

Montana's Smith River Powerful Package of Scenery and Fish



Joe Sowerby stood in thigh-deep water, coaching me to bring a colorful Smith River brown trout to his net. Perched in the front seat of a raft, I marveled at the fight in this trout, hooked when Joe directed my cast into the fast water only inches deep along a grassy bank. Finally, I got the fish between Joe and me. "Bring him up to me," he instructed patiently. "Lift that rod tip straight up."

When I did, that brownie leaped four feet into the air. Joe leaped too, about three feet to his right, and caught the 18-inch fish mid-air in his net.

"Wow! What a catch!", I exclaimed as my fishing partner Dave Sowerby and I hooted and hollered. I'd never seen that before – a mid-air catch into the net.

Something else I'd never seen was Montana's famous Smith River Canyon, where we enjoyed a spectacular 5-day float and fish trip with pink and yellow 1000-foot high limestone walls surrounding us like a protective cocoon. This is a very special place.

And the fish? Well, they are special – and plentiful – too.

Joe owns Montana Flyfishing Connection, a team of superb guides who could lead even a novice fly fisher to quality-sized brown and rainbow trout in this awesome river canyon. We also caught whitefish and a few grayling. Along for this June, 2003 adventure were Edye Cronk, President of the Sportsman's Alliance of Maine, Joe's Dad Dave Sowerby, his Uncle Doyle Sowerby, and Doyle's daughter Debbie Archambault. We are all Maine residents – and we've made Joe, a Maine native, our Montana connection for trips booked by SAM's Wilderness Travel agency.

You can book this same trip by contacting SAM's Wilderness Travel, 1-800-243-6905 or travel@fishhunt.com.

If you prefer other Montana rivers and trips, Joe offers

a variety of angling adventures – but I strongly recommend the Smith River float – a powerful package of scenery and fish.

The rafts are sturdy, with one guide for every two anglers. The tents and cots are comfortable and the campsites stunningly beautiful with fishable water right in front of your tent perched on the riverbank. There's something about the sound of moving water that makes me sleep better at night.

Each morning, the crew breaks camp and moves everything down river, where it is set up again when you arrive at the new campsite after a day of fishing.

The food was remarkable – the best I've ever enjoyed on a trip of this type. Most restaurants don't serve food this good – and I'm serious.

Hors d'oeuvres of shrimp cocktail and fried nuggets of goose. Asparagus, fresh fruit, unbelievably tasty marinated pork with chutney sauce, mouth-watering grilled salmon, garlic-mashed potatoes – even pecan pie! And quality wine with dinner. All transported for five days in coolers in the rafts.

Wildlife is abundant in the canyon – especially birds. We saw Golden Eagles, Bald Eagles, Peregrine Falcons, Mule Deer, Whitetail Deer, lots of Antelope, and hundreds of geese with their goslings. From Great Blue Herons to Kingfishers – they're all here.

Picture this. Our dinner table is laid out on the riverbank. I sit facing the river about 20 feet away, as I cut into one of the most delicious pieces of pork I've ever enjoyed. A fresh salad, garlic bread, mashed potatoes and a fine Merlot, portend a splendid dining experience after a fabulous day of rafting and fishing.

Facing me is a beautiful limestone wall on the other side of the river. I spot an Osprey perched in a softwood tree on top of the wall. Just as I'm pointing out the bird to my companions, the Osprey dives straight into the water,

with a big splash – and emerges with a fish. Now that's entertainment!

I was particularly surprised that – mid-June – there were no bugs. I never once put on bug spray.

One evening, Dave and I, guided by Joe, lingered long on the river – arriving late for dinner – to enjoy some evening dry fly fishing. In a couple hours I landed 12 trout, including 18-inch and 19-inch brownies. Dave caught an equal number, including a monstrous 21-inch brown trout. We fished from the raft and also got out to wade some of the best sections. Although the days were hot, we managed to catch fish consistently – even though I have often said that brown trout are the most challenging and difficult to catch of all fish.

