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## **Jackson trout waters soothe wounded heroes**

### **Outdoors**

*By Paul Bruun, Jackson Hole, Wyo.*

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The mixture of clean moving water, wild speckled trout and crisp fall weather is a superb therapy package. Factor in a cooperative weatherman, Sandra Bockman and her endless volunteer crew, and it is no surprise that the 2011 fall edition of Honoring Our Veterans was a mission accomplished.

My initial introduction to Bockman began by answering her long-ago plea for volunteers to take Air Force radar surveillance personnel float fishing during their temporary duty to protect vacationing government figures. This was just one of Sandra's many visitor services duties with the Jackson Hole Chamber of Commerce. However, the experience ultimately led to her creation of a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, Honoring Our Veterans, which she oversees in her "spare" time and also takes personal vacation days to facilitate.

Fortunately, our population's generally unhealthy post-Vietnam behavior toward returning vets has improved. Today, it is becoming better known that modern soldiers back from such unconventional war zones as Afghanistan, Iraq and other torturous spots are often victims of serious injuries that require leading-edge surgery and rehabilitation.

The easy route is simply to feel sorry for these wounded patriots. But thanking them and assisting in their readjustment to our society while also recognizing their unselfish contributions to this country's safety is easier said than done. This lesson first dawned on me in September 2008 while floating a wounded 101st Airborne veteran with post-traumatic stress disorder along the Snake in Grand Teton National Park surrounded by golden cottonwoods. Since that introduction, very little interrupts my dwelling on the hell these wonderful military members and their families must endure forever.

### **Calming and stimulating**

Bockman's Jackson visitation program has become so popular that veterans from around the country are eager to explore our valley. It has been proven that new interests demanding calm but mentally stimulating efforts — such as fly tying, fly casting and fly fishing — are helpful therapies for injured soldiers trying to reconstruct their lives. Local resorts, outfitters, guides and other generous parties roll out activities from lake and river fishing to kayak and whitewater floats, therapeutic horseback riding, hiking, fly tying and picnics and barbecues.

Months before these veterans' fall arrival, Bockman, like Santa Claus, has a giant list and begins checking it twice. She secures special fishing float trip permits from Grand Teton National Park and Bridger-Teton National Forest, assembles guides and carefully matches them to veterans, organizes food, lodging, transportation and even a little down time for rest and relaxation.

After the visiting soldiers have the opportunity to meet and greet many of their guides, as well as Sandra's dedicated Honoring Our Veterans board members (this year hosted by The Murie Center), a special kind of dynamic begins to grow within

the group. Uncovering the mysteries of fly casting, artificial fly assembly and how to remain attached to a wiggly cutthroat are new challenges. But getting artificial limbs, nervous systems shattered by explosions and disrupted concentration to all work in sync isn't easy for wounded soldiers, regardless of their once-sharp skills.

During the introductory morning session of fly casting and fly presentation at the Teton Pines trout ponds, conversations etched with nonfishing overtones surfaced. For a civilian to overhear what it feels like to be shot in the body and the loss of strength, movement and the resultant sympathetic pain and excruciating headaches feels like a smash to the stomach. Listening to descriptions of limb loss from mine and hand-grenade blasts was so demonstrative that at one point any consideration of eating lunch on my part was foolish.

However, during the noon break in the sumptuous Teton Pines dining room, it was thrilling to detect the optimism and positive attitudes of the veterans I was privileged to hear. The determination of those who suffered through unthinkable pain and double-digit numbers of operations and who were now whisking about on specialized artificial limbs was helping my own attitude. Several vets detailed the positive improvements spurred by treatment of battlefield injuries. New medical procedures allow successful recoveries from injuries that only one or two years ago would have resulted in amputations.

Owing to the growing popularity of Sandra's program, vet numbers have increased. This requires spreading the anglers and their guides out so river sections aren't overrun. Will Dornan and his Snake River Angler guides and Jason Balogh of Fish The Fly floated the Deadmans Bar-to-Moose segment Wednesday, while river veterans Paul Rice, John Simms, Rob Parkins of Westbank Anglers, Jamie Weeks and my wife, Jean, of Mike Rheam's Grand Fishing Expeditions covered Pacific Creek down to Deadmans.

Long time HOV supporter A.J. DeRosa wrapped up the veterans' week with float-fishing trips from the Wilson Bridge to his Wooden Boat Tours camp below Mosquito Creek and a superb Hail and Farewell dinner gathering. In the Bridger-Teton National Forest, another group of volunteer guides — including Mark Titre, Glen Oya, James Ferroni of Scott Hocking's Teton Troutfitters, David Ellerstein of Jackson Hole Anglers and Dave Cernicek of the U.S. Forest Service — explored the lower Snake River and its tributaries.

Between casting instruction from Rhett Bain and Jason Budd of Reel Deal Anglers, fly-tying demonstrations by the irrepressible Scott Sanchez of Jack Dennis Outdoor Shop, and hours on the Snake River and Jackson Lake with Airport Manager Ray Bishop, all of these American heroes received a thorough introduction to the inner game of Rocky Mountain trout fishing, Jackson Hole-style.

At the end, however, it was obvious that this proud group had done lots more for this particular volunteer than I would ever be able to do for them. Dealing with true American heroes is an honor I don't take lightly.

### **Electrofishing and dam flows**

Snake levels begin to drop in October. Local Wyoming Game and Fish Department fish czar Rob Gipson this week released an energetic fall schedule of electrofishing beginning this week on the Gros Ventre River-GTNP boundary-to-Kelly stretch (Sept. 26, 27 and 29).

On Oct. 3, 4 and 5, Flat Creek will receive electrofishing in the following areas: National Elk Refuge-Nowlin confluence to sleigh ride bridge, Karns Meadow, South Park feedground.

Oct. 10, 11 and 13, the fisheries crew will shock the Snake from the R Lazy S access to the Wilson Bridge.

According to Gipson, the Bureau of Reclamation will begin ramping down to winter flows on Oct. 3. The goal is to reach stable dam releases of 600-650 cubic feet per second by Oct. 7.

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*Paul Bruun writes weekly on his adventures and misadventures in the great outdoors.*

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