

# HILL COUNTRY OUTDOORS: FLY-FISHING

By Steve Ramirez

I am not a patient man. I have never been one to sit and watch a bobber, waiting for it to bob. In most things of value in life, I find that observing is never as good as participating. Like the "worlds' most interesting man" of the Dos Equis XX commercial fame, I prefer to live vicariously through myself. Of all the things I have participated in, fly-fishing has the unique ability of separating you from your worries while connecting you to being alive. Residents and visitors to the Texas Hill Country often do not know what a wonderful place this is for fly-fishing. Our home is a land where many rivers run through it.

The sun is just beginning to show over the live oaks as I drive along FM1376 toward Sisterdale. I turn toward Comfort and then onward until I find one of my favorite crossings of the Guadalupe River. I pull my truck to the side of the road, park among the wildflowers, step out and begin the process of stringing my fly rod. There is the sense of anticipation, a magnetic draw toward the river; but this is no time to rush. The river will be there waiting as it has since the dinosaurs first crossed it leaving footprints along the shoreline. No, this is a time to breathe, to let go of all the silliness that we civilized people pretend is of importance. As I have said, I am not a patient man; but I have learned more about patience from the river, or from a single knot in my line, than my parents could have ever taught me.

Stepping into the river for the first time is a transformational experience. Before you do, you respect her; watch her, and see how she is feeling today. Then, and only then do you take the first step, leaving your prints where the giants once did, stepping on rocks that a Comanche brave once stood on, and knowing all the while that your prints will wash away too; as they should. I strip out the line from my reel and begin my back-cast. My forward cast loops toward a "fishy" spot under the shade of a cypress tree. My line floats in the air, and then lights upon the water; the fly drifting with the current. In time, eventually, someone who lives below the surface will decide that what drifts above them is breakfast. In that moment, we are connected. I gently work him toward me, keeping my shadow to myself. He comes to the net and with cold wet hands, I hold him, speak to him, thank him, and then watch him swim away.

When I catch fish, the uninitiated might say I had a good day, but in truth, they are all good days. After all, that is why it is called "fishing" and not "catching." Outdoor writer John Gierach once wrote, "Fly-fishing is solitary, contemplative, misanthropic, scientific in some hands, poetic in others, and laced with conflicting aesthetic considerations. It's not even clear if catching fish is actually the point." I agree in that you are always casting to yourself. Still, some of my greatest moments on the river were standing next to my daughter Megan as she worked a yellow-bellied perch to the net. Solitary is not necessarily alone. We shared the experience, but ultimately, it was still hers.

I promise you, there is something magical about standing in a Hill Country river in the early morning, casting a fly to the wind. It is the sounds of the birds in the cypress trees. It is the white-tailed deer feeding along the rivers edge and red-tailed hawks flying overhead. Even the act of casting a line backwards and forwards has its charms. When I get it right, it is like flying; but I often get it wrong, and that is ok too. For those of you who have been

fishing

our streams for years you understand this all too well. Some readers may think, "I'd like to try fly-fishing, but it all looks too hard." I assure you that you will be able to catch tree limbs with your back cast just as well as I do. It does not matter. You will have fun and will learn as you do. Fly-fishing is one of those activities where you never stop learning. As children, and later in the tail waters of life, we do not care what other people think and we remember that it is through experimentation and mistakes that we learn and grow. I am growing all the time.

Hill Country Rivers include the Guadalupe, Medina, Llano, Nueces, Frio, Sabinal, Pedernales, Blanco, Lampasas and the San Gabriel. The fish that can be caught on the fly in the Texas Hill Country include largemouth bass, smallmouth bass, and the Guadalupe bass that is endemic to our region. While the largemouth bass are predominantly found in the deeper pools and tanks, smallmouth and Guadalupe bass tend to gravitate toward areas of moving water. In fact, Guadalupe bass often behave in a manner reminiscent of trout, except that they are found in warm water. With that said, there is a sustainable trout population in the Guadalupe River south of the dam and seasonal trout fishing in the winter months where the Texas Department of Parks & Wildlife plants fingerlings. If this were not enough we have a half dozen varieties of "perch" that are both beautiful and fun to catch on the fly. If you tire of catching perch and bass, you can always stalk carp, white bass, gator gars, and catfish. Living in the Hill Country we are only two hours drive from some great salt water fly-fishing, but that is for another article.

There are a number of sources of information, instruction, equipment, guidance, and camaraderie in our area. Hill Country Fly Fishers in Kerrville and Alamo Fly Fishers in San Antonio are just two of the local clubs that provide these resources. Both can be located on the internet and have regular meetings, fly tying sessions, and outings. There are several good books available on the subject with my favorite being Bud Priddy's, Fly-Fishing the Texas Hill Country. Another good source of information is [www.texasflyfishing.com](http://www.texasflyfishing.com). This site has information about each river, the fish, and the craft of fly-fishing. Perhaps most importantly, this site promotes our involvement in the conservation and management of our beautiful and fragile river habitat.

Sometimes, as I travel through our region, I am struck with how much it can remind me of places I have been in Africa. All of the time, I am certain that our home is like no other place on earth. It is a national treasure and if we do not treat it as such, others will find a more mercenary use for the land. By being a participant in the Hill Country outdoor life, we take ownership of our home and have a stake in its future.

I know that there are legions of people encapsulated in their metal SUV exoskeletons, lined up on their way to jobs they hate. I should feel sorry for them, but I do not. Instead, I know that each of our lives is in our own hands. We cannot control what happens to us, but we can control our reaction to it. When the going gets tough for me, I go fishing. Not all the time, and not nearly enough, but like I said...I am always learning. Perhaps someday one of my dear readers may decide to take that first step into the river and away from the noise, which is a substitute for living. As writer John Gierach once said, "life is short, and responsibility is overrated."

When you step out into that stream for the first time, remember that it is like going to the original church. I believe God built this place. It is a respectful place. Take the time to hear the birds and feel the cold water as it rushes past your legs. Breathe in, and out, and let out some line toward a "fishy" spot. And, if you happen to see a middle aged, usually impatient man, patiently untangling his leader from an overhanging branch, please give me a pleasant Texas wave. Then quietly, respectfully, move to an empty section of the river. After all, we fly-fishermen aren't lonely; but we do enjoy our solitude. X

