

he day her family moved from California to Jackson Hole in the mid-1980s, Katie Salsbury (then Katie Morey) could hardly sit still in the station wagon. “Mountain land ho!” she chanted as they drove east toward the Tetons. Katie had vacationed with her family in Wyoming since she was 4, and though she still wasn’t old enough, at age 10, to recognize the feeling of falling in love, she knew the area was reeling her in. She dreamed of ranch life as her father drove the miles, closing in on the Rockies. When her parents let her hang her head out the window, her blonde ponytail flew.

From her earliest vacation stays at the R Lazy S Ranch, Katie regarded nature with “delight and fascination.” By the time she became a Wyoming resident, she’d already outgrown the con-

finer of the sandbox and preferred trolling for adventure anywhere outdoors. “I started enjoying where I was,” she says. “I didn’t want to take this new place for granted.”

Sometime after settling into mountain life, she held the inspiration for her future as a biologist and an entrepreneur in her hand. “I found IT in the rafters, dusty and cobwebby, in a dirty, light-blue vinyl rod holder,” she says. “I thought, ‘Sweet, there’s a fly rod in here.’” The relic had belonged to her grandfather. “My father didn’t push fishing on us because he never really enjoyed it himself. I just found it on my own.” The vibe was so strong she soon began casting across the garage’s concrete floor, which took on the silvery glint of water.

“Then, when I was 16, I was invited to fish with my friend Amy’s family,”

Katie remembers. “It was the Dennis family. You know, Jack Dennis.” Jack, now a high-profile international angler, taught her to fish. “At the time I couldn’t help myself. I brought along the old rod,” she says. “Nothing about my grandfather’s rod was truly functional. It’s clunky, slow-action, for sure.” (Slow-action means there’s a delay between the strike and feeling the fish’s weight on the end of the fly line.) “By the time I wet a line, this type of rod was more nostalgic than anything. They hang in people’s houses, keepsakes really. Right above the fancy antique chaps.”

One float down the South Fork of the Snake River did not so much prove the hand-me-down worthy as it reinforced Katie’s visceral feeling of awe for where she lived. She spent as much time outdoors as she could, reading streams for

where the fish would be and searching for answers to her own questions about how the natural environment worked. “River life is so cool,” she gushes. “Wild fish and crazy insects.” She even recalls being “enamored with the water and watching its intriguing, ever-changing flow. I wanted to watch it forever. I wanted to live here forever.”

From then on, Katie considered it necessary to know wild life intimately, a working knowledge both practical and romantic. “Even as a high school student in Jackson Hole, I never took where we lived for granted. Most of the kids just wanted to leave. I always wanted to figure out how to make a living here and stay.” Naturally, she looked outside for answers. “I begged my parents to let me attend a summer course at Teton Science School,” an outdoor education facility in

Kelly. “Not really having the money to do it, Mom and Dad said to me, ‘You can go if you can pay for it yourself.’”

She mulled the situation over. “I convinced myself, ‘I will find a way.’” She researched the school and discovered a scholarship granted to a local student upon submission of a winning essay. So she wrote about her appreciation of the outdoors, a youthful piece filled with “I love this,” “I love that,” and “I can’t wait to learn about nature.”

But her genuine commitment to the environment stood out. “I won,” she says. “The opportunity to go for six weeks was exhilarating to me.” She attributes the teachers at Teton Science School with fostering her appreciation for “outdoor science versus lab science.” On several backpacking trips she learned the scientific method. “We used

a woman in waders

Biologist and angler Katie Salsbury finds motivation for work and play in the course of the Teton River

by Macey Lavinder Maher



From her first encounter as a child with the Teton region’s mountains and rivers, Katie Salsbury has sought a respectful place in the natural world. Now a cofounder of Intermountain Aquatics, an environmental consulting firm based in Driggs, and a member of several regional conservation nonprofits, Katie works hard to improve habitat and preserve resources for future generations of anglers and other outdoor enthusiasts.

