

INTERSECTION OF LIFE

Rivers in Wyoming are teeming with life from land and water

Story by Emmie Gocke
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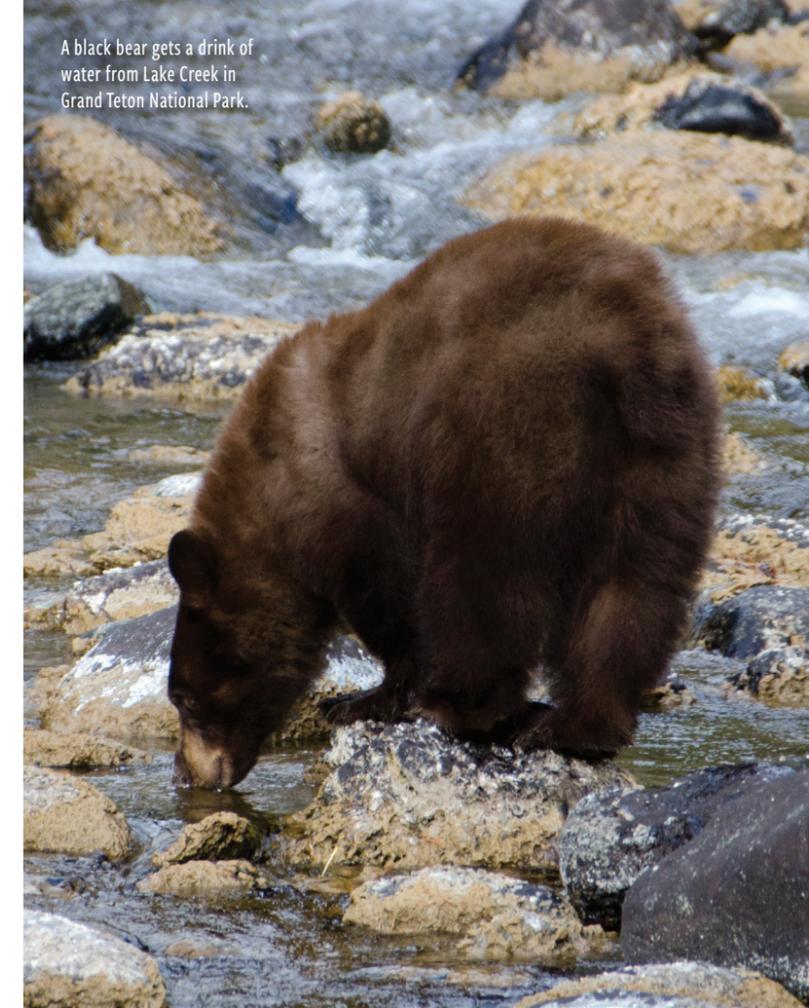
A group of cow elk make their way across the Snake River amidst fog on a chilly autumn morning in Grand Teton National Park.

In a place as arid as Wyoming, it's often said water is more valuable than gold. The rivers that carve their way through flat, sage plateaus, wind among towering pines and skim the bases of enormous granite mountains act as arteries bringing life to the landscape. While only roughly 3 percent of the Mountain West is riparian habitat, it is estimated more than 90 percent of wildlife interact with these zones. Some, like a cow moose and her calf, may pause for a drink on the rocky bank or munch on nearby willows, which draw nutrients from the moist ground. Others, like the cutthroat trout, spend the entirety of their life amid the varying currents.

A breeding pair of harlequin ducks take a break from fishing in the Yellowstone River at LeHardy Rapids in Yellowstone National Park.



A black bear gets a drink of water from Lake Creek in Grand Teton National Park.



A Snake River cutthroat trout swims in a spring-fed tributary of the Snake River near Jackson.



A pair of bull moose in velvet stroll through the Gros Ventre River north of Jackson.

Humans, too, are entrenched in our reliance on these thin, winding ribbons of water. Ranchers draw from rivers and streams to irrigate their hayfields, towns crop up along their green banks and anglers wade in the icy flows as they maneuver their lines for sport, relaxation and a fresh trout dinner. Wyoming's rivers are a gathering ground for creatures big and small. Wait patiently on their banks and you may be afforded a glimpse of a crossing elk or the tail slap of a beaver. You will see signs of the birds that rely on these waters. The rivers are constantly changing with the seasons, and the wildlife weaving in and out of their domain arrange their lifestyles around the flow.

