

FLY FISHERMAN

» Ted Williams Explains
Why Wild Trout Matter

THE LEADING MAGAZINE OF FLY FISHING

WHAT
Trout
SEE *From Below*

Montana's
**Wild & Scenic
Flathead River**

Flyathlon:
Run. Fish. Beer.



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On the Surface

Great Abaco's
BONEFISH
Highway

PAGE 16

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RUN. FISH. BEER.

○ How to “win”
the Driftless
Area Flyathlon

PATRICK BURKE

WE'RE GOING TO start you off in true Iowa style,” announces race organizer Ryan Rahmiller. A volunteer jogs 40 yards down the trail holding an M-80 and a lighter. It's raining, but the wick sparks to life with a hiss.

There are around 50 of us at the starting line, stamping our feet against the damp chill and nervously glancing skyward. The race time was moved up an hour, in hopes of beating the incoming storms, but most of us were up late drinking around campfires. In our present state, out-running the forces of nature is a lot to ask.

I look around, sizing up the competition. Some look like serious anglers, but maybe not avid runners. They pace around, tentatively stretching random muscle groups and tightening shoelaces. Others look like serious runners, but they fiddle with their fly rods with unfamiliarity, and stare at patches of borrowed flies as if stumped by a quiz. But there are some who look confident, if comically divided in half: from the waist up, they could be right out of the pages of this magazine; from the waist down, from *Runners World*.

The Flyathlon logo reads: “Run. Fish. Beer.” The slogan pretty much sums up the event, but omits one key point: Fly-athletes enjoy these things at roughly the same time. On the surface it's a questionable combination: trail running and fly fishing. Sure, it brings together two things that many of us love, but just because we love two things doesn't mean we should enjoy them simultaneously.

For example: I enjoy spending time with my dogs, and I enjoy watching fireworks. Or, I like making toast, and I like snorkeling. Some things are better apart. It's fair to question the wisdom of running with a fragile and expensive fly rod, or wet wading a trout stream in sneakers. Yet I am about to do both. We shuffle up to the starting line, past a ClackaCraft that's been repurposed as a beer trough. The M-80 detonates, the crowd erupts in a cheer, and the 2017 Driftless Area Flyathlon is underway.

► Flyathlons bring together a subniche of fly fishers, and they raise money for nonprofit conservation organizations. The most recent Middle Creek, Colorado, Flyathlon raised \$28,000. The inaugural Midwest Flyathlon raised \$7,000.

Photo: Clint Johnson



Rules of the Game

Flyathlons vary in length. This one is short, just under 5 miles. Runners carry fly-fishing gear with them and, at some point along the route, must stop, assemble their rod, then catch and measure a trout. You can fish as much as you want (provided you finish before the cutoff), but only one trout is scored, by snapping a photo alongside a provided measuring tape. For each inch of fish, two minutes are subtracted from your finishing time. Get skunked and you'll have 20 minutes added to your time.

The race is the invention of Andrew Todd, who drove here from his home in Denver for the first official Flyathlon outside of Colorado. "It's just what I always did," Todd says. "I worked for the U.S. Geological Survey, so I found myself all around Colorado and the West. I love to run, so I just started taking a fly rod with me."

The first Flyathlon was an unofficial race near Grand Lake, Colorado in 2013. "It was mostly friends and family," Todd recalls. "It went through wilderness and was totally illegal." The following year, the first official event (with insurance and permits and everything!) was held at Middle Creek, in Saguache. Forty runners raised more than \$7,000 for Colorado Trout Unlimited. "That's when

I realized that I could use this as a vehicle to get people psyched about conservation," Todd says.

Since then the Flyathlon has grown, adding more events, longer courses, and more participants—although organizers cap the number of runners, based on what the resource can handle. Andrew and his partners have also created the nonprofit organization Running Rivers to help direct how the funds raised by flyathletes are allocated. This summer the Middle Creek event alone raised \$28,000. The inaugural Driftless Area Flyathlon raised more than \$7,000.

"It's a great, great thing," says Iowa DNR ranger Ryan Retalick. "Anything to have more support for these areas, more constituents for legislation, more funding to keep these areas available to people."

