The Cold Truth About Hotspotting

SO YOU'VE MEANDERED upon slim, seemingly virgin water with robust, eager trout about which no one seems to know. This will be your little secret... But you're proud of yourself; you want to show friends and everyone, really, what you found. What to do...?

Some call it sharing, others heresy. Some see no issue and other others see it as a violation of the sacrament of fishing with flies. However you see it, if you've fished for a while, you'll encounter "hotspotting" (spilling the beans on a "secret" fishery to other anglers).

One presumption for this column: Secrets exist. Even admitting that in a magazine is questionable behavior. Any serious Montana fly angler who tells you that there are no secrets anymore, is trying to keep the ideas of secrets secret. And fair-weather fly fishers who think everyone knows all the secrets these days, simply do not know the real secrets.

So do you share? With good friends and an "understanding?" With folks you want to impress (be honest)? All comers? Not even with a friend's family who don't fish and live in Mississippi?

It can be a contentious issue in a state with stream access like Montana. Odds are great that if one can find it, all can access it, and despite the fact that Montana angler numbers are apparently dropping (license sales were down almost 10 percent from 2009 to 2011 according to recent Fish, Wildlife and Parks statistics), most "for-love-of-the-game/non-industry" anglers would agree, numbers are high enough.

I have friends who take hotspotting seriously. It's a big deal if you traffic "unknown" water to anyone, including other good friends. I've been guilty of dealing that which I should not have, and I still endure the shun.

The problem, in their view, is that while it may not ruin the fishery to face a little more pressure, it will ruin the experience for them to fish amongst others at such places (Google Colorado's Taylor River tailwater). And it might ruin the fishery as it exists now to endure a little more pressure. Word of big trout spreads like a wind-swept ripple – have a listen to the scuttlebutt in Simms Fishing Products' break room or the Bitterroot Brewery tasting room some time...

But I also have friends who think worrying about sharing is silly, and it's no big deal to bring a friend to "the braid," or to tell an acquaintance about the off-the-record public-land spring creek. Much of the joy of fly fishing is derived from the shared experience, and one more rod won't ruin the fishery. Right?

And (just for a little self-gratification) try writing a column about fly fishing in Montana where you can only reference the Bighorn, Yellowstone, Gallatin, Madison, Beaverhead, Big Hole, Bitterroot, Clark Fork, Blackfoot, Flathead and forks, Kootenai... Okay, it seems less daunting when put that way, but considering that is what most Montana fly-fishing location-based articles focus on, trying to find a new story while staying within those high-water marks can be challenging. Especially when the majority of good stories come from the off-the-record tributaries.

Some experiences that illustrate the good and bad: A friend once made me a Google map, highlighting the fishy channels of a popular Montana mainstem with notes about his biggest catch there, how to fish it, etc. It was beautiful. But it was also the epitome of hotspotting, and in that way, it was ugly. I still have not made use of the information.

I once tried to write a book regarding 20 or so of Montana's "off-the-beaten-path" fisheries – quite an opportunity for a freshly hatched writer. But after a few days of rationalizing, secret-keeping-while-being-honest and taking attitude from guides and fly shops, I decided it was not the project for me. That book, "Flyfishing Adventures Montana", is now in print by a different author.

I contacted multiple Montana fly-fishing personalities to go on the record for this column. None were interested.

Hotspottees sometimes wish they were left in the dark. They become burdened with exciting, valuable information which they must take to their graves (which can occur quickly if not handled properly). If they want to maintain their relationship with the hotspotter, they keep quiet. It can drive an angler batty.

And frankly, some anglers would rather figure it out than be gifted the advantage. For them, much of the joy of fly fishing is bushwhacking and discovering.

So use your judgment.

My approach: By all means, share it with a trusted friend, but with an understanding. And no photos on Facebook, regardless whether you say anything about location. Locals are pretty good at recognizing background topography, river hue, etc. At some point, that information will get into the wrong hands and will go public, and you'll never want to go back to that circus again.