

# Brush Creek Ranch: Feasts and Fishing

The choices for food and trout streams abound at this Wyoming retreat

WRITTEN BY KIMBERLEY K. YABLONSKI • PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAN HAM

THE DUST FROM THE SUN-BAKED GRAVEL ROAD swirls up around the tires as Josh slams on the brakes. The truck comes to a rest on the one-lane trestle bridge. He jumps from the driver's seat and hops up on the iron railing.

"There's a trout, right there, feeding," he exclaims with the unbridled enthusiasm akin to a young boy or, in his case, a seasoned fisherman. "Do you see it?" I do. The trout ambles through the clear, calm water. We continue to watch as the impressive rainbow chases off some smaller fish and continues to feed on all the Upper North Platte River has to offer. No hiding in the shadows for this guy.

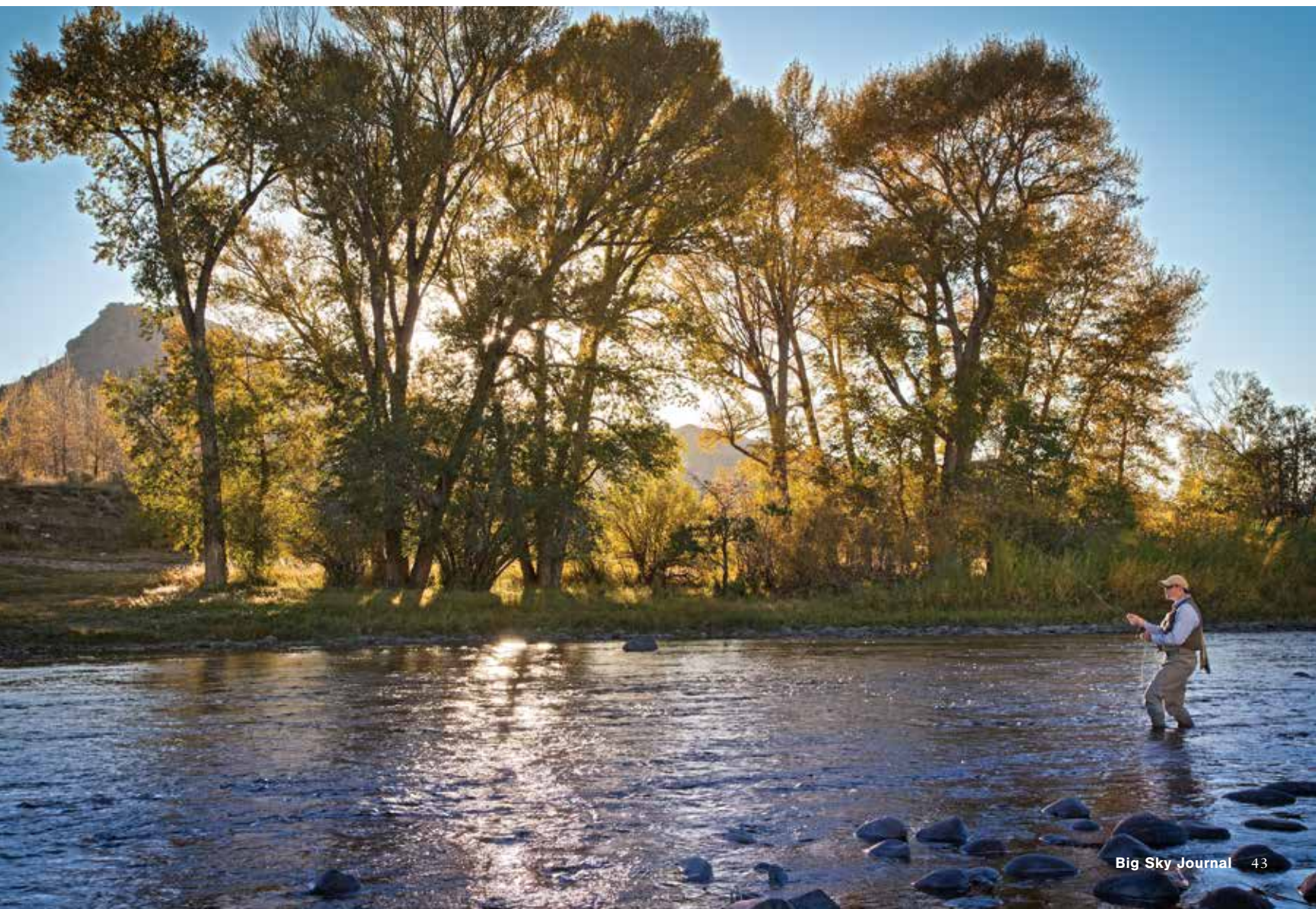
Josh Graffam is activities director for The Lodge and Spa at Brush Creek Ranch, a 15,000 acre spread near Saratoga, Wyo., in south-central Wyoming's North Platte River Valley. Don't let the "spa" part of the name taint your impression. While the ranch is refined rustic perfection, no outdoor adventurer's desire is left unfulfilled. The staff is just as obliging to those who choose waders over yoga mats. With gourmet meals and high-end accommodations, equal attention is paid to all things outdoors.

