwork: buying fishing licenses and picking up a few items from the fly shop run by the outfitters. Once our due diligence is attended to, we head back up the canyon and make ourselves at home in the Wind River Lodge.

The building is a modest two-story structure of yellowing spruce clapboards accented with tastefully constructed metal railings and wooden features. Accommodations would be perfectly suited for what the Wind River offers – catching basket loads of fish – lacking many of the ostentatious stylings commonplace in mountain lodges. This lodge serves but one purpose; allowing serious anglers a place to eat and crash in-between delirious bouts of fishing. No cell reception. No Internet. Untethered from the modern world. Just the ticket for more than a few Americans right now. It does have cable television should you feel the need but other than that, you're on your own. The cabin sits in a yawning section of the canyon and affords views of elevated,

craggy peaks and slag-filled washes sprinkled with thin evergreens. In the springtime, these runs cascade down the sides of the mountain like rock avalanches when heavy rain and snowmelt unlock loose veins of shale and granite. As the last vestiges of sunlight crept out of the canyon, our long day on the road behind us and preparations made for the following morning, we made our way to dinner.



Our Guide, Chris Young, and the inflatable raft

During the first night, we are joined by the owner of the Wind River Canyon Lodge, Darren, who stops by to pay his new clientele a visit. Insufficient to say that he is a great person to kill a few hours in conversation with. He was born on reservation land in the town of Crowheart, Wyoming, and has been running the canyon for over a quarter century, one of the first Native American guides to do so. Along his circuitous path to success, he managed to pick up a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology and spends the winters in Phoenix picking people's brains at \$225

dollars a pop. We talk about politics. Darren has no love-loss for the current administration and despises the U.S. government's treatment of Native American people and their, let's just call it 'lack of stick-to-itiveness' when it comes to Federal treaties. We talk about what it's like growing up impoverished on an Indian reservation. To say that Darren occupies an interesting slice of American society would be an egregious understatement. The middle section of a Venn diagram encompassing both the high hook-and-bullet society of fly fishing and the hardscrabble roots of his upbringing. Darren's 77-year-old father still runs the family ranch in Crowheart, occasionally helping out with operations at the fishing business – driving groups of fisherfolk to a put-in or calling in the conditions of the river that runs through his property. After a quick breeze through everything from Donald Trump to the Cherokee Trail of Tears, talk turns to topics less touchy: Fishing.

"When the water is 'off-color' like this, they don't look up when they feed," said Darren, describing our best chances of catching fish the following day, "You'll have to set up a rig that pulls the thing right past their faces."

With the healthy accumulation of snow the West received last winter the Bureau of Reclamation (who control the Boysen Dam and the water levels in the canyon) have been forced to release more of their precious commodity downstream. The flow had been as high as 9,000 cubic feet per second (CFS) in the springtime but would be holding steady around 3,500 for the next three days. 'Off-color' water, a pale, overwatered-chocolate-milk type runoff would be the byproduct of this winter's high-altitude hangover. As a result, fishing would be done predominantly with a double-drop or hopper-dropper system. A technique using one large dry fly to float at the surface and

act as an indicator, while another sinking fly plunges below the ripples, attracting the fish. We'd be doing some midge fishing with an indicator buoy as well with some single and double-drop clamp-on weights attached to the leader. Trout need a couple feet of visibility to see a dry fly on the surface, so instead, we would be dropping some 'bait' and waiting for the subtle sinking motion of the indicator, signaling that a fish had taken a nibble. When you see that indicator dip, set the hook and hope he can't spit the fly before you get him into the boat. Markedly different from your run-of-the-mill dry fly fishing where the fish's violent breaching signals a hook-up, and substantially more difficult.

Our crew was up early the next morning to fill their bellies and drain a few cups of the strong stuff. There are only two sections of the Wind River that can be fished by boat, with only two rods allowed on any one section at a time, so we didn't require the usual pre-dawn wakeup call customarily reserved for fishing trips but we still managed to get out the door before 8 am. Today, we would be fishing the Upper Gorge, starting from just below the Boysen Dam and fishing till we pulled in later that evening, a couple miles below the lodge. In the parking lot, we met our guide, Chris Young, who at 23-years-old has more fly fishing knowledge than most will acquire in a lifetime (a fringe benefit of growing up in this quiet corner of Wyoming). He wore an unkempt and reddening beard that hung down off his chin, springing out sporadically in shabby tendrils. Chris grew up in 'Thermop' and had been throwing line since he was waist high. We would be on the hunt for Brown and Rainbow Trout, the former now endemic in the region, the latter stocked by Wyoming Department of Game & Fish. There is a strict and self-imposed catch and release policy on the Wind River and I cannot say I found any fault in the credence. Better to catch a picture with

your smartphone before releasing the trout back into the water to be caught at a later date by another fisherman.



