

# Rivers of Recovery

**L**AST YEAR, I WAS ASKED TO participate in a retreat, sponsored by Reel Recovery, for men who had been diagnosed with serious, life-threatening forms of cancer. Many different types and stages of the disease were represented, and everyone had undergone radical changes in their lives, among which were loss of sight, strength, equilibrium, flexibility, memory, manual dexterity, and so on. For many, the loss would be permanent, even if the cancer went into remission for many years.

The retreat was held at Sylvan Dale Ranch, near Rocky Mountain National Park, about 90 miles northwest of Denver. Sylvan Dale has been in business for a long time and offers several well-stocked ponds and a very nice stretch of the Big Thompson River. I would accompany one of the retreat guests for a day of trout fishing. The guests would not need to know how to fish, and they weren't required to bring any gear. Everything—food, lodging, tackle, guides, and fish—was supplied for the three days and two nights, at no cost.

My job was to offer the person I was

**A fly-fishing retreat can offer everything from escape to camaraderie to hope.**

fishing with whatever kind of instruction he desired. I could teach him how to cast, where to put the fly, how to wade safely, or I could simply offer a steady hand, conversation, and an understanding ear. My goal was to just be there for him for a day. In the evenings, the guests took over, and they found that they had shared many common experiences.

## Picking Up the Thread

**O**n a beautiful summer day, I met Paul. He was married, and had two

kids about to start college. He was well-educated and had a very good job. Unfortunately, he suffered some permanent effects—including the loss of sight in one eye and a compromised sense of equilibrium—as a result of radiation and chemotherapy treatments for a very serious tumor. As a boy, he had learned to fly-fish with his grandfather near his home in northern Wyoming, but he'd given it up as he grew older. Our time together was, in his words, his "first day back."

We started at one of the ponds, and it was soon clear that fly fishing was like riding a bike for Paul—he'd never forget how. Within the space of about an hour and a half, he landed half a dozen nice rainbows and lost twice that many. After lunch, he wanted to try the river. I suggested he tie on a black Woolly Bugger and told him to let it slide along under the edge of a foam line in front of a long rock cliff. The fly hadn't traveled more than a few feet before everything went tight.

I was in the water about 15 feet above him when he turned all the way around, clamped down on the line, put the rod over his shoulder, and without missing a step marched up through the water past me. As he went by, he said, "My grandfather told me not to give them any line." Suddenly, a large trout popped out of the water and started bouncing along the stones on the shore.

With the fish safely on dry land, Paul reeled up and came back to see what he had caught. It was a 20-inch, wild brown in perfect condition. I fish the Big Thompson regularly, and this was the largest stream-bred fish I'd ever seen taken from the river. After unhooking the fish and putting it back, Paul turned to me, his face terribly scarred, and said, "John, this is the most wonderful afternoon I could have hoped for."

He then decided to buy a fly rod and everything that goes with it. He wondered if he should get chest waders or hip boots.

COURTESY OF REEL RECOVERY



The closing ceremonies of a retreat at Sylvan Dale Ranch highlights the camaraderie and support that are the hallmarks of events sponsored by Reel Recovery.

## Making a Difference

**R**eel Recovery is a nonprofit organization that provides free fishing retreats for men who have or have had cancer. Casting for Recovery organizes similar events for women with breast cancer. Both groups actively seek volunteers and donations. Take the time to write for more information, or visit the Web sites below. Then, if you can spare some time or money, help make a difference in the lives of others through fly fishing.

### Reel Recovery

160 Brookside Road, Needham, MA 02492

[www.reelrecovery.org](http://www.reelrecovery.org)

### Casting for Recovery

P.O. Box 1123, Manchester, VT 05254

[www.castingforrecovery.org](http://www.castingforrecovery.org)

(I suggested the latter, reminding him that, with his equilibrium problems, he didn't want to get into water that was too deep and wind up in Nebraska.) He also wanted to know if tying flies was difficult. I replied that, if he could negotiate what he and his family had been through, tying would be a piece of cake. He asked if there were any places near Denver where he could fish, and I gave him several; I could hear the mental file cards dropping into place.

On that day, because he was willing to try, he shifted his life just a bit. For a while, the disease wasn't running everything, and if that could happen once, it could happen again. Paul is a remarkable man, but no more so than the dozen other men we took fishing that day or the millions of men and women who deal with this each year. All they need is a chance that fits.

What Reel Recovery and Casting for Recovery (see the sidebar on page above) do is so simple that it is often overlooked. In a country with so much, it is often easy to miss the value of what is right next to us every day. One person had, for at least a short while, some time beyond the appalling events that had so altered the lives of him and his family. All it took were some Renegades and some trout. He did the rest.

*John Betts, an accomplished artist, angler, and tier, is a frequent contributor to American Angler and Fly Tyer.*

[www.americanangler.com](http://www.americanangler.com)

<b>CONSTRUCTION:</b> Surgical Grade Stainless Steel <b>SIZE:</b> 4", 4.5", 5", 5.5", 6" <b>COLORS:</b> Gold Loops/Handles or All Black		<b>JAW:</b> Curved or Straight, Half Smooth & Half Striated, All Smooth, Half Smooth & Half Cross Hatch, Deep Relief Milled	<b>A Clamp for all REASONS</b>
	<b>TYPE:</b> Barb, Release, Scissor, Tungsten Carbide, Side Cutter	<b>SHANK:</b> Loop handle clamps have pin-in-shank for cleaning hook eyes	
		<b>HANDLE:</b> Loops or Mitten	

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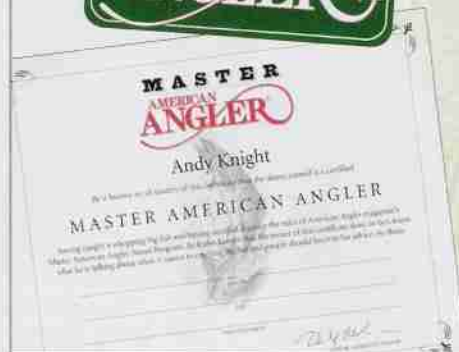
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