

OUR KIND OF CLASSROOM: TOM MINER BASIN ON THE YELLOWSTONE.



Back to School

Montana's new guide-prep program takes learning to a higher level BY GEOFF MUELLER

GUIDING FOR THE FUTURE (G4F), a new program launching this spring in Montana, aims to close the gap between mediocre and great. That paradigm shift begins with providing guides a well-rounded education that goes beyond basics. Communication, collaboration, and understanding how a resource functions—through good times and bad—are key focal points.

“The best way to make guides true stewards of the resource is to give us the knowledge and the training we need to understand the issues and to be better educators when we communicate with our clients,” says Brant Oswald, G4F steering committee member and veteran Livingston, Montana-based guide.

And one of the best ways to recognize a need is to see it through the lens of a crisis.

In the summer of 2016, local guides and outfitters had their livelihoods sidelined when Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) shuttered more than 180 miles of the Yellowstone River and its tributaries. The sudden action resulted when thousands of whitefish turned belly-up along the river's banks. Afflicted whites tested positive for Proliferative Kidney Disease (PKD), a microscopic parasite that can also infect and kill trout. (Trout mortality was much lower during the kill.) The summer's low, soupy flows contributed to the outbreak. At the time, the 'Stone was a bony 280 cfs, while its daytime in-river temperature, near Livingston, hovered in the 70s.

Oswald describes it as a disorienting experience: “The fish-kill itself, the closure, a busy little place turning into a ghost town overnight,” he recalls. “It was a stark reminder of how much many of us rely on the resource of this river and its fishery.”

The closure also made Oswald realize that guides, working in unison with other river users, including state agencies and area landowners, could and should be part of future solutions. “I listened in on a lot of guide conversations at local watering holes during the closure,” he says, “and I heard all kinds of theories for what was going on.” A lot of that chatter was fueled by misinformation. “Guides can play a role as outdoor educators, not just with our clients but also everyone within earshot at the bar. But that only works if we have access to good information.”

On the heels of the fish kill, Oswald teamed with fellow flyfishing outfitter Sean Blaine to blueprint the foundational ingredients for G4F. But because their guiding season limited their time, they needed an integrator. That's where Whitney Tilt stepped in.

Oswald first met the gregarious former biologist at the Yellowstone River Symposium in April 2017. There, Oswald presented the idea of a resource-training program for guides. Tilt, having worked on the Master Hunter program for One Montana, which shares similar resource-first ideals with G4F, saw potential in Oswald's spiel. “It's a privilege to be a fishing guide,” Tilt says. “There's nothing in our constitution that says you have the right to be one. It's got to come through the concept of public trust—that care of the resource—and the only way you do that is by accepting responsibility that you're a steward. That's what needs to change.”

Tilt was the closing speaker at the symposium, and during

his talk he addressed the historically thorny relationship between guiding and ranching communities. He also stressed the need to reenergize the watershed group through collaborative efforts. “We have to recognize that we're in this together,” he says.

Tilt is currently the Director of Lands and Wildlife Conservation at the Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation, which—in addition to owning the Atlanta Falcons—has property in Montana's Paradise Valley. With G4F, Tilt has employed his all-in approach to recruit and assemble a diverse steering committee. The group brings together industry brands such as Sage and Simms, as well as regional experts in wildlife conservation and fisheries science.

The Fishing Outfitter's Association of Montana (FOAM) has also jumped on board. “We felt that this sort of training needed to be offered to guides by their peers, in order to get their buy-in on the idea,” Oswald says. “We felt strongly that if [G4F] was instead offered by an individual company—or required by a government agency—the guide community would not see its real value. So we've worked with FOAM to make it the lead group for the program.”

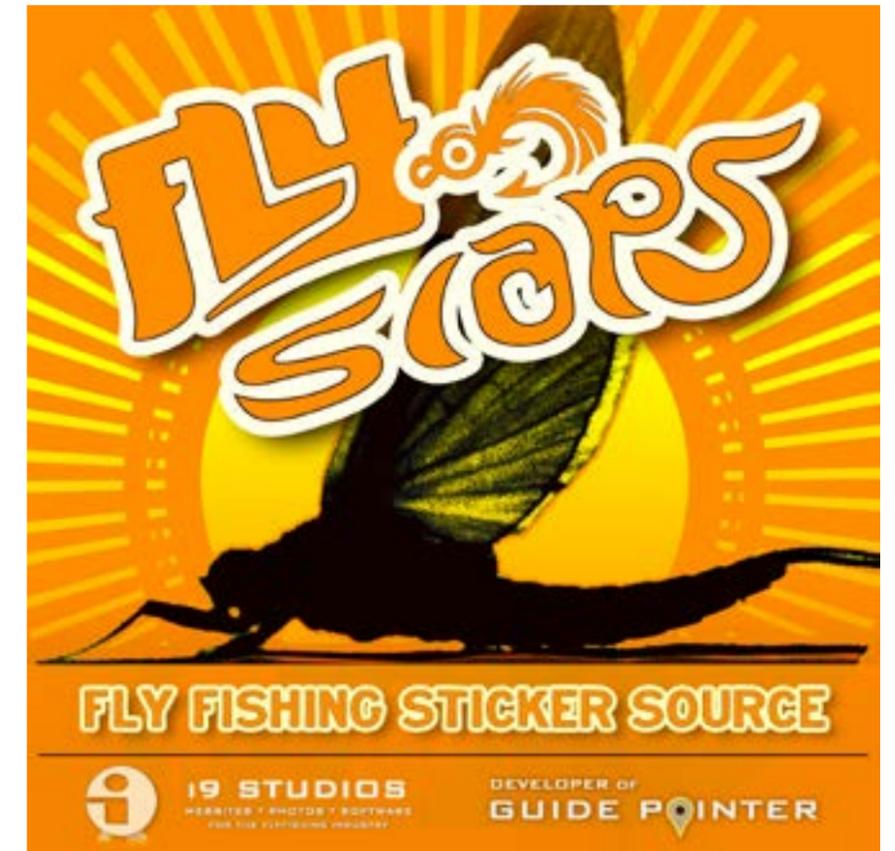
One Montana's Mitch Lassa has been instrumental in developing G4F's curriculum. The course's four core values include: knowledge, professionalism, ethics, and stewardship. Repercussions from the Yellowstone closure have also moved fisheries monitoring and “citizen-science” efforts into the spotlight. “While your average guide school may focus on rudimentary skills, G4F gets at a more fully tuned-in strategy. We want to improve the skills and increase knowledge of our guides and outfitters, but we also want them to be protecting and conserving the health of the resources.”

G4F is currently open for registration. Its online component kicks off in April, with on-the-water courses to follow in May at Tom Miner Basin, on the Yellowstone River. So far, more than 25 guides and outfitters have enrolled.

“As our resources become more heavily used, the role of the guide becomes increasingly more important,” Tilt says. “We all have to be paying attention, and we all have to be ready to learn and adapt.”

For more on G4F, see guidingforthefuture.org.

DAN ARMSTRONG



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