



Mimi Gates fly-fishing in China

FLY GIRLS

WRITTEN BY **Liz Bryson**

WOMEN FALL IN LOVE WITH FLY-FISHING



Bright flies catch the eye at the Evening Hatch Fly Shop in Ellensburg, Washington. The shop carries a large variety of fly-fishing equipment and offers guided trips, as do several other area fly shops.

Fly-fishing wasn't exactly the first thing on Melanie Nielson's mind after her divorce. Nielson, an Ellensburg, Washington, resident, had never tried fly-fishing before a friend took her out on the Yakima River seven years ago. After only a few outings, she fell in love with the sport, mainly because it forced her to think about making the perfect cast, predicting the river's movements, and luring a fish. "It's a great stress reliever and takes your mind off things," Nielson said. "Being outdoors ... you just can't beat that."

What first began as a hobby is now part of Nielson's livelihood. The 36-year-old helps run the Evening Hatch Fly Shop, an equipment shop and guide service located in Ellensburg, not far from the Yakima River. "I do the bookkeeping, work the retail, and shuttle customers. I've done it all but guide," she said. Fly-fishing has brought her closer to other women and has provided a fulfilling pastime unlike any other activity.

More and more women are getting involved in fly-fishing with each passing year. There's even a large organization dedicated to women's growing role in fly-fishing, the International Women Fly Fishers (IWFF), with more than 300 members. The organization not only encourages women to get involved in a traditionally male sport but also nurtures relationships among members.

The way women and men go about fly-fishing is different, in many experts' opinions, but what attracts the opposite sexes to the sport is no different. They both seek relaxation and a challenge, and they have a love of nature. "From my experience, women pick up fly casting faster than men," said Scott Ruprecht, president of Sportfishing Worldwide, a renowned guide service. Women are better at learning fly casting than men?

That sounds pretty controversial. There are probably a lot of men out there who would disagree, but Ruprecht has a theory for why. "They just pick up a rod and go after it. Men, on the other hand, do not want to look foolish in front of their buddies," Ruprecht explained.



Jennifer Mitchell, an avid fly-fisher from Goldendale, Washington, fishes the Yakima River in Ellensburg, Washington, on a winter morning in January. Mitchell fishes year round, as do many fly-fishers. Trout is the main catch in the blue-ribbon river.



He's not in the minority with his theories. Other professionals say the same thing, including Al Parke, a guide for the Evening Hatch. "I've been fishing for 63 years now. I take a lot of women on their first trip because husbands can't teach their wives. Women listen to me and soak it all in quickly. Men, on the other hand, seem to have preconceived ideas about fishing, and they don't want instructions."

"Patience is a big factor," Nielson said. "We don't cast as much, and we let the fly float longer. Plus there's less of an expectation when we go out. We want to catch a fish, but we don't expect to catch 20. If I catch one and I did it right, I'm happy," she said, adding with a laugh, "We also smell better."

"For women, fishing is about the experience, not catching fish," Ruprecht said. "Women are generally easier to please on trips. And it's a great chance for them to get away and not think about their portfolio, the office, the kids, etc."

Another avid female fly-fisher, Jennifer Mitchell, a

34-year-old Goldendale, Washington, resident, has fished for three years now. She became more involved in the sport when she met her husband Jack Mitchell, owner of the Evening Hatch, but she also grew up around fishing. "I come from a family of steelhead fishermen. My brother is an avid fly angler," said Mitchell, a real estate broker. She too sees differences in how men and women fish, but there are also many commonalities. What frustrates a man on the river is usually what also frustrates a woman—sometimes. "I can remember one time when I fell into the river," she recalled with a giggle. "We were on the Klickitat River. I was so frustrated, I stomped out of the river, ripped off my bra, and had to dry it on the dashboard of our car."

On another occasion, Mitchell hooked what she called "a hog of a brown trout" in Montana on the Jefferson River. "I was fishing alone. My husband was further off, on a guide trip. In the middle of the river, the fish gets wrapped around a rock. I was on the phone with Jack, trying to figure out how to catch



this fish. I was so mad, I ruined my cell phone and my camera. It was battle royal," she recalled. "But sure enough, the line busted off. I didn't catch that fish."

That feeling of disappointment is something to which any fly-fisher, male or female, can relate. What really draws Mitchell to the sport is the challenge of understanding the river, weather, and fish. "There are so many different dynamics in play. You have to think about your gear, how you're going to fish with it, what fish eat, how bugs play a factor, what hatches are happening at what times of the year. Figuring all that out is a challenge. But what I love most is when I swing that fly and a fish grabs. There's nothing like it."

Nielson agreed. On her very first fly-fishing trip, she managed to catch a "pretty good fish," she said. Since then, she's had a lot of success in the river, such as the time she caught a ten-pound bull trout. "It was my biggest fish so far, and we had no camera. It took 20 minutes to land it, and it circled the raft three whole times."

What Nielson feels she's gotten most out of fishing are friendships. "I've met people from all over the world and made some good friends along the way. It's a good network."

Here in the Pacific Northwest, the fly-fishing is superb. With so many locations to choose from, it's no surprise there's a large network of women fly-fishers. One organization, the Northwest Women Fly Fishers (NWF), has about 120 members. Like the International Women Fly Fishers, the NWF's goals focus around supporting women interested in the sport. It also focuses on ecology, conservation, and education. "Since inception, NWF has raised more than \$100,000 for conservation projects in the Northwest," the organization's Web site states. NWF has helped fund small to medium projects that improve fisheries, educate the community, and bring attention to fish habitat.

Along with conservation efforts, the organization also takes fishing excursions, as does the IWFF. Becoming a member of either of these groups is



Melanie Nielson, an Ellensburg resident, prepares her line during a fishing trip on the Yakima River. Nielson works part-time at the Evening Hatch Fly Shop.

simple. They require small annual membership fees, and in return, they help members network and keep them informed on trips and fly-fishing news.

The NWF, based in Seattle, hosts monthly outings and meets at the REI store in Seattle. Its calendar of events can be found online at northwestwomenflyfishers.com, as well as a membership form.

The IWFF is also online at intlwomenflyfishers.org, and it too hosts outings known as the International Women Fly Fishers Rendezvous. This year, its annual excursion, from June 18 to June 21, will be held at Mount Shasta in California. The trip will include fishing on the upper and lower Sacramento River, McCloud River, Fall River, and Hat Creek. Anyone from beginners to experts can participate.

In Kittitas County, there are several great fly-fishing spots along the Yakima River, where trout is the main catch. The year-round sport is supported by several local fly-fishing outfitters, including Evening Hatch, Red's Fly Shop, the Worley-Bugger Fly Co., and Tight Lines Angling. All of these outfitters can be found online. They offer a wide variety of services, including gear, guided trips, fishing condition updates, and more.

Women looking to get more involved in fly-fishing can regularly find Nielson at Evening Hatch, 2308 Canyon Road, in Ellensburg. She's happy to help other women get involved in the sport. The sharing of ideas, camaraderie, and bonds is what makes an already fulfilling pastime even better. **M**



Jennifer Mitchell, left, and Melanie Nielson fish together on the Yakima River in January. The two women have gotten to know each other over the years through their love of fly-fishing.