Our first evening, we are dining creekside. Greeted with a refreshing Blueberry Lemonade cocktail made with Citron





**Left:** A roaring open-hearth fire warms the bar area of the Trailhead Lodge great room. **Right:** Every culinary desire is met with an equally remarkable view from the Chuck Wagon dining area, delicious game sausage links, eggs, buffalo and venison hash, walnut or blueberry pancakes, home-made granola all served from the culinary exhibition kitchen. **Below:** The remote location of the lodge allows for peace and tranquility while battling the trout.







Vodka, we sit at linen-clad picnic tables that encircle a roaring bonfire. Local musicians play lively tunes accompanied by the soothing babble of Brush Creek as it flows by. Kids toss pebbles as they await dinner. The casual meal begins with yellowfin tuna ceviche shooters topped with avocado cream and radish sprouts. Dining in nature does not limit the selections. Beer-can chicken, a prime rib carving station and grilled Scottish salmon (flown in fresh overnight) are offered up with campfire potatoes. Butter rolls off chins as we sink into juicy bites of sweet corn on the cob. We are full and sleepy; our beds beckon as we anticipate the fishing to come.

Tucked near the million-acre Medicine Bow National Forest, the Orvis-endorsed Brush Creek Ranch offers a bounty of fly-fishing options. Every level of fishing challenge can be had from the subdued but plentiful Brush Creek to the action of a float trip on the Upper North Platte River — honing young ones' skills on the stocked ponds or challenging hardened fishermen on The Encampment River.

Brush Creek Ranch offers an almost overwhelming variety of activities, everything from paint ball to mountain biking to skeet shooting and horseback riding, making it perfect for families and seasoned fishermen alike.

Dawn brings breakfast at the Trailhead Lodge: game sausage links, eggs, buffalo and venison hash, walnut or blueberry pancakes, homemade granola and even a blackberry mint smoothie all served from the culinary exhibition kitchen. The lodge's 28-foot ceilings and panoramic windows offer the dining and bar area views of the Snowy Range on the east to Bennett Peak and the expanse of the Sierra Madre Range to the west. A huge

**Clockwise from below:** After a day of amazing activity relax with a massage at the spa. • Regroup in the coziness of your cabin before topping off the day with inspired cuisine prepared to perfection.

## Rainbow and brown trout are the predominant game fish in the Upper North Platte River, which is classified as a blue-ribbon trout fishery by the U.S. Department of Interior.

open-hearth fireplace warms the space. Our fishing guide is made happier when we bring an offering of thick-sliced Applewood bacon to kick start our day.

For those more focused on fly fishing, the allure of Brush Creek Ranch is access to the Upper North Platte River which meanders through meadows, sagebrush-covered slopes and red sandstone outcroppings. It takes a sharp turn at Bennett Peak eventually joining up with the South Platte River to form the Platte River which flows into Nebraska.

"The Upper North Platte River is a very natural, wild, freestone river," Graffam explains. "It is not a tailwater river. There is much less pressure. It's quiet around here."

As a member of the USA Fly Fishing Team, Graffam knows of what he speaks. In his view, "There are some great rivers in Wyoming that don't see a lot of people."

The North Platte River flows northward out of Colorado for 122 river miles until it reaches the idle waters of the Seminole Reservoir. Fed by the Sierra Madre, Medicine

Bow and Snowy mountain ranges, the river twists and turns through Wyoming's largely agricultural Saratoga Valley. A complex spider web of tributary streams feed the Upper North Platte River adding varying amounts of water to its flow and providing prime spawning habitat needed for natural trout reproduction.

Rainbow and brown trout are the predominant game fish in the Upper North Platte River, which is classified as a blue-ribbon trout fishery by the U.S. Department of Interior. There are about 60 percent rainbow trout and 40 percent browns, but cutthroat and cutbow trout also populate the river.

"The Platte River is a completely wild fishery. In late June to early July, the post-runoff period, there is nothing like it," says Phil Mcgrath, Brush Creek Ranch's lead fishing guide.

This season will be Mcgrath's eighth year guiding the Upper North Platte River Valley. "There is no stocking so

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you don't see huge fish. The average size trout is in the 18- to 22-inch range," he says.

Brush Creek Ranch has float permits that allow access to 100 miles of the Upper North Platte River, a bounty for a river that offers limited public access. A typical float trip on the river is a full day covering about 20 miles of water — 12 miles when the water is low, Mcgrath explains. There are 110 miles of floatable water in the freestone section of the Upper North Platte River. This section is not controlled by a dam as it is further downstream. The river flows through a patchwork of private land ownership, which in Wyoming extends to the middle of the river.

The ranch owns about 1.5 river miles of the Upper North Platte River in the Bennett Canyon section, a beautiful, secluded spot where time stands still, leaving just you and the trout.

"It's a coveted spot," Graffam says. "The canyon area

is one of the most scenic areas. You won't see anyone else."