There was a tranquil day last September when I found myself an unsuspecting observer to the natural connection between wildlife and the river in a newly-forming riparian area. It was during the ambiguous time between summer and autumn when cool water feels invigorating against your skin, but the cold clings to damp clothing as soon as the sun sinks below the mountainous horizon. I was wet-wading a side channel of the Snake River that a few years previously had deserted the rushing torrent of the main channel to seep sneakily amid a tangle of towering conifer trees. It felt almost dreamlike — strolling through a large stand of fir and spruce. The forest floor was



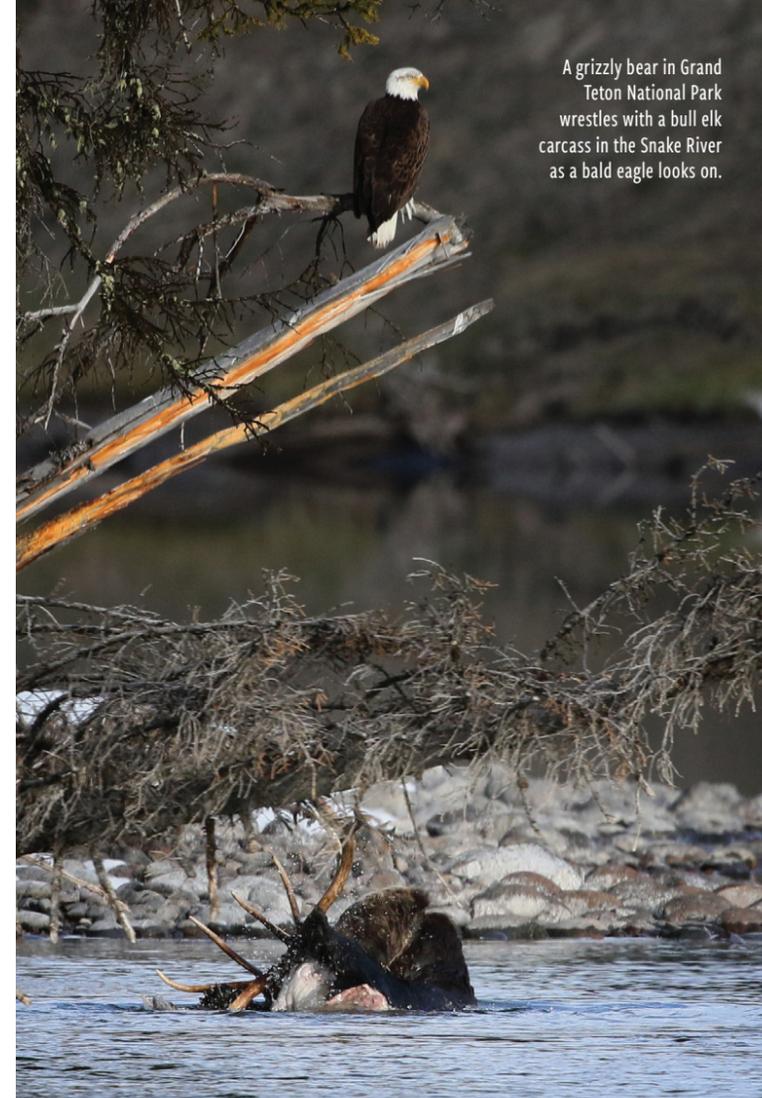
A river otter chomps down on a freshly-caught brook trout in a tributary of the Snake River.

a knee-deep swirl of remarkably clear water flowing over fine sand rather than a carpet of needles. The river flooded throughout the forest as far as I could see, although sand had been deposited in places to form small islands amidst trees, some still with green needles at their crowns. Where the current of the river was strongest were small clearings among the trees, littered by the occasional strainer, where the sediment had been carved away to leave brilliant blue pools likely to hold trout. Here I would stop to cast my fly through beams of the late-afternoon sunlight that glittered on the surface of the moving water.