The Wind River Canyon's Lower Gorge

Fishing begins in the still-turbulent tailwaters of Boysen, where the cold subsurface water passing through the generators mixes with the warm stuff sluicing down the spillway. To help maintain a sunken midge as it passes through the cyclonic whitewash we'd be using a weight system: two lead weights (or shots) clamped to the leader just behind an orange indicator buoy. With the added weight of the shots, the idea is to hold the backcast just one half-second longer than normal to allow the line to fully extended behind you. It takes a few minutes to get used to this new-fangled strategy, but soon I've got the hang of it and am laying out lengths of fly line to 20 yards. The added weight also allows you to throw your fly line even further. After a brief period of stagnation, to get my casting back in-step and to work out which fly combination is

the most effective, I manage to pull in three impressive trout within a half hour, all in the range of about 18 inches. Thick and well-fed, glowing in the high-country sun. The trout all put up a solid fight, necessitating the use of the reel rather than stripping in the fly line till you land the fish, as is customary with more manageable fish. When they see our blue inflatable raft, they make runs like their pelagic cousins, ripping out line as they descend into the muddy depths. Chris rows and occasionally mends our tangled lines (best part about fishing with guides) or throws on a fresh rig to see how the fish will respond. We spend the first half of the day meandering our way through the sunbathed crags of Wind River Canyon, hitting different slip lines in the current or spot casting to calm pools.



View of the Canyon from the Wedding of the Waters

We eddie out above a double set of rapids to grab lunch. Sandwiches hastily assembled atop muddied coolers. Cokes and cookies for dessert. Once again,

nothing here is too fancy. Just what you need to refuel for another 4 to 5 hours of fishing in the high heat of the late afternoon. As we wrap up lunch Dad and I snitch our life jackets on while Chris heads downriver to scout the rapids – two gnarled-looking suckers called Sharpenose and Sphincter that will be classed as a 4+ today with the high water. When Chris returns he's noticeably silent and starts to meticulously batten down loose objects before adjusting our lifejackets, clamping mine down so tightly that oxygen has trouble reaching my lungs. My lunch threatens to rear its ugly head. While this raft we are on is great for fly fishing, its swiveling seats allowing for a 360° casting radius, they are extremely cumbersome. Rickety old things that sway easily with the gesticulations of the river's current and flow. When we finally get out into the channel, looking to set up our entry line into the top of the cataract, I'm already beginning to see stars from lack of oxygen.

To better distribute ballast, I've crumpled myself into a ball in the open bow of the raft, trying to both occupy as little space as possible and harness as much mass at the same time. We steer towards the right-hand line at the top of the rapid, past a monster wave that marks the entrance but the wave immediately behind it swamps the front of our boat as we dip into it and it sends a chocolatey deluge over the bow. My vision is obscured by the cold, soupy water. Unable to see our intended course, we dip into the second trough and rush headlong into an oncoming buttress of whitewater. Before I realize we've hit the second wave I feel the inflated edge of boat sweeping under my thighs as I'm escorted, unknowingly and unwillingly, into the roiling boils of the rapid. Coming to the surface now I can see the boat has floated ahead of me, downstream, where it levitates momentarily on a third wave, lurches upriver suddenly before tipping towards

me and capsizing, throwing Chris and my Dad from the boat. There's now three of us in the water along with an overturned boat and a stream bend's worth of floating detritus. Fishing gear and garbage from lunch bobbing along.

Holding onto the lifeline that runs the circumference of the raft, I move to the rear of the boat to protect myself against submerged, midstream objects ominously sideling below me. The raft is taking violent bounds and palsied jerks as the frame bounces and drags along the bottom of the channel. The oarlocks scrape against the submerged crags, making an eerie, subhuman groan as metal meets slab. The skeletal frame quakes and rattles against the soft blue flesh. Instinct tells me to get away from the boat but as I try to sneak away and orient my feet downriver, I smash my ankle hard on an underwater rock. It feels like it might have drawn blood but as I catatonically peer around the sun-soaked canyon I see the water smoothing out, the turbulent waves and wash of the rapid now behind us.

