

Ground beef

By Amy Bulger, editor

I awoke to heavy snorts outside the window at daylight, but I had gone to sleep alone.

In the near dark the night before, I found the edge of a Wyoming Game and Fish Department wildlife habitat management area, divided by fence and cattle guard from the BLM land used for grazing on the other side. I camped on the Game and Fish side, where thick, tall sage dictated I sleep in the truck. At daybreak, a curious calf left her bovine brethren a half-mile below in the valley to become my fuzzy welcoming committee of one.

I was alone on another elk scouting trip. Hunters frequently charge deep into the back roads of a hunt area looking for the places we imagine we'll find unique experiences. But more than once, these back roads have doled out more than I bargained for in lessons of self-reliance and adaptability. This would be another.

The little brown cow stuck her head through the fence and mooed as I boiled water for coffee. She showed off with leaps, kicks and head shakes. I assumed her excitement was linked to the color of my truck, maybe the same as the one that dumps her daily feed in the valley below.

As I poured the perked brew, a ker-flup ruckus came from behind me, then an eerie quiet. I turned to see only ears poking above the sage near the cattle guard. Then came the moans.

I scampered to the road, coffee in hand. All I saw was half a cow. The top half. She had walked across the cattle guard and fallen in, her belly completely flat against the rails, legs dangling into the concrete culvert below. Ground beef.

The look on her face gave away her surprise at how cattle guards worked. We stared at each other. I felt mildly responsible for her predicament, and suddenly guilty for living in cities all my life. I scanned the two-track all the way to the horizon. I hadn't seen another car for 16 hours. I wasn't going to get that lucky.

"So... can you figure this out on your own?" I asked out loud.

The whites of the calf's eyes bulged in fear. My mind raced. She let out a frothy, slobbering moan. Leaving wasn't an option. Could I lasso her neck and pull her out? No rope. Walk up confidently and bear hug her neck, muscle our way out of this? No way. She was young, but not small.

I resorted to technology. Yes, I YouTube'd it. But the search pulled up only one other such bovine predicament. The video showed a full-grown heifer in a similar position and an entire fire department called in to help. I had enough cell service to text but not to make a call to a game warden or ranch house landline, or the fire department.

The sun was rising on the prime scouting time I'd driven four hours to be a part of, and the gravity of the situation was sinking in. I tore apart my truck. No boards. No rope. Nothing for leverage. Just a few wedges of cut firewood I keep in the truck for emergencies. This surely wasn't the emergency I'd had in mind.

But this might work.

I balanced on the cattle guard next to her, working the pointed wedges of wood into the grates so the flat sides became platforms between the rails for her front hooves. She worked one front leg out and got a solid foothold. Then the other, enough to shuffle the rest of herself comically out. And when momentum pushed her toward me, I heaved into her shoulder like a linebacker to stick her into reverse.

I think we were both shocked it worked. From her side of the cattle guard she gave a kick of her back legs and trotted around in a small circle. Nothing broken.

The sun was blazing through the windshield as she got smaller in my rearview mirror. I'd driven a couple hundred miles to scout and missed my best chance. My archery elk season was opening in a few days, my plan of being prepared dwindling. I hadn't seen anything this trip. And yet, I left thinking that now I'd surely seen it all.

Half a hornberg

By Amy Bulger, editor

"It used to be a hornberg," I smirked. "Think this thing'll still work?"

We were ready to ease into the current, our sights set on large browns piled under a downed log on the other side of the river. It was a warm fall day and our hip waders would get us far enough across to cast above and let our flies drift down.

I closed the little silver fly box and put it back in my vest. Front left Velcro pocket, the place it has lived for years, where muscle-memory will find it next time.

The hornberg isn't real recognizable these days. I guess that means it's done its job well. The rusty hook is barely camouflaged by the straggling remains of one faded yellow-greenish hackle feather, one thin striped mallard feather arched near its back, and a body of unraveling tinsel and black thread that makes it seem more like a sickly streamer than a dry.

Despite its bad looks and overripe retirement, it's the only hornberg in my case — one Dad dug from the basement fly collection he has amassed through years of proud garage sale finds. Ages ago, when I left for college, he tucked the hornberg into this silver fly box alongside bead-head nymphs, miniscule shrimp, a purple parachute adams, commando woolly buggers and neon green bug-eye streamers. Others have shined over the years, some have been added as others were lost to rivers, but few have ever outperformed.

