



NEWS

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## On the fly

### Festival tours try to trace Maclean's footsteps on Blackfoot

By Alex Sakariassen



Fly rods chatter against the front windshield as Jerry O'Connell steers his Subaru along the dusty washboard road between Montana Highway 200 and Clearwater Junction. He jabs a finger in the direction of a ponderosa grove, talking about a great hole in the Clearwater just beyond, about how it's fed in spring and fall by cooler waters skimming along the surface of Salmon Lake and fishes great during those times. Come July 11, O'Connell will pass this exact spot while leading the first of two Blackfoot River fishing-hole tours as part of the upcoming Seeley Lake literary festival "In the Footsteps of Norman Maclean." But pinpointing spots from the pages of Maclean's *A River Runs Through It*, published in 1976 and based on events from 1937, is hardly exact.

"The book gives some details," O'Connell says, specifically referencing a passage where Maclean's brother Paul swims to a midstream rock and begins shadow casting. "It's upstream of the Clearwater bridge, and he writes it's where the Blackfoot 'roars its loudest.' Well, the river's pretty darn loud coming through the canyon a few miles up. There's a few stretches with big rocks in the middle. It could be one of several places."

For the purposes of his tour, O'Connell has settled on a set of rapids at a sharp bend roughly halfway between Clearwater Junction and Sperry Grade. Perhaps this isn't the spot where Paul Maclean emerged soaked from the Blackfoot, "shook himself duck-dog fashion" and sent his fly dancing in long, low arcs over the water. It's a strong candidate, though, and enough of an evocative backdrop to add weight to O'Connell's live reading of the passage.

The tours, which take place July 11 and 12, are part of several outdoor opportunities folded into the festival's schedule. Coordinator Jenny Rohrer says other tours will focus on stewardship projects along the Blackfoot as well as the wildland firefighting elements contained in *Young Men and Fire*, Maclean's acclaimed novel documenting the tragic Mann Gulch Fire of 1949. The festival also includes presentations by Maclean's son John, author Pete Dexter and others, and tickets have already been purchased by people in Virginia, Texas, California, Illinois and Alabama. Rohrer says many are making this part of their "Norman Maclean pilgrimage," and the outdoor offerings are a critical component.

"I don't think you can look at the work of Norman Maclean without seeing the beauty of Seeley Lake and getting on the Blackfoot," she says, "or at least seeing the Blackfoot from the shore."

While there are a lot of myths and urban legends about the film, O'Connell, who founded the nonprofit Big Blackfoot Riverkeeper organization, says he doesn't plan to do much debunking during his tours. He's already familiar with the rich history of the area, having crafted tours in the past around Native American trails and the passage of Meriwether Lewis through the valley. Imparting these lessons, he says, is far more valuable to understanding Maclean than talk of Brad Pitt and Robert Redford.

"The history of the Blackfoot Valley was a huge part of his writing and his spirit," O'Connell says. "It shaped the man as much as the book."

The ancient trail used by Lewis passes close to another critical stopping point on O'Connell's tour: The hole where the three Maclean men last fished together, before Paul's murder in Chicago. Standing on the bluff where he believes Norman and John likely sat when "the universe stepped on its third rail" and Paul wrestled a huge trout to shore, O'Connell makes his case by mapping out the book's description of foliage, shadows and sunset.

After fishing the hole himself for a bit, O'Connell strolls back a quarter-mile to a stretch of water nearer his car. Clouds of caddis and golden stones hover above the water, twisting and contorting like wisps of mist caught in a light breeze. A fish breaks the surface below a band of cliffs opposite O'Connell and crashes back with a meaty splash. O'Connell lets out an excited "o-hooo," brings his rod over his head and drops a fly a few yards upstream, letting the current take it straight over the trout's last known position. There's a sudden tug on his line, but before he can set the hook it slackens again. "Darn," he says. "Almost had him."

The rush of adrenaline does, however, remind O'Connell of a time when a trio of trout fought over his fly right in front of him. It was in this exact spot, his story begins ...

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