The river's rich past stretches back to uses by numerous Plains Indian tribes including Arapaho, Blackfeet, Cheyenne, Crow and Sioux. In the early 1800s, it was the pathway used by fur trappers. Later, westbound emigrants blazed paths that eventually became known as the Oregon, Mormon and California trails. Famous Western lore was born of stories of early explorers like John C. Frémont who, guided by mountain man Kit Carson, encamped in the Medicine Bow Mountains during his second exploration in 1843.

Brush Creek Ranch has its own long history. In 1884, the Sterrett brothers settled the land and built the original homestead, the buildings of which have been restored and dot today's ranch. The Blacksmith cabin was the original blacksmith shop. A boulder marked with a U - (meaning U. Line) is a sign of the ranch's original cattle brand.



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Another of the ranch's fishing options is The Encampment River, which is the largest tributary of the Upper North Platte River. The Encampment River is fed by the Sierra Madres Mountains, the western mountain range of the valley. There are bigger fish but less of them in The Encampment. Skill is required to land them.

"Fishing The Encampment you have to be sneaky, or more technical," McGrath says.

If the fishing is tough, the living isn't. Like all aspects of Brush Creek Ranch, every detail is attended to. The newly built yurt on the ranch's section of The Encampment River offers fishermen a break from the elements in sportsman-style comfort.

While it is ill-advised to miss any meal at the ranch, if parting from the trout is too much to bear the box lunches are no slack fare. Select a chopped beef short rib sandwich with creamy horseradish and arugula on homemade focaccia bread, roasted salmon wrap with herb cream cheese or a pulled pork sandwich with Dijon aioli, romaine lettuce and red onion on homemade ranch white bread.

A short Polaris ranger ride from any of Brush Creek Ranch's cabins or the main lodge is Brush Creek. A winding, narrow creek, it is easy to get lost in the fishing. Just below a high swing bridge, we throw our lines into a deep pool warming up our casts. Mayflies and caddis are the best dry flies here. A blue wing olive is favored in the fall.

The ranch has just completed a three-year stream restoration project of Brush Creek. The goal was

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## Dinner Camp Scottish Salmon

*Serves 2*

6-8 oz. fillet of salmon, skin on, pin bone removed

1-2 T Plugrá (or any unsalted butter)

Fresh herbs

Pat fish dry. Season well with salt and freshly ground pepper. Grill on a clean grill. You can also pan sear with oil (we prefer a blend of olive and canola). Get a good crispy sear starting with the side you want to show on the plate. Lightly flip fish with a fish spatula when proper sear is reached. After turning the fish, we add 1 to 2 tablespoons of Plugrá (this is an unbelievable European-style butter) but any unsalted butter will work. Baste the fish with the melted butter and cook on low heat so as not to brown your butter. Add fresh herbs: thyme, rosemary, crushed garlic cloves, tarragon, options are endless. Place the fish in the oven to reach your desired doneness. When fish is nearly done, remove from oven, baste with butter one last time and place on any type of plate lined with paper towels or on a perforated rack to remove any excess butter.

The same can be done from the grill. After it's marked you can place in the oven to finish or make sure your grill is not so hot so that you can cook to your desired doneness on the grill and not burn the fish.

to restore it to its natural flow. The restoration included cutting off a lot of old channels and irrigation ditches and even beaver dams that were allowing the water to run-off, heat up in the meadows, and flow back into the river.

"We didn't create any fishing holes or pools," McGrath said. "We just placed rocks and shored up the river's banks in order to restore its natural flow."

Despite the serene fishing, we take a break and head back for lunch which is served in the chuck wagon. Neither the chuck wagon nor its fare is anything like days of old. Family-style feasts are served on the expansive three-season log structure which features a full kitchen, barbeque and open fire pit.

Post-fishing, we naturally gravitate to the saloon porch rocking chairs to swap stories of the day and soak in the views. The saloon, complete with swinging doors and a cozy fireplace, offers old-fashioned Western fun — billiards, piano, jukebox and shuffleboard. Guests may also help themselves to the overwhelming selection in the Trailhead Lodge wine room, which holds just shy of 800-bottles of coveted wines.

The traditional clank of the dinner bell calls guests to the chuck wagon where dinner is served when the weather is too perfect to be indoors. From each long wooden table a spectacular view accompanies dinner. Once again, there are choices for every desire.

Chef Drew Anderson's philosophy is simple: "We treat our food with respect. We use fresh, seasonal ingredients and season simply so as not to mask the flavors of the food we are preparing."

As the day winds down, the meal is made complete with Paonia peach cobbler topped with vanilla bean ice cream, cheesecake in a jar or homemade cupcakes. We are as fat on food as the trout we have been catching all day.

The striking red rock boulders erupt from the hill-side shadowing the grazing horses as the sun slowly pulls the curtain on another exceptional day of fishing and feasting. **BSI**

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**Kimberley K. Yablonski** is a freelance writer who covers outdoor recreation, history and western products and places for *Distinctly Montana*, *Montana Living* and other regional magazines. Whenever possible you can find her hiking the mountains of Montana or trying to fly fish.