

Lundbreck Falls

Casting in the dark, on Alberta's Crowsnest River.

By Dana Sturn



Curtis Hall

A friend lost a fly box on the Crowsnest River. It slipped out of an open vest pocket. We never knew where or when. All we knew was it was gone. I searched down one side while Richard splashed across and searched down the other until his progress was halted where the river rushed up against a rock wall. He waived me off, and pointed upstream, signaling I should meet him back where we started.

"This sucks," he said, wading out. "All my Stealth Caddises were in there."

His first trip to Alberta wasn't off to the best start. Crap weather and reluctant rainbows made his few days on the Bow near Calgary underwhelming, so this morning on the two-hour drive south I assured him that the Crowsnest would be different. But now I imagined the box—my gift of a clear Orvis full of perfect little hand ties—spinning in eddies and bumping off boulders, eventually tumbling over Lundbreck Falls a few kilometers downstream. There are some big trout below those falls. At dusk they start looking up for caddisflies that the size-16 Stealth Caddis matches perfectly in dark waters.

Now he didn't have any. And that's where we were headed.

Smaller and wilder than the Bow, the Crowsnest flows east along Highway 3 in southwestern Alberta, until it joins the Oldman River northeast of the village of Cowley. It's a walk and wade dream river that fishes best late June through early autumn. In July I like to pitch my tent at Lundbreck Falls. Above the falls, the Crow is primarily a rainbow fishery, boasting 1,500 hundred trout per mile; below, you'll find browns too. Fifteen-inch fish are typical here, but don't be surprised when a 22-incher stretches your net.

For me, the Crowsnest is a welcome retreat, its caddis hatch a refuge from the lingering stuffiness of fly fishing. Sometimes I just want to spend a week wet wading knowing I'm gonna get 'em, and sipping the beer I stashed in the shallows for the walk back. Each day I can do something different, or nothing at all. Because every night around 9 p.m., I can walk down to the river and catch big trout on little caddis patterns. It doesn't matter if my casting's a bit off, or if I don't know the name of the bugs they're biting. There doesn't have to be anything technical about it. I don't want to be the Friday fly shop hero, telling everyone what they just missed. I just want to drink a beer and catch a few trout.

There's a midstream rock near the campsite, my twilight perch every trip. Sitting there at dusk I can see them, big snouts emerging from the choppy water. Gently lay 5X just above them, and watch the little black speck bob along until someone eats it. As the light leaves I cast blind, and strip back once, twice, three times. The line often tightens before the third strip. There in the dark, my reel will chatter while I wedge my boots between slick rocks.

This is tricky. Sometimes I'll bruise a knee. Or fall in. I lost a hat once, which I found the next morning a few hundred feet downstream. But never a fly box. Near midnight I'll walk back to camp, sipping one of those Big Rock Traditional Ales I stashed in the cool shallows. My neighbors are long asleep. I'll sit at a picnic table in the perfect darkness and listen intently to nothing.

Tonight, Richard's first on the Crow, our headlamps illuminate rough caddis tied to replace lost ones. It's Saturday and the campground is full. We hear the kids giggling from the trails below camp, and know that the trout won't be looking up for a while. Later, with a handful of ragged wraps of elk hair and dubbing, we shuffle through the currents until we find a spot that fits our feet.

We false cast with eyes closed and heads bowed so the bill of our caps shield errant hooks. Those ugly little flies land up there in the chop, then float towards us until something big stops them.

After a dozen of these moments, I'll mention open pockets and unappreciated gifts. Richard will reply that good gifts are worth sharing.

"Maybe someone will find it," he'll say, the day's frustrations tempered by hot fishing on a warm summer night.

We'll never know if one of those kids playing below the campsite will find that box intact, and learn to snug a clinch knot up against one of those perfectly tied little flies. And, then, one night years later, seeking refuge from a bright and busy world, close her eyes and cast upriver into the darkness below Lundbreck Falls.



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