So I keep giving it play, at least for the first few casts anyway. The once-affirmative words, "This thing'll still work!" now rearranged into a question: "Think this thing'll still work?"

Only occasionally are fish actually hungry enough anymore to be fooled by such a wounded imitation. But I'm a sentimental angler, and its character hooks me every time, as does the idea of the ensuing

fish tale — a lunker caught on half a fly.

My folks, both teachers by trade, had many ways of passing down their love for the outdoors, and this tiny fly box was one. Dad put it together as a tool to educate me on flies before I knew what a hornberg even was. He taped a piece of paper into the opposite side of the box, tiny handwritten letters spelling out the name and size of each. His angler care package left me wondering if he just got tired of the same streamside conversation every time he caught a fish:

"What you usin'?" I'd shout.

"A mosquito," he'd whisper back.

"A what?" I'd shout back, holding up one hand and staring into his big fly box, clueless. They all looked like mosquitoes to me.

"The brown one," he relented to words that would stop me from spooking more fish. "The fuzzy brown one, with stripes!"

I learned Dad was a quick study. When I got married, my new husband received a coveted Christmas gift — a big silver box full of another arsenal of flies from the basement collection, a handy cheat-sheet lining its innards. New flies to learn.

The fly box is but one small way we pass on tradition. Though the cheat-sheet in mine succumbed long ago to water and weather, I learned the names in Dad's fly-box arsenal before it dis-

integrated. Teaching tool success. The flies have proven a good mix. So much so that, these days, I figure if a fly isn't already in that box, I probably won't miss it.

My folks called the other day about a story I wrote in the April issue, "Polishing a gem." Dad was ferreting out a status report on Diamond Lake, by the end of the conversation we'd crafted plans to meet there, fish it together once water levels and weather cooperate.

I didn't mention it to him on the phone, but I'm guessing those trout will be hungry enough to eat half a hornberg.



Turkey stuff

By Amy Bulger, editor

I dug around last weekend for a turkey call in a big, plastic tub that looks just like 10 others on the garage shelves. Black Sharpie scrawled on peeling duct tape across its side told me I was in the right one: "Turkey Stuff." I was looking for my favorite — a nondescript wood and slate call — in the jumbled, colored textures of wood, ceramic and glass mingling inside.

There are so many tubs now. "Hunting Socks," "Hats and Gloves," "Elk Stuff," the row keeps going. Our gear has quadrupled for the worst of reasons: Inheritance.

I don't know if it's common to befriend your father-in-law before you're even friends with your husband, but that's how my story goes. I worked with him before I even knew he had a son. Seven years ago, he took me on my first hunt — a wild tom on the Colorado plains. He loved a hunt, any hunt — so much that he spent 14 years professionally teaching people how to do it.

I didn't yet understand birds or shotguns or the nuances that distinguish hunting from harvesting. But for weeks I wandered the office, scratching out yelps and purrs like a hen with laryngitis until, one day, I finally sounded like a wild turkey. Always guarded with his emotions, he pulled a call from his desk drawer, answered my yelp with an efficient gobble and a smirk, and then promptly went back to work.

He did the calling in the field that year, spewing an impressive array of sounds with both slate and mouth calls to concoct an imaginary flock of hens. I was busy shaking with adrenaline. I hadn't expected the power of the tom as he beat his wings on the ground, strutting just yards in front of me, answering the yelps. That communication hooked me as a hunter.

But it took a couple seasons until I started calling on my own. I was engaged to his son by then and we'd found our own turkey spot. The little oasis of public land was such good habitat for holding birds that we kept going back. It is the kind of secret spot we only shared with those closest.

We let my in-laws in on the secret, but it wasn't until two years ago we all were able to hunt it together. It was the most inconvenient of times for a turkey hunt. Everything my husband and I owned — minus turkey vests, decoys

and shotguns — was in a moving truck headed from Denver to Montana. A 500-mile detour to our turkey spot in Nebraska was sold as a chance to hunt with my in-laws "on the way."

