



# A Fishing Adventure in Idaho

Story and Photos  
by David and Mary Gayle Sartwell

I was sitting on a boulder on the edge of Kelly Creek, just upstream from where it joins the North Fork of the Clearwater River in northeast Idaho. The fishing had been okay during the cool early morning hours, but not what I thought it should be. As the early summer sun chased the dark shadows back under the boulders, it filled the sharply sloped valley with warming rays that fell on both me and the startlingly clear water that went rushing by. I was quietly contemplating my next move

(Above) Mary Gayle casting to a far-bank glide

Matching the hatch with a Yellow Sallie



when a tiny yellow fly fluttered in on unsteady wings and settled on the back of my hand.

I stared at it for a couple of seconds before it gathered itself and flew off. As I followed its erratic flight into the sunlight, I noticed that the hazy mountain air was suddenly alive with a hatch of its mates and, almost as importantly, I also realized that I had in my fly box a Yellow Sally with a little red on the tail which simulates an egg sac—in fact, I had several.



The surface of the water started to dimple with feeding fish.

I signaled to Mary Gayle, my wife and fishing buddy, who was just downstream, and she waded up. It took us just moments to flattened the barbs on the #18 hooks and tie the flies on the end of the seven-foot tippet on our three-weight rods. We separated into different pools and started working the water.

Ripping a few feet of floating line off of my Redington reel, I made one false cast, then whipped the Yellow Sally out

over the rushing water that flowed into a big glide over a stony bottom. The fly dropped onto the surface and floated along with the gentle current. There was a ripple, a flashing side and then a tail. It missed.

With my heart racing, I carefully lifted the line from the water and recast to the head of the pool. Mending a little line upstream, I watched intently as the fly bobbed along with the downstream flow in the crease between the run and a little back eddy. A sip, a strike, a hook set and I was on.

The little foot-long cutthroat made his first run across the pool, ripping out line as he went. I had set the reel to a very light drag as I was fishing with a two-pound tippet and didn't want the trout to break off. He was determined and sassy. Up he went into the air, sides twisting and turning, trying to shake the hook. He splashed down into the water, creating a small hole in the creek. Two more runs and he came slowly to the net.

Have you ever had one of those days fishing when everything lined up just right? The right hatch, the right water, the right fly? Over the next four hours the two of us could not keep the cutthroats off our lines. Almost every drift in every pool produced a trout from eight to 14 inches. By the end of the hatch, we had caught and released more than 40 fish.

An hour into the feeding frenzy, Mary Gayle enticed a beautiful 18-inch wonder out from the shadows of a huge mid-river boulder. He slurped up what he thought was going to be a sweet lunch morsel, only to be pricked by the sharp end of the hook as he turned back toward his hiding place. Startled, he launched himself into the air, head shaking back and forth,

**A feisty cutthroat falls for a San Juan worm.**



**The fisherman with dogs: It's always more fun to fish with friends.**





jaws open, water streaming off his flashing body. As he cleared the surface, it seemed that he just kept going up, but the laws of gravity finally caught up with him and he fell to the surface with water flying everywhere.

He was a determined little fellow but Mary Gayle had his measure. Fortunately he stayed in the confines of the run and did not bolt downstream into the heavier water. With practiced ease she gently brought this Idaho treasure to her feet, reached down and slipped the barbless hook from his jaw. He was a black dart as he dove across the stream to his hideaway.

The night before, we had driven from Greer, Idaho, on Fire Road 250 more than 50 miles on a one-lane road with pull-outs back into the Clearwater National Forest. Using the National Parks Lands Pass you can buy at any National Park, the charge for a site right next to Kelly Creek is only \$3.50 a night. Sites includes a fire ring with grate, a picnic table, water and toilet (but no shower facilities or electricity). Of the 17 or so sites, only four were taken, so we had many choices.

In the dwindling light of the late-June evening, we set up our Cabela's Alaskan Guide six-man tent (which is perfect for two people), ignited the Buddy heater to warm up the tent, and fired up the Coleman stove. While Mary Gayle rustled up a meal of fried chicken, baked beans and potato salad, I got out the crosscut saw and rendered some downed wood into small enough chunks to start a roaring fire that warmed us from the evening mist and low-50s mountain air.

So as not to waste any time in the morning, I put together our rods and reels. I thought we would start the day with some nymphs, so to the tippet I tied on a tandem set that included a #12 bead-headed Prince followed by a #18 Pheasant Tail. This is a setup that is a good rig to start with in almost any trout water. I also had a box full of #16-18 Elk-hair Caddis, Parachute Adams, Humpy, San Juan worms and a

wide variety of bead heads.

It started to rain just as darkness set in, so we retired to our tent. After getting whipped in two games of canasta under a hissing Coleman lantern, I put my head on my pillow, pulled the covers up around my neck, let the air mattress do its magic and drifted off to sleep thinking of large trout and tight lines.