Driftless Area

The 2017 Driftless Flyathlon was in the Yellow River State Forest, in the heart of the Driftless Region—an area of limestone hills rolling across parts of Minnesota, Iowa, Illinois, and Wisconsin. The spring creeks that wind through these valleys draw anglers from across the Midwest, and beyond.

"The concept of a run/fish/beer event is a natural fit for our region," says Rahmiller, co-owner of Driftless

on the Fly. "It offers great fishing opportunities, benefits coldwater conservation, and gives participants the chance to sample some of the state's best craft brews."

Dave Kuntzelman and I were already training for two other races when word of a Midwest Flyathlon reached our social media feeds. We registered immediately, and just in time. The 60 slots sold out quickly.

The race day schedule reads like a strange, landlocked cruise ship itinerary. At 8:30 A.M. we board a hay ride to the starting line. Race time is 9:30. By 12:30 P.M., all runners must cross the finish line, where they are handed a local beer. We drink beer and eat barbecue until 3:30, then pick teams for an afternoon one-fly competition. At 6:30 there is a single-elimination pellet gun beer can shootout.

I have a strained hamstring. After breaking his clavicle in a cycling accident, Kuntzelman hasn't run in months, so we decided to forgo our dreams of a podium finish and instead focused on fishing together. Among the contenders, however, there is a fair amount of strategy. The serious runners know their paces, so the fish is the only variable. How long will it take to catch a trout? Do you score the first fish, regardless of size, or spend precious minutes chasing a larger one?

Some opt to fish early, then bang out the miles once the fish question has been answered. Others go with a run-first-then-fish-hard strategy.

A quarter mile into our run we spot a promising stretch of riffles and pools. We push through the underbrush, emerging on the bank comically covered in burrs. The prickly hitchhikers will cause serious chafing issues during our run, but for now we're focused on fishing. I manage to quickly catch a 12-inch brown on a #14 beadhead Pink Squirrel. This quintessential Driftless Area nymph has become something of a punch line among local anglers, but I am not ashamed. I'm on the board in under 10 minutes, subtracting 24 minutes from my finish time.

Soon we're back on the trail—damp and muddy, our feet numb from wet wading. The race is not a loop, it's there and back. At the turnaround, volunteers hand out not water, but shots of locally distilled whiskey. We let the elixir warm us while we dump pebbles from our shoes.

We finish near the back of the pack. By noon, the last few fly fishers slog across the finish line. Fish lengths are logged, arithmetic is done, and the winner is Jim Reilly, of St. Paul, Minnesota. I corner him in the beer tent and press him to reveal his strategy.

"I was kind of hungover, I really didn't give it any forethought. Just run fast," Reilly says. "I'd scoped some water on the way out, and nobody was in that hole on my way back. So, I just jumped in, waded across, and got 'er."

The rest of the weekend unfolded according to the itinerary. The fishing stayed good all weekend, and the beer was cold. But the highlight was definitely the people. If fly fishers already occupy a niche, then this group has carved out an eccentric and friendly sub-niche.

"I feel like fly fishing, trail running, and craft beer can all be kind of . . . douchey, you know?" Todd laughs. "If you go into a fly shop you feel it right away—unless it's a good fly shop. The same goes for the starting line of an ultra marathon. People think their

sport is the coolest thing on earth. But this? You felt it today, it's a laid-back environment."

I met a surprising number of people who'd run one or more of the Colorado Flyathlons, and everyone I spoke with plans to return for the Driftless Area event next year. This concept, crazy as it seems, resonates with people. Todd sees room to grow.

"I think it could go to many other places," he says. "It just takes that local element. That's why this is so exciting, to see someone else take it and make it their own. If it's just me putting on events, my wife is gonna divorce me and I'm gonna lose my day job. But if people want to do this, we can give them the bones of how to do it."

Patrick Burke lives in the Chicago area, and works in advertising as a writer and creative director. He is also a freelance outdoor writer and content producer, with a focus on the Midwest and Great Lakes regions. His last story in FLY FISHERMAN was "Trash Fish" in the April-May 2018 issue.



Photo Clint Johnson

▶ A Flyathlon starts like most other races, except participants run with fly rods. You can score only one trout, and for each inch of trout, two minutes are deducted from your finish time. If you don't catch a fish it'll cost you 20 minutes.

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