Eventually, Chris surfaces from where he had been riding out the rapid in the air pocket underneath the hollow boat, joining me in the slow drift downstream in the chilled flow. He barks an order for me to get to the right bank, climb ashore, and I obey. As I come to my feet I can see my Dad's head bobbing down the river, chasing some equipment that has surfaced around him. Chris yells at him to clamber ashore and he comes to a rest 150 yards downstream. In the confusion, I've managed to grab my hat, backpack (which had been double-fastened to the metal frame of the boat) and my sunglasses, the proverbial rose-smelling result of a capsizing. A few minutes of hiking and my Dad has made his way back to Chris and I, and in the aftermath, the three of us stand sullenly by the overturned boat catching our breath, slinging socks, shoes and damp articles of clothes against the rocks to dry.

The coolers, dry bags, fly kit and most of the other equipment is soggy and sodden. Chris's leg is mashed up from violent contact with the frame and my ankle pulses, but other than that there's no serious bodily harm. After some brief assessment and contemplation, trying to figure out what is still floating downriver and what has remained in the boat, Chris turns to us to ask if we're ok? If we want to hike up to the highway and get in a van and retreat back to the lodge?

"Fuck it," I cut out over the dull hum of the river rolling past, "Let's keep fishing."

For the rest of the day, fishing continued to be spellbinding, pulling up 20" fish regularly from either end of the battered boat. Beefed up suckers that put up a harrowing fight, locking my fingers up with soreness from the day's long struggles. As the bite of one setup starts to slow Chris has us situated with a new one and soon enough we're knocking them dead again. It was the most successful day of fly fishing I've ever had, bar none. We drift into the take out a little after 5, slightly behind schedule after our unexpected walloping. There would be no dwelling on the flip though, no sense in concentrating on the low point of the day when the highs were as high as they could be. Sure, we'd have to tell the story a few times when we got back to the lodge that night, but we were happy to regale the other guests with our riveting tale.

Next day, we'd be heading to the lower stretch of Wind River Canyon, starting just below the cabin and running 4 miles downriver until the Wind runs off the reservation and out of the canyon, where it transforms into the Bighorn River. A peculiar set up that was new to me, the Wind River converts to the Bighorn at a spot called the Wedding of the Waters;

same river system, two distinct names for each section.



One of the local Wind River Rainbow Trout

There'd be two more large rapids today but not until late afternoon and nothing like the savagery we had seen yesterday, the water levels having receded overnight. Until then it would mostly be a lot of spot casting with the hopper-dropper sets using the Zirdle crawfish pattern that had been knocking them out yesterday. We took off in the same inflatable rig, Chris having made a few key repairs overnight: new oarlocks and a healthy round of tightening for the frame. The boat was ill-conceived for rapids (as we discovered when she practically came apart around us in the middle of the cascade) but it's a great way to keep our lines free from the meddlesome willows and tamarisk trees that line the sides of the river. This would be both a difficult and perilous river to wade fish in, river bottom matching the steep declivity of the canyon walls. From the edge, it drops off

precipitously into the cloudy, clotted water. With Chris's overhaul having patched the skiff together, she begins the day riding high and rowing straight. Today would also be noticeably hotter, the granite faces of the canyon walls absorbing and radiating the midsummer sun.

We start off strong with the fly setup Chris has us using. The Zirdle has them practically crawling into the boat within a few minutes and we pluck some monsters from their riparian hideaways. We hoist them up and unhook them and get them back into the drink as soon as we can. Killing these trout is not our intended purpose and so we take good care of them while they are in our care. Occasionally, a phone is sought so we can store a memory of one of the bigger ones, but you know a place has good fishing when you stop taking photos of 17" trout because they're unworthy of the effort. And aesthetically speaking, the lower reaches of the canyon are pristine. Like they had been carved from a single piece of flawless ivory and salted with olive chunks of shrub and stunted pine trees. A miniature, chaparral-soaked version of the Grand Canyon. Not as profound or as rich in geologic majesty maybe, but just as awe-inspiring and even more special due to the sparse habitation of the area. Even if this place was totally devoid of catchable fish it would still be a Shangri-La for any naturalist or outdoor enthusiast, and as it is totally chalked full of oversized trout, you can see why this place is a well-guarded secret.

We come to a rest again for lunch, pulling out slabs of cold, fried chicken and scoops of potato salad from our stocks. Guides are in charge of supplying their own lunches at Wind River Canyon so don't expect lavish trays smoked fish or assorted charcuterie, just fishing food. Nearing the end of lunch, I realize once again that we'll be hitting the biggest section of whitewater directly following a large, fat and carbo-laden meal. One of the

river rafting crews passes us as we stop to scout and, still rattled from the previous day's capsizing, we decide to throw Dad up front for a ballast boost and run the rapid while the other boat waits for us behind the falls as a safety measure. With the other crew looking on, the rough-cut V of the valley's exit to the basin beyond framed behind them, we pour through the first fat entry wave. Another lip of water staggers over the bow but we blow through it, surf the chop and pull through to the calm water behind. Life jackets are loosened and fists mashed together. Clearing the rapid has relieved a palpable cloud of stress from our boat, especially for Chris whose smile glows after our last obstacle of the day. Our rods are out and fly lines are fluttering soon in the warm upriver breeze.

