

SUPER FLY

**MORE MEN THAN WOMEN FLY-FISH. BUT
OVER THE PAST 25 YEARS, INTREPID WOMEN ANGLERS
HAVE BEEN CHANGING THAT. MEET
SOME OF THEM—AND CAST YOUR OWN LINE—
IN WISCONSIN'S DRIFTLESS AREA.**



(This page) Fly shop owner Geri Meyer basks in the joy as Lisa Wilson, who has been learning to guide, works her rod and line. (Opposite) Fewer than one-third of American fly-fishers are women—a stat educator and program leader Tina Murray aims to change.

Before I met Geri Meyer, everything I knew about fly-fishing I learned from Brad Pitt. In the 1992 film *A River Runs Through It*, the breakout star's character seeks solace on the Blackfoot River in rural Montana, his one constant in a world turned upside down. Out there on the water, all of his troubles melt away. The rush of the current, the whoosh of the line—fly-fishing as medicine, a way to get his head right.

That kind of therapeutic ritualism is one reason that Geri Meyer, co-owner of the Driftless Angler fly shop in Viroqua, Wisconsin, fell in love with the sport. Another, which I realized only after joining her and a friend, Lisa Wilson, on a 10-hour fishing trip, is the camaraderie that comes from spending quality time in nature with women you trust.

Meyer started fishing 26 years ago, back when there was no easy way to connect with women who shared her interest. Seeing a female angler casting on a bank was like spotting a unicorn. And you'd never find women in fly shops. "I'd go in and the record screeched," Meyer recalls. Then one of three things would usually happen: She'd be "hit on, condescended to or ignored."

Tina Murray, owner of Shenanigans, a women-focused guide service based in Madison, Wisconsin, remembers similar indignities. She grew up in a family that fished for food and was drawn to the beauty and conservationist spirit of fly-fishing. But few people decades ago gave a thought to things like inclusivity, different learning styles or the safety hazards of ill-fitting gear sized for men.

WRITER ASHLEA HALPERN PHOTOGRAPHER KATHRYN GAMBLE



Divided trays hold hundreds of iridescent flies at Driftless Angler, the shop Geri Meyer and her husband, Mat Wagner, own in downtown Viroqua. They moved to southwest Wisconsin from New Mexico in 2006 to start the business, seeing opportunity in an area with abundant trout streams but no local fly shop. Meyer has made a point to stock the store with gear tailored to both men and women, and she operates womensflyshop.com.

“I’M ALL ABOUT BREAKING BARRIERS DOWN, SO PEOPLE UNDERSTAND THAT THE RIGHT WAY TO FLY-FISH IS THE WAY THAT WORKS FOR THEM.”

TINA MURRAY

And the irony, Meyer says, is that those dismissive men back in the day had no clue that women make excellent anglers. She notices the difference when leading couples on fishing trips. “Fly-fishing is not a muscle sport; it’s about finesse, and women typically grasp that idea quicker,” she says. They’re also more receptive to advice, which means “they often catch more fish—and that drives some husbands crazy.”

Of course, attitudes have shifted hugely, but the numbers lag behind. According to the Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation, women made up 37 percent of fishing participants in 2021, a 5 percent increase from 2010. But fly-fishing remained the most male-dominated category: Only three in 10 anglers

were female. It was also the least diverse, growing whiter over the last three years than it already was.

Shenanigans owner Murray has devoted her career to casting a wider net. She teaches at-risk youth to fish. She has worked with fellow veterans. And she is deeply involved with the Southern Wisconsin chapter of Trout Unlimited, a decades-old conservation nonprofit. In 2005, she created their beginner and intermediate clinics for women, and in 2021, she coordinated a leadership institute that empowered female fishers to launch clinics in their own home waters. “The more competent a woman becomes, the more confidence she gains,” Murray says. “The more confidence she gains, the more she’s

willing to take risks, which increases competence. It goes ’round and ’round.”

Technology has also been a boon. Social media attracts new and younger women to the sport. Organizations such as United Women on the Fly (UWOTF) host online courses. Local Facebook groups like Driftless Women on the Fly help enthusiasts find one another. Gender parity hasn’t been achieved yet, but the community of “fishy women,” as Meyer calls her people, has never been stronger.

Jennifer Hsia, a physician who splits her time between Minneapolis and Milwaukee, met many of her best fishing pals through Instagram. She’s largely self-taught, thanks to YouTube, and now serves as an online instructor for UWOTF and Fly Fish Instruct. Her mission: Bring more women of color into the fold and “make sure that people who might not traditionally be involved with this sport don’t feel like they don’t belong. No one should be a gatekeeper to enjoying the outdoors.”

Originally from Washington State, Meyer honed her fly-fishing chops in Taos, New Mexico, and now travels all over the world to fish. But at the end of the day, she loves coming home to the Driftless, where the fishing is slower but more technical than out west.



A military veteran and career educator, Tina Murray owns Shenanigans, a guide company with the motto “Fly Fishing for Everyone.” She leads tailored, local private excursions, as well as an annual all-women trip to Canada.



As female anglers from Wisconsin, Geri Meyer and her friends walk in the footsteps of a storied figure—Carrie Frost. In 1896, she opened C.J. Frost Fishing Tackle Manufacturing Company in Stevens Point. Frost used her initials to downplay her gender, but over the next 20-odd years, she created jobs for more than 150 people, many of them women.



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Wisconsin's inland trout season kicks off in January (with catch-and-release limitations by county until early May), and runs until mid-October. The 89 classified streams in this part of the state are fed with aquarium-clear spring water—naturally pH-balanced to sustain wild populations of brook and brown trout. The fish feast on abundant mayflies, caddis flies, scuds and sow bugs in the streambeds.