My favorite fishing time came every morning between 5:30 and 6 a.m. when I wandered up and down the river on my own, wading and casting. Those solitary peaceful mornings always produced memorable rainbows and browns. And I enjoyed watching the sunlight work its way down the canyon walls.

When I returned to camp, bacon would be sizzling and the coffee would be hot and plentiful. Did I tell you about the food yet? If you take this trip, insist on a spicy breakfast burrito some morning – but use the hot sauce sparingly – or have plenty of Tums!

As you can imagine with a company called the Montana Flyfishing Connection, this was strictly fly fishing – both subsurface and surface depending on conditions and time of day. The size of the flies surprised me. They are huge – nothing like the tiny flies we have to use in Maine to catch brown trout. My five-weight rod was satisfactory although it would have been easier to throw some of those big diving sculpin and floating golden stoneflies with a heavier rod. And the bugmeister fly – well it was so effective it ought to be illegal!

But my proudest moment came when I caught three

rainbow and two brown trout one morning before breakfast right in front of our campsite on a fly purchased in Rangeley – the CDC emerger. One brownie was so big that Dave had to wade out with a net for me.

Although I've been fly fishing for 12 years, I learned a lot from Joe and his experienced guides. I'll be a much better angler after this trip with them.

My second proudest moment came the last day with Joe guiding Dave and me again. I'd been steadily improving my technique in getting those flies up into holes under the limestone walls and big river boulders.

Joe pointed out a boulder up ahead on the left as the raft approached, and encouraged me to try to put my fly right into an indentation with a small pocket of water in the middle of the boulder. And I did!

The take was immediate, with a big splash, and a 17-inch brown trout was on! They needed a wide-angle lens to photograph my grin as I brought that trout to the net.

The things I remember best: stunningly beautiful brown trout in an array of yellow, gold and pinkish colors, patient experienced guides who provided all the flies and leaders and tippets needed and knew the river like they were born in it and worked incredibly hard to put fish on the end of our lines, the two days I was guided by Joe Sowerby who is among the very best guides I have ever experienced, breathtaking scenery of limestone canyon walls and rolling meadows, abundant wildlife (I especially enjoyed the eagles), five-star superb food, evening campfires, sleeping beside moving water, my angling companions who were all good sports, mornings alone on the river, a quick hit from an eager trout as the raft moved swiftly down a rapid – those always surprised me, and of course, the river itself, as pretty as any river in this country, generally no more than 50 yards wide, always propelling us forward – when I wanted so much to stay behind!

Now, I can't wait to return. — *George Smith*



Sitting in the River

After a very hot and sunny day on the river, I arrived at our campsite exhausted. When I mentioned a swim, Steve, a member of the crew, pointed out a small boulder about mid-river.

"You can sit in a small hole in the river with your back up against that boulder," he suggested.

Stashing my rod and back pack near my river-side tent, I grabbed a beer and waded out to the rock.

"Ahhh," was all I could muster for comment as I settled into the cold river. Very refreshing. That boulder was just perfect as a back rest.

I'd been sitting there about 20 minutes when Dave Sowerby's raft arrived, and he joined me, replenishing my cold beverage.

We were sitting there in the river recounting a splendid day of fishing, when our outfitter, Joe Sowerby, waded out with hot appetizers of fried nuggets of goose for us.

Now that's service!



Four Casts Four Fish

As our raft glided by, Doyle Sowerby stood casting towards the cliff into a small side channel of water. We were gazing at the "birthing cave" high above us on the sheer cliff wall, until Doyle's shouts got our attention.

Doyle gestured wildly and shouted, "Four casts, four fish, 18 inches!"

We thought he was kidding.

But we should have known better. Guided by his nephew Joe, one of the best guides I have ever experienced, Doyle had stepped out of his raft, cast what he described as four of the best casts of his life right into the undercut bank of that cliff, and pulled out four brown trout, all 18 inches in size.

I accused him of pulling out the same trout four times. But no brown trout gives you more than a single chance. What a thrill! – GS



Guides and Crew

Joe Sowerby
Casey Dudley
Curt Hickey
Adam DeBruin
Kirk Gammill
Steve Blanche