Opening weekend of the season fell on my birthday. German chocolate cake on a picnic table. Time sitting fields balanced with time over skillet dinners, watching my father-in-law deconstruct a blind we somehow managed to turn inside out. We waited on the sun to get low, waited for it to rise. Eventually, we chased our moving truck north and my in-laws headed back to Denver.

He called one month later. Illness. Surgery. Percentages. Anger shocked into hopefulness. But recovery isn't how his story goes. By the next spring turkey season, we moved back. Closer, anyway. A bucket list replaced with a bucket, full of prayers. But nothing could stop it by then. Services held in a shaded grove in July.

It's hard to count the number of extra miles on the road you're going to be thankful for later. Those 500 we'd gladly drive a thousand times over.

In a couple weeks, his son and I will chase birds there again, continue what a simple turkey call started. And so the "Turkey Stuff" tub is down from the shelf, and we search it for things we need. There's that wooden slate call. It's the one I learned on years ago, the only one with a pitch that sounds right to me anymore.



Happy as a catfish

By Amy Bulger, editor

We met at the worst time — they were road-weary at the end of their trip. But they still had us to entertain, straggling guests with our own agendas.

They were 71,000 catfish that had traveled from Arkansas, traded for 24,000 Wyoming rainbows. They'd come through the freezing nights and sun-stormy days that plague the Midwest in May. I wonder what a 1,200-mile journey is like for creatures only 6-inches long? Do road miles stretch farther when divided by breaths much shallower than mine? They'd hunkered in hotel parking lots while their Wyoming Game and Fish Department chauffeurs slept after long hours at the wheel to bring these new residents home as fast as possible.

I'd volunteered to help stock fish at Sloan's Lake in Cheyenne. It's a place I frequent, an oasis of a nature break on days I can't break free from the urban zone. I wanted to put work in, to give back. Volunteering on Game and Fish projects is one meaningful way outdoors lovers can do that. And it can sure satiate some curiosity.

I soon discovered the "fish stocking" I was picturing — chutes of water shooting fish from the truck, and me pulling the lever akin to opening the starting gate at the Kentucky Derby — wasn't quite what I'd signed up for.

Casper-based Fish Culturist Adam Leiferman texted from the cab of the stocking truck as they headed through Kansas City, "Thanks for volunteering to sort catfish!"

Sort catfish?!?!?

Dreams of the Derby's opening bell were replaced with gruesome visuals of spiny barbels piercing flesh, bloodied and swollen hands, a catfish named Leatherface wielding a tiny chainsaw.

A co-worker tried coaching me on the three-finger catfish pick up, so as not to get stung — one on either side of the head, one on

top. I practiced on my stapler.

"But the only problem," he spoke from experience, "isn't the catfish you're grabbing, it's the other hundred swimming around in the barrel you have to reach into."

In front of me laid a comparatively docile stapler and a handful of days to turn myself into the fastest fish grabber in the West. Or find a pair of impermeable gloves.

Fortunately, when you volunteer for projects at Game and Fish, torture isn't part of the deal.

Adam parked the stocking truck at Sloan's during a May morning

squall of snow. Fishery techs set up a sorting table, a maze of a thing that filters fish from one end to the other. A hole like a tub drain on the downward side was where the catfish congregated and dropped into a water-filled bucket. Once the bucket was full, we carried them into the water where they swam out to grow into their new home.

Though the catfish were little, their barbels and fins could still poke. I'd opted for the gloves, and was soon fearlessly scooping handfuls of wriggling catfish from table to bucket alongside the techs to get them into the lake as fast as possible.

We worked quickly to put 2,500 catfish into the lake, but it still took over an hour. They used the sorting table like a waterslide as we kept an eye out for errant, hitchhiking green sunfish. We didn't find any. Collective oohs and aahhs rose up every time an 8-inch "monster" hit the table, and worked stopped completely to take a closer look at a 3-inch albino.

We are nothing if not curious beings. And that snowy morning I learned, despite their barbed exterior, catfish are much like myself after a long journey on the road — they sure seem pretty happy to be home.

Today, when I take a few laps around the lake at lunch, I might stop to ask the anglers on the banks if they've had any luck. If it's you I happen to talk to, and I ask if you've pulled up a smiling catfish, just humor me. I know they're in there, waiting.



Photo by Justin Joiner/Wyoming Wildlife