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Novices in Nature: Reel women

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Middle Provo River - The stretch of this river between the Jordanelle and Deer Creek reservoirs is among the top trout rivers in the Rocky Mountains, and it's obvious even to rookie fly fishers why that is.

When the sky is blue and clear, Mount Timpanogos and its majestic neighbors in the distance frame a panorama of crisp green plants and trees. The water tumbles rapidly, yet you can see the mosaic of brown rocks at the bottom.

And the fact that there are about 2,750 fish for every mile of the river makes it a fly fisher's dream.

Because this world-class fishing destination is just 30 miles from Salt Lake City, it was a natural choice for our Novices in Nature series.

From a beginner's perspective, the draw of fly-fishing is its simplicity and tranquility. But, as we learned from our experiences, there's much more to it than just a hook and a fish.

Maggie Thach: Picking the perfect lure for Provo River fish.

The first thing our guide, Steve Schmidt of Western Rivers Flyfisher in Salt Lake City, did when we got to the Provo River was pick up a rock and examine what lurked underneath. We saw a leech, a caddis fly, stonefly shucks and mayfly larvae. That taught us which bugs are most prevalent in this area of the river so we could find out what the fish liked.

Steve determined the grasshopper imitation would give us the most success. After he hooked the bait/artificial fly onto our rods, he gave us a short lesson on technique. He told us to keep our wrists straight and that the rod was just an extension of our arms - contrary to what Roxana thought on the ride up as she confidently asked, "It's all in the wrist, right?"

Although Roxana tried to sound as if she knew what she was doing, she thoroughly looked like a beginner as she slipped in the middle of the river and was dragged about 10 feet in the swift-moving water. I forgot she didn't know how to swim and was only concerned with whether we got that on tape. Luckily, a colleague had enough sense to give her a hand before she ended up in Utah Lake.

We resumed our lesson. Every time you move the rod back or forward, you must stop and wait for the line to catch up so you don't hook yourself, as I did a few times. I hooked the inside of my right elbow, my lower lip and my hat. The only thing I didn't succeed at catching was a fish, but only because I didn't react quickly enough when they hit my fly.

As my pursuit intensified, my technique went out the window. I reverted to my old high-school volleyball days and snapped my wrist on every cast. I resorted to a "hatchet or Samurai sword hold" - as Steve called it - and clenched the rod with both hands. I ignored the fact that I was becoming a human buffet for the menacing mosquitoes and zeroed in on a small piece of water hopping with fish. I got some fish to bite, but because I couldn't see where I had cast, I didn't know where to look when they came up to eat.

"That was you," Steve said as a fish would plop up to the surface.

"It was? Where? I can't see them," I replied, frustrated.

Out of luck, I managed to hook a fish.

"I got it, I got it. I can feel the pressure [of the fish]. Steve, Steve, what do I do?" I flailed around, letting the excitement get to me, and it was too late. That small brown trout got the best of me. It got away.

My competitiveness kicked in and I was determined as ever. Unfortunately, the fish were almost gone by then.

Although I didn't catch any fish, I realized there is more to fishing than that. I got to escape the 100 - degree weather in Salt Lake City to enjoy a beautiful day on a cool river. I took a nap at lunch as the sound of the rushing water put me to sleep. I spent a whole day enjoying nature. Even though I came home empty-handed - if you don't include the 14 mosquito bites I acquired - I have a feeling I will be out on the Provo River again. You could say fishing caught me. Now, I'm hooked.

Roxana Orellana: After we lowered the piece of gum in a fishing motion, the curious, hungry arachnid bit into it in a matter of minutes. Feeling the tug, we would pull on the string to reveal our catch.

The technique could easily be applied to regular fishing and perhaps fly-fishing too, I figured. But fly-fishing turned out to be a little more involved than what my patient, noncompetitive nature had in mind.

Maggie, a competitor from birth, boasted that if anyone was going to have a fish in hand by the end of the day, she would. In the end, all she caught was herself.

Little did she know it was mostly up to the fish, luck and a graceful cast whether that happened.

After a short lesson of how and where to cast, we were on our own, free to find out what it was all about.

Steve Schmidt, our guide, ever so patiently gave us our space and let us work our magic - or, in this case, lack thereof.

In our fashionable tan waders and boots we made our way into the river. Watching where to stand is essential, something I found out soon after.

Eager to cast my line and start pulling in fish, I didn't secure my footing. The current took both of my feet under me and down I went. Laughing in panic, I felt myself being dragged down the river.

"Just grab onto something and don't drop the rod, because you're going to have to pay for it," I repeated to myself, followed by "you won't drown, it's too shallow."

It seemed the adrenaline only manifested itself in laughter. A few feet down the river, Brett Prettyman, a co-worker helping with the trip, managed to catch me. (See his version above.)

A bit shaken and drenched, I resumed fly-fishing. It took some time to get the hang of the casting motion.

I could tell Maggie was feeling the pressure, too. Forgetting the prescribed technique, she hooked herself several times. Out came the pliers from Steve's bag to the rescue every time.

There were fish to be hooked, but we weren't catching them. I did feel a couple of tugs on the line, but I wasn't quick enough. With frustration building up, my casting turned into a somewhat whipping motion, which didn't make the fish bite any faster. I felt an addiction building up.

"I need a fish! I want a fish! Must get a fish!"

Only a fish on the end of the line would legitimize my skills.

I looked over at Maggie, who appeared to be in a trance throwing her line back and forth at times using both hands, crouching ready to reel in a 50-pounder.

I prepared myself to be startled by her victorious cheer over her first fish. It didn't happen.

Caught in the ambitious pursuit of a fish, I forgot that no one was really keeping score.

Fly-fishing takes patience and technique, both of which can quickly go out the window for overly eager novices.

It would have been great to get just one little fish, especially when asked thousands of times by people if we caught anything.

But that fact alone makes me want to venture into the river again and perhaps create a fish tale of my own. "I've been trying to catch this one fish for five years.

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