Bottom right photo by Tom Montgomery. Others courtesy Katie Salsbury.

this process, making a hypothesis and studying, diagnosing too. I titled my first research project ‘Ungulate and insect herbivory on willows along Ditch Creek,’ though I’m not sure I knew what an ungulate was until I got into the course. We studied insect gall distribution on browsed versus unbrowsed willows along the riverbanks.”

Katie’s developing mind also latched onto a river geomorphology class taught by Luna Leopold, a National Medal of Science-winning geologist and son of conservationist Aldo Leopold. “It gave me an immense background in my surroundings. After that I went on to study ornithology.” At 18 she earned a job at the school’s bird-banding station and collected data for MAPS (Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship), a national program to chart the migratory path of 120 species of land birds from Central America through Alaska. Katie contributed by netting and banding study subjects alongside professional biologists. She continually monitored the birds, accruing valuable population-trend data for western Wyoming.

In college at the University of Colorado, she studied biology, then added rangeland ecology and watershed management in graduate school at the University of Wyoming. By the time she met wetlands and waterfowl specialist Jeff Klausmann, her future business partner, she’d decided she wanted to wear her waders to work. “I saw this sort of job title in my head and thought, ‘Wow, this

is a real niche.’ I could specialize in restoring fisheries and get back to the Tetons after college.”

Driggs appeared an idyllic location for Jeff and Katie to launch the new venture: Intermountain Aquatics. “Katie and I mutually wanted to take consulting to the next level—customer service, attention to detail and scientific foundation,” Jeff says. The two scientists and their staff set out to restore and enhance local fisheries, evaluating what it would take to return degraded river systems to more healthy conditions, and transforming bank and water quality to heighten potential for healthy trout populations and increase angler enjoyment.

Then, in early ’99, Katie’s personal life stopped ebbing and rushed to shore at full speed. Her boyfriend, Baker Salisbury, proposed, and, with her typical I’ll-do-it-myself determination, she decided to build a house. “At that point, Katie was very excited to not wait on where we would live,” says Baker, who owns Westbank Anglers on the Moose-Wilson Road. “Right away she designed our home, one we’d build up Fox Creek Canyon.” She didn’t wait on the building crew either. “She served as the general contractor and all. She hired workers. And, she made sure I was there working as well.” The whole time Katie kept her commitment to Jeff and the new company, with a tool belt, a fly-fishing vest, waders with pockets crammed full of test tubes, and a fluttering heart in tow.

“We start by testing water quality, evaluating stream bank erosion and recommending native plant revegetation,” she explains. “The idea is to provide solutions that function ecologically in the surroundings. Many of the private landowners or public agencies then employ us to follow through on-site, where we stabilize the banks and plant the vegetation for them. We dove right back into science and created our own type of sod [Wetland Sod, a trademark product of Intermountain Aquatics] that stabilizes the soil of the bank faster than

what we had been using before. Time frames are crucial to our business and the quicker the process, the better.” A perfectionist, she adds, “Bear in mind though, the process cannot be forced; what we implement has to mimic nature.”

The key to river restoration is a holistic approach, Katie says. How does the river function as a whole? She frequently begins by evaluating the fish. “If trout are healthy, then rivers are pretty healthy.” During work on the Teton River, Katie discovered that her backyard’s bounty of fish was in serious decline. “I wanted to find out why. After talking with other local biologists, I realized I wanted to be part of the solution.”

Public forums evolved to discuss concerns about the river and beseech help from residents. With her background and knowledge Katie earned an integral role within this community of friends who cared about the river—cared deeply about the generations of anglers and river enthusiasts to come.

From this, a nonprofit aptly named Friends of the Teton River (FTR) organized. “She brings us state-of-the-art information about stream restoration,” executive director Lyn Benjamin says. “Katie made herself available, all the while planning her wedding and building a home. It was the embryonic stage [of FTR], and she helped us figure out the problem issues—Katie was a star.”

Even in her own backyard, Katie didn’t hesitate to share the spotlight. “When FTR decided to take action on the Teton River, we created a unique method to seek solutions. The Habitat Assessment and Restoration Project [HARP] was born out of our forthright acknowledgement that we alone could not solve the issues on the Teton. So we invited regional professionals from the state and federal agencies and the universities to come float the river for two days to brainstorm both the problems and solutions. The group identified eroding stream banks as one problem that could be addressed without delay.”

