



Therapeutic Adventures

Sports/Columnists

SADLER: On the river with Adaptive Anglers



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This past Saturday I had the chance to watch some very talented anglers enjoy fall fishing on the Moormans river west of White Hall. What was truly remarkable about this group of anglers was that they all had a physical or developmental disability, a chronic illness or other special health needs.

Twice a year the Thomas Jefferson Chapter of Trout Unlimited teams up with Therapeutic Adventures, Inc. to host a fly-fishing camp. This past weekend's "Adaptive Anglers on the Fly – Fly-Fishing Camp" was the fifth camp the two groups have organized.

TJTU maintains the special regulation section of the Moorman's River just below Sugar Hollow Reservoir dam. This one-half mile section is a catch-and-release, fly-fishing only section. During the special regulation season from Oct. 1 through June 15 fishing is by permit only.

The public can purchase a permit at the Albemarle Angler in Charlottesville (you also need a state fishing license). The Thomas Jefferson chapter stocks this section with rainbow trout from 10 to 18 inches every four to six weeks during the season.

The fly-fishing camp got started when James “Chubby” Damron of TJTU and Mark A. Andrews of Therapeutic Adventures, decided that the TJTU catch and release section of the Moorman’s river might be a great venue for one of Therapeutic Adventures’ adaptive outdoor recreation program.

Like most TU chapters, the Thomas Jefferson chapter has coalesced around a long-term sustainable project that helps define the chapter’s community involvement. It is noteworthy that this chapter has made accessibility to the sport, by people with special needs, a strategic element of their project.

Some of that came about because TJTU was the organization that benefitted from Andrews’ son, Caleb — it was his Eagle Scout Leadership Service project. Chubby was the mentor for Caleb’s project. The project was the genesis for the Adaptive Anglers on the Fly – Fly-Fishing Camp.

With a suitable location now in hand, Andrews designed one of Therapeutic Adventures’ adaptive programs to make fly-fishing accessible to those folks with special needs.

Last year Andrews’ other son, Zach, did an Eagle Scout project that improved the trail system along the river to increase the opportunity for wheelchair bound anglers. He also built an information kiosk.

This past weekend, the campers were based at Montfair Resort Farm near Crozet. There were 14 campers along with a family member or caregiver. Because this was a “shared experience” camp the family member or caregiver could join in the activities if they wanted to.

It was an inter-generational group ranging from a five-year-old boy to a 59-year-old woman. The disabilities included traumatic brain injuries, cerebral palsy, amputees and spinal cord injuries.

At the camp the participants learned about selecting the right equipment, how to use and care for it, how to cast, tie knots, what trout like to eat and where they are in the water. They had the chance to tie flies, learn fly-fishing ethics and etiquette and the “Leave No Trace” concept for outdoor activities.

Andrews and his staff at Therapeutic Adventures focus on providing greater access to the outdoors. They offer a number of outdoor programs adapted for the disabled. They can also help folks with important decisions regarding safety and the right equipment for outdoor sports and recreation.

In the spring, the two groups host a women only program for cancer patients. They work with the Martha Jefferson Cancer Care Center to offer an adaptive fly-fishing camp called the Spring Fly Fling! Last year, the TU guys were all decked out in pink sunglasses for the occasion. That must have been something to see.

Andrews told me that, beside the fly-fishing camp, they offer adaptive programs in three areas. Snow sports, water sports and wilderness sports.

For the snow sports they offer adaptive programs for alpine and nordic skiing, snowboarding and also snow shoeing. Most of those programs are based at Massanutten Ski Area.

In the water sports, besides fly-fishing, they offer adaptive canoeing, kayaking, rafting and sailing programs. In the wilderness sports they offer adaptive programs for backpacking, camping, rock climbing and mountain biking.

They follow a three-phase instructional approach. At each level, participants are introduced to variety of skills and concepts including leadership development, conditioning, nutrition, motivation and outdoor emergency care.

Watching Andrews and the TJTU volunteers in action and seeing the campers respond to the opportunity — to not only get outside — but to also actively participate in the sport was heart warming.

All too often, especially these days, it is easy to get down and feel like life has dealt you a bad hand. When I see other anglers willing to share their knowledge with others it always makes me proud of them. When I see them do it for people who have been dealt a bad hand, then I know I am seeing everyday heroes in action.

On that note I wish you all a happy Thanksgiving. As you enjoy your day I hope you will take a moment to remember that around the country and the world there are men and women in service to this country who are not home with friends and family. They are standing watch so we can stay safe in our homes. When you can, take a moment to offer your heart felt thanks to them. I know they will appreciate it.

Editor's Note: Tom Sadler is an avid fly-fisherman, guide and instructor and founder of The Middle River Group, an organization that provides diverse business expertise to the conservation and wildlife management community and the hunting, fishing and shooting sports industry.

Previously he worked in Washington with several conservation groups including the Izaak Walton League and the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation.

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