

THE ANGLING REPORT

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“SERVING THE ANGLER WHO TRAVELS”

(Editor Note: Online Extra subscriber Richard G. Lyon was recently selected to fish free at Yellowstone Valley Ranch in Montana. All he had to do in return was file the following detailed review of his experience. See box on page 3 for more information on our FREE Fishing Program.)

From the main entrance to Yellowstone National Park in Gardiner, Montana, the Yellowstone River flows north to Livingston before turning east. This is Paradise Valley, and just about every one of the 50-odd miles in this stretch offers great fishing against a backdrop of spectacular canyon or mountain scenery. Over the Labor Day weekend, courtesy of *The Angling Report's* FREE Fishing Program, a friend and I were fortunate enough to spend three nights and two days here, fishing from Yellowstone Valley Ranch (YVR), the only lodge in the valley dedicated to fishing.

Prior to our visit, I'd spoken and exchanged e-mails with Paul Robertson, YVR's manager, about where we should fish. For those of you not familiar with this area, in late August and early September there's usually good fishing on four or five world-class rivers, several of these rivers' tributaries and a couple of high country lakes, and that's not counting private water or Yellowstone National Park, either of which could easily entertain the pickiest angler for a week or two. While I'd mentioned to Robertson that Nelson's Spring Creek (a Yellowstone tributary) was my favorite fishing venue in the world, and that I'd always done well on the Yellowstone, I stressed that our guide should select our itinerary based on experience and current conditions. Maybe to please me, maybe because I guessed right, we floated the Yellowstone on Friday and stalked on Nelson's on Saturday.

Eric Adams of Montana Fly [Fishing] Guides was our guide and is YVR's director of fishing, a year-round position that I'll say more about later. He chose a stretch of the Yellowstone just upstream from the ranch, from the 26 Mile Marker to Grey Owl, an eight-mile float. Adams joined us at breakfast to discuss our day. He'd fished this stretch the day before and reported that the recent cold evenings had effectively closed hopper season on the river

but that it still offered excellent opportunities for dry fly fishing from put-in to take-out.

So it proved to be. Even though rising fish were spotted only sporadically from our nine o'clock launch through our 5:30 take-out, we had consistent strikes on attractors (most successful: a parachute rat-faced McDougall) and pseudos. The action and the size of the fish weren't spectacular; however, the fishing – and catching - were great. Neither of us went long enough without a strike to become bored, but the strikes weren't so frequent nor the risers so obvious as to allow either of us to relax on any cast.

Adams made the fishing much easier on us by using a skiff with much lower sides than the MacKenzie-type drift boat I've used so many times in the past. The lower sides allow easy casts while seated, a real relief to my friend Debbie, who has a bad back, and a welcome break for anyone. These boats are handmade by a Montanan and have become so popular that the shipwright now has a one-year backlog.

Over the years, I've fished with many guides on many rivers, and I've never (really!) had a bad one. Adams, though, ranks among the very best. No flash, but quiet competence, unlimited patience, great knowledge of the river, and a wonderful teacher. I can't recall that he ever raised his voice. His patience particularly came through when he helped Debbie improve her skill at setting the hook. Adams works with several other guides, all with at least several years' experience in Paradise Valley, so even if the Ranch is fully booked (18 guests) everyone can fish.

The second day we fished the creek. Any day on Nelson's is a treat. This narrow spring creek winds for about a mile through the Nelson ranch on the east side of the Yellowstone. Its pools, sloughs, nooks and crannies hold many large, visible trout; 14 inches is a normal fish. In the background are the Absaroka Mountains, on this day obscured by windblown smoke from nearby forest fires but normally majestic whenever you look up. The fish in the Nelson's see many imitations and often refuse naturals that aren't the exact size of whatever is hatching. Usually, the fish just cruise serenely under your fly without even an upward glance, even to a perfectly presented tiny fly matched exactly to the hatch on 7x tippet. This Saturday was typical of a sunny day on Nelson's, as frustrating as it was fun.

