



REELED IN: A LOVE STORY

It was the last thing I thought I needed, but fishing found me. BY KERRIE FLANAGAN

AS I STOOD IN THE CACHE LA POUFRE River and looked around, I realized I was the only one crazy enough to be out fishing in December. My chest waders kept me dry, but I still felt the freezing temperature of the water on my skin. I lifted my fly line out of the river, gently cast it back and forth a few times before placing it back on the water. Like an addict I needed a hit, but mine involved a fish biting the fly at the end of my line.

A few years ago, if someone had asked me my thoughts on fly fishing I would have said it looked complicated and boring. I always teased my fly fishing friends about their obsession with

the sport because I didn't understand what the big deal was.

So, two years ago, when I agreed to be a parent chaperone on a week-long fly fishing trip with my 16-year-old daughter and 20 other students from Polaris Expeditionary Learning School, my fly fishing friends were surprised. I told them I wasn't going because of the fishing. I agreed to go because I love to cook for people.

The third morning, after feeding everyone a hearty breakfast, I sat on the bank of the river and watched my daughter fish. I admired the ease with which she cast her line into the water, stripped it in as she followed the current,

and then did it again. I sat there, under a crystal blue autumn sky, immersed in what she was doing without any awareness that three hours had passed.

Throughout the trip, I was amazed at how the behavior of the usually energetic, hormonal, friend-centered teenagers, changed when they got in the river. I watched them not only learn to fish, but learn to be more comfortable in themselves and with the quiet. My perception of fly fishing shifted and I knew I wanted to stay connected to this world where time faded away and to-do lists disappeared with the current.

A week after my return, I headed to the Big Thompson with a friend who is an avid angler. Following a crash course in casting, I slipped on the oversized borrowed waders, grabbed my friend's rod and stepped into the river. As I prepared for my first cast on the water, my hand trembled slightly from nerves and prayed I would not make a complete fool of myself.

After a quick review from my friend, I concentrated on the cadence of my casting. Each time my fly landed on the water, my insides tightened up in anticipation. Following a successful cast, my pink indicator bobbed, signaling a bite. I yelled to my friend, but my delay in setting the hook allowed the fish to get away.



As we worked our way upstream, all sense of time drifted downstream. I enjoyed the sunshine, the sound of the river, and being away from the 200 e-mails waiting in my inbox. I persevered for four hours until I finally hooked and reeled in my first fish; an eight-inch brown trout. Every nerve in my body screamed with excitement and I couldn't stop smiling. After a high five with my friend, I posed for a picture with the fish before releasing it back into the water.

I never imagined I would soon become one of the fly-fishing obsessed, constantly checking the weather and river reports. I invested in all the necessary gear and I craved time on the river, rearranging my schedule so I could be on the water as much as possible.

Fishing is a sport dominated by men. But I soon learned that although women make up only 21% of the angler population in Colorado, they are an active group. The Colorado Women Fly Fishers is a nonprofit organization whose purpose is to encourage and support women who fly fish.

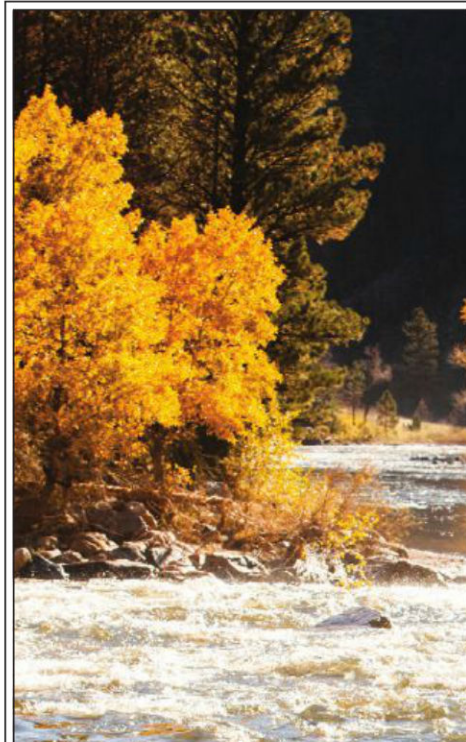
I was thrilled to learn there was a Northern Colorado chapter with more than 50 members. During my first meeting, the room at the local fly shop filled with kindred spirits. While enjoying wine, cheese and chocolate, the group of women shared fishing stories, tips and then we practiced tying different knots.

I asked a couple of them what they enjoy most about the sport. Julia Houx, co-owner of St. Peter's Fly Shop, loves spending time outside and fishing is a pastime that allows her to forget about all the other things happening in her life. Plus, she finds it exhilarating to watch a fish come to the surface to eat the fly she just placed on the water. Gretchen Osborn, the meeting organizer, said she is drawn to the sport by the constant challenge coupled with peace and serenity.

Fly fishing is a sport that takes more precision and finesse than power, making it an activity women of all ages can enjoy and even excel at. Fishing guides have told me it is easier to teach women to fly fish than men because women tend to be better listeners and they do not try to overpower the rod.

As I approach my two-year fly fishing anniversary in October I am grateful that fishing found me. It brings more balance to my life and helps me be a better version of myself. When I am in a river and the water is flowing all around me, I feel at peace and it calms my busy mind. But that's not enough. I need the adrenaline rush that comes with catching a fish; from setting the hook, to landing the fish in the net, to then releasing it in the water. This is what makes my whole body smile, what calls me back to the river, even in the middle of December. **FC**

Kerrie Flanagan is a freelance writer and the director of Northern Colorado Writers. Find more of her work at KerrieFlanagan.com.



Get Hooked

Looking for lessons, encouragement, a fishing buddy? Here are some organizations to get you started.

Colorado Women Flyfishers

The purpose of CWF is to fish, have fun and enjoy the camaraderie of other women who delight in the sport of flyfishing. (Information about the Northern Chapter is on the main website.)

colowomenflyfishers.org/newsite

Sisters on the Fly

Activities run the gamut from fly fishing, kayaking, cowgirl college, wine tasting, and horseback riding to whatever else sounds like fun. The group's goal: to bring women together to challenge themselves.

sistersonthefly.com

Casting for Recovery

A group founded on the principles that the natural world is a healing force and that cancer survivors deserve one weekend—free of charge and free of the stresses from medical treatment, home, or workplace—to experience something new and challenging while enjoying beautiful surroundings.

castingforrecovery.org

Rocky Mountain Flycasters

This local chapter of the national Trout Unlimited and the state organization Colorado Trout Unlimited. Colorado Trout Unlimited works to protect, conserve and restore Colorado's coldwater fisheries and their watersheds.

rockymtnflycasters.org