

Mesmerized by moving water

By Tom Dickson

Long before I started trout fishing, I was drawn to streams.

It began when I was four and our family moved into a rental house across from a forest. My mom let me cross the dirt road outside our front door and explore the wooded area on my own. Running through it was a small stream. I remember catching mudpuppies and minnows, and wading upstream to a swamp covered in giant Ponderosa pines toppled by a windstorm the year before. I walked along the fallen trunks and peered down at the fish darting about in the still pools below.

This was the early 1960s, when kids could roam free. I was in heaven.

I'm not the only one who loves moving water. Researchers have found that people prefer the murmur of fast-flowing water to almost any other sound. In one study, subjects who had undergone severe stress were seated with eyes closed while the sound of flowing water was played and a device recorded their brain's electrical activity. The scientists found significant increases in the brain's alpha and theta waves—low-frequency brain patterns associated with relaxation, meditation, and dream states. Another study showed that exposure to the sound of burbling water lowered people's heartbeats and reduced muscle tension.

Why the calming response? One theory is that running water, like the sound of waves, a fan, or falling rain, is “white noise”—which, because it contains all sound frequencies, masks sudden, disruptive sounds that demand our attention. Another is that we evolved from the sea; yet another that we all once lived in amniotic fluid in our mothers' womb.

Hmm. Maybe.

I'm no scientist, but I think what's going on is that running water has always been a

source of life. Environmental psychologists note that our human ancestors gravitated toward streams, rivers, and other riparian areas during Paleolithic times to find shelter from sun and wind, obtain drinking water, and hunt abundant wildlife attracted to the verdant vegetation.

But more than just water or even moving water, it's *cascading* water that attracts and soothes.

Wherever our ancestors originated, there were nearby or distant mountains where streams flowed down from surface snowmelt or underground springs. The calming gurgling sounds come from water tumbling among rocks and boulders. As it flows over hard, uneven surfaces, water is frothed and oxygenated, adding to its vitality.

The soothing sound of fountains and sleep devices is the sound of mountain streams, water close to its source, where it is most pure and less likely to be contaminated. It is the music of life.

Streams attract me for other reasons, mainly that they hold trout. But even those who don't fish will stop on a footbridge and stare down at the moving water, mesmerized by the sound and the sight, like watching a campfire.

Also drawn to streams are belted kingfishers, American dippers, flycatchers, warblers, mink, beavers, and dragonflies. Deer and elk come at dusk to drink. There's no better place to see wildlife.

Half a century after our family moved away, my siblings and I returned with

our mom to revisit the old neighborhood. Though surrounded on all sides by housing developments, a bit of the old forest remained, protected as designated green space, with trails and interpretive signs. We walked around a bit, taking shade under the tall pines.

I was pleased to see that the stream was still there. As my family members headed back to the car, I knelt down and listened to it gurgle. Then I spotted a finger-sized fish and watched for a few minutes as it held in the shadow of a submerged log, waiting for me to leave so it could resume feeding. I rose and followed the others. 🐟

Tom Dickson is the previous editor of Montana Outdoors.



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