

# Yeah, Jimmy!

A stray joins a fishing fraternity on the Blackfoot River.

By John MacDonald

I cannot cast a fly on the water anymore without thinking of Jimmy James. The handsome mutt from the Humane Society was my companion on nearly every fly-fishing trip for eight years, standing at my side in shallow water, hoping like Norman Maclean for a fish to rise.

Jimmy James's whole head would follow the fly through the air on each cast, and his brow would furrow as he watched it settle on the water. If the first dozen casts produced no strikes, I'd start to hear a soft whimper. If further efforts generated similar results, the whimper would grow to a whine and, finally, a loud and frustrated yelp.

"Come on," I imagined him chastising me, "You have to mend that, man!—mend it!"

When a fish did take my fly, Jimmy James often saw it first, and his whole body would flinch with what I always took to be the same joy I felt at that moment. It became a habit for me to loudly exclaim, "Yeah, Jimmy!" instead of the usual "Fish on!"

All he wanted once a fish was netted was to admire it briefly, watch it swim back into the current, and maybe smell the net.

I taught him none of this. I don't know if someone else did, or if it was innate. He was a two-year-old stray, found wandering by the hospital in Helena and taken to the animal shelter. He was healthy, gentle, and sweet, and wearing no collar. I loved him before I ever knew he could fish.

The shelter had named him "James," which seemed too formal for what I took to be a country-boy kind of dog, one who should have two names like Billy Bob or Bobby Jo. His short, gold-colored coat had the glint of a nice hardwood floor. His ears seemed just slightly too small for his head.

A good friend and I took him on a day trip with us shortly after the adoption, mostly because I didn't want to leave him alone for hours. We parked near a

favorite stream, and the moment we pulled out our rod cases, Jimmy James became excited. He became even more so as we assembled our rods. Frankly, I was nervous. Would he be a pest? Jump in the water? Grab the fish? Get a fly hooked in his leg? My friend and I began walking upstream toward a familiar hole. Jimmy James trotted ahead, scanned the water, and then stood right beside the hole, waiting.

We made eye contact. "Here," he seemed to say. "This water looks promising."

From that day, Jimmy James became my constant fishing buddy. He also became one of the guys on our annual four-day fishing trip to the Blackfoot River. My brother, who maintained that fishing and dogs were incompatible, was quickly convinced otherwise.

"It's uncanny," he said on one of our early trips with Jimmy James. "I've never seen a dog concentrate so hard on anything."

I felt robbed when Jimmy James died. He was only ten. He was in distress one early spring morning, and a quick trip to the vet showed that his lungs were filled with blood from dozens of ruptured tumors. I had to do what so many dog parents have to do. Hate to do. As the drugs took his discomfort away, I held him and whispered in his ear: "We're going fishing, buddy." He looked happy. I've never been so sad.

I think of him every day. I still fish with him, too. My fishing buddies helped me scatter most of his ashes in our favorite hole along the Blackfoot; a few are in a sealed fly box in my fishing pack and go with me every trip.

When I catch a fish these days, a decade now since his death, I'll unconsciously mouth, "Yeah, Jimmy!" It brings me joy and a twinge of sadness.

Comforting me the day we spread Jimmy James's ashes, one of my buddies toasted him with a flask of bourbon.

"No one wanted you to catch a fish more than Jimmy James," he said. "Not even you." 🐕



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY LUIVE DURAN/MONTANA OUTDOORS

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