

From the book,

Gone Fishing

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Written by Bob Rashid

I am not an expert angler. I stumble on boats, I am woefully ignorant of modern fishing's vast array of hardware, and my casting technique has been known to make people laugh. Martin Hanson, an angler for sixty years, sized me up immediately.

"You're not a fisherman, are you, Bob," he said politely, moments after we had been introduced, wondering, no doubt, as many people have, why I was working on a book about fishing.

The truth is, I am lucky if I catch a fish, but I'm very good when it comes to fishing in another sense, and in this regard I am not alone. During the months I spent with people who fish, almost everyone, from the pros to the novices, expressed one particular sentiment. Roughly, it went like this: I love to catch fish, don't get me wrong. But the great thrill about going fishing is getting away from everything else and being out here.

Trout fisherman Sam Diman expressed it best. He had spent a brisk September night camped near his favorite river, the Bois Brule, and was slowly sipping the morning's first cup of coffee. He had fished the previous day, but now he sat next to a crackling campfire and gazed calmly toward the river.

"A friend of mine once told me," he said, "'you can't let the fishing get in the way of the fishing.'"



Once Sam put it into words, I realized that this had always been my philosophy. I may not be the greatest fisherman, but when it comes to relaxing by the water, I can compete with anyone. I can sit down with the best angler and chatter away, enjoy the sunshine, eat lunch, meditate ... you name it.

One of the last times I fished – that is, relaxed by the water with a fishing pole in my hand – I had the wind knocked out of me. I was about seven years old, and had gone with my father on one of our many trips to the river.

My father liked to fish. Long after he died, my mother sent me a photograph of him taken with two of his fishing buddies. The three of them were standing in a grove of birch trees behind a rope that sagged under the weight of twenty-four northern pike. Each fish was larger than the next, one after the other, eight to a man. My father, a contented person by nature, beamed.

When I was a young boy he used to take me to a river whose name I never learned. I don't remember catching any fish there, but I loved to go. My favorite thing to do was sit by the water and chew on a blade of grass. I made him chew on one too, so we could be alike. He always brought along a coffee can full of dirt, and I enjoyed reaching inside to pull out one of the fat, twisting nightcrawlers we had dug from the back yard the night before.

One day as we walked by the river, I saw some grass that had grown taller than I was. It looked soft and soothing, like the water we had been watching all morning. I pointed it out to my father and asked him if I could dive into it.

He laughed. "Sure," he said.

I handed him my fishing pole and got a running start. I sprinted to the grass and threw myself forward, arms straight ahead in my best imitation of Superman. I sailed through the soft grass and bellyfopped onto the ground. It hit me like a shot. I couldn't breathe. Later, whenever my father related the story, he would say that he gave me "the old football one-two-three," meaning that he took hold of my waist and pumped me up and down until I got my breath back. I was never much of a football player – I was too small – and that I had to be given "the old football one-two-three" filled me with pride. It was at once my greatest and most painful fishing experience.

Although I don't remember going fishing much after that episode, a transformation went through me when I started this book. I noticed it almost immediately. Returning from my first fishing trip with John Motoviloff, an outdoors writer and knowledgeable trout fisherman, I realized that I had been missing out on an important source of relaxation.

John has an eye for trout streams. The tiny creeks you see trickling through a farmer's field, barely big enough to warrant a second glance – John will investigate. More than once I have followed John through freshly plowed, manure-laden mud, into mosquito-infested pricker

bushes – that is the correct name for those things, by the way, pricker bushes – tripping over logs in the dense underbrush, only to find a stream of water no bigger than a drainage ditch. John can never hide his excitement. "I know they're in here," he'll whisper.

I promised John that I would never reveal the location of his favorite trout streams. Several anglers have made the same request, and I always honor it. I have had the privilege of being shown some spectacular locations, prized by the angler not only because they contain pools full of fish, but also because their natural beauty creates an environment that the angler reveres. As the writer George Vukelich once said, "It's like being in a church." If there ever were a sacred trust, being invited to an angler's favorite spot is certainly it.

John fished for trout with a worm. "The purists hate this," he said, smiling.

I photographed John jigging the line from the bank of the stream. Mosquitoes danced around his head. He stood perfectly still and held his fishing pole aloft. In the tall weeds he looked like an orchestra conductor, baton at the ready, framed against the changing colors of the evening sky. I was amazed by his concentration, by his ability to be still.

I put my cameras down and watched while he fished. For old times' sake, I plucked a blade of grass and stuck it into my mouth. I knew at the time that I had rediscovered something wonderful, but it didn't ring absolutely true until we returned to the city and I watched a man hurry down the sidewalk, talking on a telephone. People who fish, I thought, know something other people don't.