Nelson's does have reliable hatches, however, and we tossed size 20 and 22 midge and baetis in the morning and sulphurs in the afternoon, aided occasionally with a floating nymph trailer. A steady upstream wind complicated the fishing considerably. Adams taught me a good lesson for fishing in these conditions. An upstream wind slows down the floating naturals but not a fly fished upstream that's anchored to a line weighted with a hook, and the educated fish at Nelson's can tell the difference. A downstream cast reduces this differential just enough to fool a fish now and then. With my seven foot, 4-weight rod, any cast directly into the breeze was an automatic puddle cast, and with them I was the only angler on the creek catching fish. Strikes were occasional but steady throughout the day, and at day's end I landed a gorgeous rainbow that made me forget all those ignorant fish that paid me no mind. A wonderful day.

My friend and I will remember this trip for the ranch as much as for the fishing. YVR is located at a bend in the river about halfway between the Mallard's Rest and Grey Owl fishing access points, about 15 miles south of Livingston on US Highway 89. Five cabins sit on a bluff high above the Yellowstone, with great views up and down the river and across to Emigrant Peak and the Absarokas. As the ranch's brochure says, "It's called Paradise Valley for a reason." Each cabin has two units, each comfortably appointed, with two queen beds, a large bath area and a small patio with a great view for evening reflection. There was no mini-bar and no room service, but there was an ice chest on the patio filled with bottled water and sodas. Additionally, the place had two great amenities for a fishing getaway – no phone and no TV!

A modest split-level main building 30 yards from the cabins completes the complex. The upstairs part of it houses a small fly shop, the ranch office and the manager's residence. Downstairs, there is a kitchen, dining room and lounge with bar and, alas, a television set. The décor is comfortable, not elegant – an apt description of the physical appearance and general approach of the ranch.

The small staff is capable, caring and friendly; the ranch values friendship and informality. For us, this efficient and homey service began when Luke, one of Robertson's assistants, picked Debbie up at the Bozeman airport. Beer and wine and a platter of snacks are served in the lounge every evening, where staff and guests (some still in fishing garb) mingle. Guides are encouraged to join the guests in the lounge to discuss the day's events or

to plan tomorrow's venue. Chester, Luke's Labrador retriever, came by our room at mealtimes to escort us to the table.

Dining at YVR does approach elegance, thanks to Josh, a gifted young chef who during our visit turned out three terrific dinners and two wonderful breakfasts. Diners usually choose between two entrees at each meal, though an especially large or small guest count might dictate a set plate. Vegetables and greens come from a small organic farm in the valley, and Josh's cooking style is true to his California roots – healthy ingredients and subtle flavoring rather than haute cuisine, though in generous portions for guests like us who'd spent the day working up an appetite. The dining room is fairly small, though a large outdoor patio can double the capacity in fine weather. While all the food was delicious, I especially remember two of the best omelets I've eaten in years.

While the dining room isn't officially open to the public, Robertson likes to invite local friends, to spread the word about the ranch's new management. Robertson took over management this past winter, coming from the famous Firehole Ranch in West Yellowstone. He and Adams plan to make YVR as desirable a fishing destination as any in Montana. He certainly has the right location. The management team's goals emphasize improving the guest's experience. No plans for condos, time shares or convention centers. The only building improvement on the drawing board is expanding the kitchen and dining room and moving the lounge upstairs to improve the vistas.

This place is about fishing. You've got to like a lodge with a five month season but a year-round director of fishing. Adams aims to make the ranch better known in fly fishing circles, working with equipment suppliers and angling publications. Marketing to the public won't start until these two have the ranch where they want it to be, however.

The ranch is open from June through early October, with plans to open a bit earlier next year so anglers can catch the Mother's Day caddis hatch. Prices – but not the fishing experience – are significantly less than other Montana "upscale" fishing lodges where I've stayed. Six-night, five-fishing-day stays, from Sunday through Friday, are preferred, and are offered at \$2,895 per person, double occupancy. These rates are full American plan with lunch on the river and include guide fees, shuttles to and from the airport and fishing gear if you need it. Robertson will accommodate shorter stays, if space is available, at comparable daily rates. The ranch offers non-angling guests a

concierge service for amenities, such as massages, or other outdoor activities, including horseback riding, trap shooting, cycling, wildlife viewing and hiking in Yellowstone Park. Contact Paul Robertson at 800-626-3526; or visit the ranch's web site at www.yellowstonevalleyranch.com. –

Richard G. Lyon.