Immediately Katie co-wrote a grant that allowed the team to stabilize 2,500 linear feet of riverbank. She believes in FTR projects because of the approach. “It is not political. It’s objective,” she says. “We ask a question and find out if we’re right. Many times we collect information to prove ourselves wrong. We allow the research to form our solutions.”

Katie also charted the way for the first annual FTR River Party and Adventure Auction. Benjamin calls the event an “exquisite affair.” In 2003, the event’s third year, it grossed nearly \$8,000. Bonnie Berger of FTR explains the primary goal is to recharge member interaction, generate new memberships and fund office overhead. Today nearly 400 members support research teams that focus directly on river projects using grants. Operational expenses are covered by fundraising events such as the River Party.

With FTR, Katie participates in restoration activities, training volunteers on bank stabilization techniques, teaching elementary school children about erosion and planting willows along riverbanks. She recently joined the board of the Yellowstone Business Partnership, a regional group that promotes a prosperous economy, community vitality and a sustainable environment in the greater Yellowstone ecosystem.

“Issues concerning the river environment are integral to both of the nonprofits I work with,” she says. River sports’ growing popularity is a mixed blessing. “More people enjoying rivers is a great thing, but there are hurdles ahead,” she says. She acknowledges that as an international fly-fishing enthusiast, she’s also a cause of the concern. “Resources will be taxed from more use.” It’s another challenge, she admits, but not one that can sink her belief. “I can’t be frustrated with the resource, the streams themselves. What we have to do is nudge nature.” And channel newcomers to the sport into preservation efforts.

She herself is devoted, through Intermountain Aquatics, Friends of the Teton River and the Yellowstone Business Part-

nership, to saving the resource she values so much. “If you work hard, your dreams can be realized. These are my responsibilities now, watching the health of fisheries. I don’t get out to fish as much as I used to. That’s the way it is.”

On a typical weekend day, she works and Baker fishes. If she can cast off her pressing duties, she joins him on the Teton River in the early evening. “It revitalizes me, those moments when I’m out there,” she says. She scrutinizes the course of the river. “Frequently I pick up the insects, bugs that are anywhere near the river. I think about the insect life and if it is good and in healthy numbers for the trout. Then I also know what to tie at the end of my line.” While she fishes, her mind drifts upon possibility. “I evaluate and I dream,” she says. “It’s a great combination.”

Katie is also fond of fishing beyond home waters, an attraction she considers a tiny but necessary vice. “I love to go with Baker to fly-fishing destinations. This is what keeps me fresh so that I don’t burn out. In fact, we just got back from the Bahamas.” Direct from the baggage claim at the Jackson Hole airport, her skin glows and the accent of coral in her necklace reminds her that fly-fishing feels natural anywhere in the world. “I wasn’t grown-up the entire time. I just played.”

“When we get where we’re going, Katie and I go after fish together,” Baker says, “but really it’s a race to spot the fish first.” Katie downplays her competitive edge. “It is just games. I do try to leave work behind.” In 2003 she also traveled to Chile and Argentina, and she hopes to realize her next goal, which involves two months, a sailboat, Baker, fly rods and more of the Bahamas. “All before I’m 35,” she claims, brandishing a grin.

Having children, someday, might keep her closer to home, but she welcomes the thought of creating a legacy. “I will teach them to fish,” she says, nodding repeatedly. “Positively, in the womb.” Of course, she’s confident the Teton River will be in great shape by then.

At Intermountain Aquatics, Katie Salisbury focuses on stream- and river-bank restoration. To help these areas revegetate, the company she co-founded with partner Jeff Klausmann developed Wetland Sod, a biodegradable coconut-fiber mat embedded with plants native to the Intermountain West. Customized to the contours of each site, Wetland Sod inhibits erosion; provides oxygen, insect habitat and cover for trout; and thwarts weed propagation.

Photo top left by Jim Wood. Others courtesy Katie Salisbury.