After a quick breakfast of eggs, bacon and toast slathered with native huckleberry jam, we hopped in the truck and drove along the narrow mountain road that hugged the side of a steep valley above the rushing stream. Beautiful pool after beautiful pool revealed themselves to us as we eased along. Although we were following Kelly Creek, Cayuse Creek and Weitas Creek are two other runs in the same watershed that also have great fishing.

At one point where there were three lovely holes in a row, I jumped out and made two large Xs in the road. I then drove nine miles to a fork that would have led us to Cayuse Creek, turned around and


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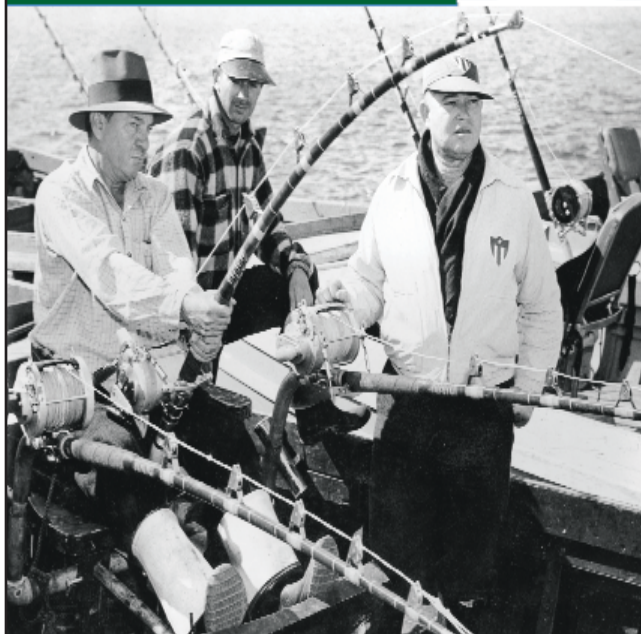

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headed back to the double-X pools. Because this area is so remote, few people take the time to work their way back. We had the river almost to ourselves.

What an adventure we had in Idaho! Fishing the evening hatch on the famous (but crowded) Henry's Fork of the Snake River that snuggled up against Yellowstone Park, drifting the South Fork of the Snake in a float boat, white-water rafting on the uppermost reaches of the Salmon River, using float tubes to cast to big rainbows on the Silver Creek near Sun Valley and then fly fishing the famous (but hard to reach) Kelly Creek for the legendary Western Slope cutthroats.

We had driven hundreds of miles on wonderful dirt roads, taken what seemed like thousands of pictures and stopped, times too numerous to mention, to just take in the view. The wildlife was stupendous—

the mule deer buck that stood not 20 feet from the entrance to our tent just staring at us from a cocoon of early morning mist; the bald eagle that flew through the rainbow at the foot of Mesa Falls, and the antelope that puffed up and blew at us every time the camera snapped a picture.

So, the next time you are hankering for an outdoor adventure, pull out your Delorme's book of maps and start drawing your Magic Marker over the back roads and byways of Idaho.

Dr. David and Mary Gayle Sartwell are an award-winning writing and photography team that has published thousands of articles in both newspapers and magazines. They are outdoor people specializing in adventure travel. Both love travel, bridge, good food and wine, fly fishing and outdoor adventure of any kind.

## IF YOU GO

Kelly Creek, born high in the Bitterroot Mountains, is a blue-ribbon cutthroat fishery located in the heart of the Bitterroot National Forest. It is a remote location on a good dirt road far removed from any population center. No phone service, electricity, etc. It is about 48 miles northeast of the tiny town of Pierce, Idaho [www.pierce-weippechamber.com](http://www.pierce-weippechamber.com) on Forest Road 250. It can be reached from the East by running up Interstate 90 past Missoula, Montana to Superior. There take Forest Road 250 West about 54 miles. This takes you up over the pass into Idaho [www.visitidaho.org](http://www.visitidaho.org). Check for snow reports because the pass can be closed into late June some years.

There are 13 really nice wilderness campsites right on the creek in the Kelly Forks Campground. They offer fire pits, two water spigots, and a toilet, but there is no electricity. This is not a place for big rigs as the road is very narrow. Ideal for truck campers and small units. The fee is \$7.00 a night, 1/2 off if you hold a National Parks Pass. Although the campground does not serve as a trailhead, nearby trails less than a mile from the campground lead into the Clearwater Roadless Area. For reservations, go to [www.reservation.gov](http://www.reservation.gov).

For the more adventurous, both Cayuse and Weitas Creeks that drain into the Kelly offer some terrific back-country fishing for small trout. Forty or 50 hookups a day are common, but long hikes or overnight camping is required.

A Delorme Idaho map book is essential in getting around the area. Roads that appear on maps are not necessarily passable so ask fellow travelers and park personnel.



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