Adding to the ethereal feel of the place was the unmistakable sign of elk. Their musky scent clung to the skeletal branches like the swaths of green lichen that dangled from them. I had never been in a place where the smell was so strong, almost as if it had seeped into the damp wood and was now permeating into the sodden air. Their tracks crisscrossed where the fine silt had settled beneath a couple inches of clear, slow-moving water, leaving the hoof prints remarkably intact, if slightly blurred by the flow above them. A trout darted through a column of sunlight toward my foam bug floating innocently in a slow moving eddy. Just as the fish went for the fly, I heard an elk bugle. Startled, I set the hook too soon and pulled the fly from the trout's mouth before it had a chance to grab hold. My airborne fly narrowly missed snagging on a low-hanging branch as I squinted into the darkness on the opposite side of the pool. I began to creep upstream in search of the bull, hoping another spectral bugle would reverberate through the trees.



A great blue heron along Flat Creek near Jackson tosses a small fish into the air before it gulps it down.



A grizzly bear in Grand Teton National Park wrestles with a bull elk carcass in the Snake River as a bald eagle looks on.

I was distracted by a small clearing in the trees filled with slow-moving water that glittered spectacularly in the sunlight. The river left a section of grassy bank on the opposite side where I was sure a large cutthroat was waiting, eyes skyward and waiting for a fly to fall through the streaming sunlight. The cast was perfect. My foam bug hit the opposite bank and bounced softly into the current while my line settled several feet away. I watched the foam bug drift casually. Then, in the space of a heartbeat, a large shadow streaked from under the grassy bank and struck the fly ferociously. I timed the set perfectly this time, lifting my rod as my heart leapt inside my chest. I held the line taut for a sliver of a moment. Then the fish jumped, spraying glistening droplets of water into the air. The slash of crimson beneath its jaw and its golden flank reflected magnificently in the sun. It was big, but I remember more notably that it was beautiful — exactly the sort of fish one would expect to live in a sunlit pool surrounded by tall pine trees rising spectacularly from a flood of water.

In another heartbeat the fish was gone. It managed to wrap my line around a tree downstream and use the torsion to wriggle the hook from its mouth. I thought it probably would not have been fair for me to land such a beautiful fish in such a beautiful stretch of river anyway when the haunting sound of an elk bugle again penetrated the trees. It was much closer this time, and I had crept only a few yards upstream when I saw him. A magnificent bull elk stood in shadows among the conifers and he held his head up and tasted the air.



A beaver nibbles on twigs in Spread Creek north of Jackson.

A group of pronghorn swim across the Green River as they migrate to their summer range north of Pinedale.



I watched him for a moment, glistening tan coat, powerful shoulders, smooth antlers, before he smelled me. In another moment he was gone, darting urgently through the trees. Just like that beautiful cutthroat trout, he slipped to safety away from the open water.

Creatures are drawn to the rivers, whether for the entirety of their lives or just for a series of moments. They are the places where wildlife gather to receive water, the resource essential to all life. Because rivers are few but their necessity great, they are the intersection where humans and wildlife can glimpse each other. Prey may cross in the same spot where a predator stops to drink a few hours later. An otter can stay warm and dry in a den in the bank, and easily slip into the underwater realm to hunt for fish. In winter, the river provides open water free of ice for ducks, swans and geese seeking sanctuary. Beavers transform river flows to create marshy ponds where cattails thrive and herons are spotted, motionless in their stealthy search for an unsuspecting fish. You may hear the sharp chirping of a bald eagle perched above

the flowing water or the mournful call of a loon on a slow-moving oxbow. Trumpeter swans and sandhill cranes hide their young in the tall grass on meandering banks. The occasional elk or deer carcass arrives on their shores where grizzlies and wolves may be seen wrestling with the meat.

River currents are constantly changing as the snow deposits in the high country and melts as the weather warms. In the spring, rivers are a raging mass of muddy brown berating their banks. In the fall, they are clear, calm and frequently steeped in fog. Rivers weave the entire ecosystem together. They are a place for every creature to gather for a drink, cross quietly to another patch of forest, or hunt for fish darting below the surface. And we too are drawn to these blue ribbons teeming with life, if only to sit quietly and watch the show.

— Emmie Gocke is a Wyoming native who continues to enjoy Wyoming's outdoor activities, many of which are on rivers.

— Mark Gocke is the Game and Fish information and education specialist in the Jackson and Pinedale Regions.