This is Meyer's happy place, and it's where I'm going to meet her for my first time fly-fishing. After driving a half hour from Viroqua, we unload near a stream in the Timber Coulee watershed, deep in Vernon County. I ask where we are, and she shoots me a sly smile. Keeping names a little hush-hush fends off overcrowding and encourages newcomers to stop into shops like hers and learn about stream etiquette. When Meyer trades tips with other guides, it can sound like code: "Go 300 paces past Cowboy Jack's, hang a left at T-Rex, cross at Camp Snoopy, and the stile is just beyond the sorcerer's rock."

Wherever the heck we are, the landscape is beautiful: all loping hills and swaying corn, navy blue streams and Grant Wood-esque barns with silver-domed silos. There is no road noise—just the babbling of the creek and an eagle piping in a tree.

Over the next few hours, Meyer shows me how to assemble and hold a rod and briefs me on the sport's colorful vernacular. ("Bobbars are indicators, lures are flies, and that's not a pole; it's a rod," she notes. "People get really fussy if you say pole.") She explains how to "match the hatch," where you study local insects to figure out which flies the Michelin Star-picky trout might want to eat, and how to stalk a trout without spooking it. But the real artistry is in the casting—that buttery-smooth ribboning of fly line that reads like poetry when done right.

My first attempt was a disaster: I caught the hook on my own shirt. The second attempt latched a backpack. It went like this for most of the day, a parade of bumbles and blooper clips. I didn't get frustrated because Meyer had warned me before we set out that the day would be a roller coaster: "You're gonna get it and be like, 'This is so easy.' And then two seconds later, it'll all go to shit. All day long."

I was like Urkel with a lasso, but Meyer was eternally patient, humming "The Blue Danube" waltz and mimicking a ticktocking metronome to give my casting some rhythm. If my arcs were too sweeping, she'd tell me to channel Jackson Pollock, imagining a giant invisible canvas in front of me. Instead of

"painting the inside of the igloo," as she evocatively described it, she told me to flick my wrist at 11 and 1 o'clock. It was during that demo that I noticed the small tattoo inked on the inside of Meyer's wrist: "Nevertheless, she persisted."

When I finally hooked my first fish, I was both elated and terrified. The 6-inch brown trout had fallen for a Purple Drank, a nymph-like fly with a snazzy amethyst body. Meyer and Wilson showered me in high fives, but I was too concerned about hurting the poor thing to victory dance. Meyer leapt into action, showing me the proper way to cradle a quivering fish (always with wet hands, so as not to damage their slimy coating). As I marveled at the trout's shimmering metallic body and pink splotches, I was keenly aware of our power imbalance. I was holding his life in my hands. We wriggled the hook from his lip, snapped a quick photo and sent him on his way. (I only had the heart for catch and release, and as it happens, neither Meyer nor Wilson like the taste of trout.)

Most fly anglers who experience this kind of intimacy cultivate an even greater appreciation for Earth's natural resources and a fierce desire to protect them. Meyer modifies her hooks with

pliers to prevent them from tearing apart the trouts' mouths. She waxed at length about the gossamer wings of mayflies. When Wilson spotted a woolly bear caterpillar floating adrift in a stream, she scooped him up and ferried him safely to land. Some of the trout even have names; that's how well the women know these streams and the catches that call them home. (Hi, Frank.)

As the sun sank behind the hills, the three of us gathered around Meyer's hatchback to celebrate a long, hard day of fishing. The conversation meandered like the creeks we'd been following: We griped about the lack of inclusive sizing in the outdoor industry and what Meyer called big-box retailers' urge to "shrink and pink" whatever they already make for men. We joked about husbands, hot flashes, the challenges of peeing in waders and why it's so important for women to have a safe space to learn about fly-fishing.

My casting shoulder ached as if I'd just lobbed a thousand softballs, but I felt good. I caught (and let go) five fish that day, but I was walking away with something far more valuable: the confidence to try again. As any fishy woman will tell you, that's the real hook. **MWL**

REEL LIFE

Ready to book a fly trip to Wisconsin? Base yourself in Viroqua, a crunchy little town with great food and a raft of charming rentals.

EXPLORE

At Wildcat Mountain State Park, about 30 miles northeast of Viroqua, the 2.5-mile Old Settler's Trail has narrow pathways and hair-raising drop-offs that snake through tall pines and around boulders the size of spaceships.

One of the state's largest used bookstores, Driftless Books and Music, fills an old tobacco warehouse, with sections for every imaginable micro topic (Scandinavian lit, organic farming, facial hair) as well as books by, for and about women.

TASTE

At Wonderstate Coffee, whose roastery is solar-powered, fuel up on seasonal drinks and wader-busting breakfast sandwiches in a 1940s Mobil gas station.

Sample local farmstead cheeses on a board at Noble Rind Cheese Company, or cobble together a locavore picnic from the excellent Viroqua Food Co-op.

For a dinner that celebrates the bounty of Vernon County and its hundreds of organic farms, reserve a table at The Driftless Cafe. Co-owner Luke Zahm hosts Wisconsin Foodie on PBS, and if you're lucky, his menu may include trout.

STAY

Bucolic vacation rentals abound in the Driftless. Poke around on Airbnb and Vrbo, and you'll find comfortable homes walking distance from trout streams, HGTV-ready cottages with butcher-block countertops, and apartments in town (including one above the Driftless Angler fly shop).