The last few hours sees us catching more chubby trout and the occasional pugilistic carp, leaving my appendages sore and strained from struggle. If it is the kill shot the hunter looks for, the fly fisherman seeks the well-fought battles. The sound of your reel clicking away as a fish yanks away the colored line. And in place of the huntsman's stocks of meat, it's the silvery sleek sides of those Rainbows that please both the eye and the mind of the patient fly fisher, without fare. Humpback gray on paunch and ridge, but the sides spangle with streaks of colorfully dyed skin that glitter in the sunbeams. That crimson streak cut from behind the operculum, along the lateral line sparkling like an arm of the milky way, before melding into that leopard-spotted peduncle and tail. Even as we make our way off the Res and back onto the public domain we're still netting world-class fish. Soon though, we pass out from below the alabaster walls of the canyon and onto the flatlands, nearing the Wedding of the Waters and the Bighorn. I snag a final flurry of crepuscular fish as the light escapes the canyon and we pull to a smooth halt.

For the final day of fishing, my dad and I would be hitting the lowest section of river, the Upper Bighorn, a public length of river that begins from the exit of the gorge. A horizontal, meandering path of water that runs 8 miles from the Wedding of the Waters, through Thermopolis, ending at the Hot Springs State Park on the other side of town. There would be no rapids today and none of the marvelous vistas that had been available during our floats through the canyon, but with rigor mortis setting into my right arm and shoulder from two solid days of casting and reeling, a more reserved day was just what we needed to bring the trip to a close.

We would be fishing off the reservation today, no more regulations on number of rods in the water. Back onto the public lands where anyone with a fishing license can drop a line. As a result, the fishing would be slower today, these trout having seen more tied flies than their guileless relatives up the canyon. For the first time on the trip, we'd see other people fishing the same water as us. For our rigging, we'd be fishing a few different sets today: After a fast start with hopper-dropper, snagging a couple right out of the gate, things slow down so we move to a midge set up with a single shot in the shallow water. We'd ultimately make the switch back to the double-drop, trolling a San Juan worm off the back of the grasshopper indicator.

After two days of Dunkirkian slaughter, the bite is decidedly sluggish today. These public waters are where skill starts to play into your fishing. How delicious can you make that fly look to a fish that has seen plenty of patterns glide by? Careful experimentation showed us that these fish like the Zirdle pattern, but they were decidedly more skittish and we had to put in substantial effort. Simulating the motions of a swimming crawdad by pulling in short strips of fly line. I could say I was slightly disappointed with the

fishing on day three, but it was more like we had finally come back to reality after two days of catching an abundance of trout, most of which were over 16" long at least. This was how the rest of the world fishes, I thought. Even though, with the sun out and the tawny plains of grass ruffling in a light breeze running up to the far horizon, we were still doing better than 99% of anglers out on the water that day.

We pulled into the shade of a bridge spanning the river for lunch and loaded up on sandwiches, salad and more than enough Butterfingers, the *whishing* sound of a cropland sprinkler and our hushed voices all that rose above the gentle whirr of the river. Insects speaking. After three days with the same guide, Chris opens up his hard shell and we talk. Unedited banter about life, what it's like to grow up in Thermopolis, what it's like to live in a community that sees itself on either side of a line drawn in the sand: Indian and Non-Natives. A line, I saw, as being as distinct as this cloudy, green vein of water and the desiccated scrubland banks surrounding it. Stagnant fishing creates an opportunity to explore the human elements of this rough-and-tumble town, low-slung between two calico hillsides, in an undiscovered section of the western United States.

As we pack up our lunches and wrap ourselves up in sunshade in preparation of more fishing, a massif of thunderheads juts out of the southern sky, bringing with it cooler temperatures and the faint pitter-patter of rainfall. Once the sun dips behind the clouds the heat loses its razor's edge and on cue, we start landing more fish. Monsters that would stir the ire of any fisherman who gazed on the scene. The rain eventually subsides but the sun never re-emerges from the thin casing of cloud cover, keeping the fishing hot almost until we flow into the State Park. Fishing might not have been as good as the first two days, but sun-stroked, sore and

satisfied as I am, I'm happy to finally call it a trip.



Happy with this large Brown Trout