

The Guides

by Brett Crawford

They had more commonalities than differences.
I learned to spot them from a distance,
driving vehicles littered with fishing-brand stickers,
self-inflicted tattoo artists intent on painting their entire bodies.
Their trucks were filled with flies and smelled of
cigars and wet dogs.
Their boats and boots, conversely,
were pristine and washed and shined daily.

My hands are large
but were consumed by theirs when shaken,
a symphony of muscular contractions that I found intimidating
but trustworthy enough
to place my life in their hands wading through whitewater.
Their shoulders carried a broadness
built by paddling clients against the river current each day.
Those who chose to wet wade in mountain runoff
displayed calves chiseled as by a marble sculptor.
Keeping pace for a single day
eliminated any wonder I had about the maintenance of
such a physique.

Their ruggedness was observable through their physicality:
clothing colors that blurred with the surrounding landscapes,
decipherable only by movement and patches displaying
conservation commitments.
They moved with quaint walking sticks,
not for stability on land
but for navigating the rocky, slick, and unforgiving riverbeds,
sometimes visible,
oftentimes buried under whitewater.

They stalked trout with elegance,
mountain lions seeking their prey on boulders,
even crawling like soldiers taking fire on a battlefield.
Movements seemed symphonic and practiced.
They slithered through thick tree stands on riverbanks,
scaled large boulders,
paddled through rapids,
willingly ready to jump into rushing water,
acting as human anchors,
always portraying an obsession,
making the most acute and intuitive adjustments,
perpetually pursuing a perfect presentation.



They taught with endless patience,
oozing a willingness to critique only for the sake of efficiency.
When their verbal instruction failed them,
the rod became an extension of their soul,
a tool filled with energy,
confronting the resistance of flowing river water,
authorizing them to defy the laws of physics,
throwing line in handsome loops to impossible targets
only to have it disappear
against currents that had given friction seconds prior,
mimicking the trout's natural food sources,
delighting with the creativity as an executive chef.

Their conversation skills were on display,
developed during practiced listening
of guiding the elite
(United States presidents,
senators,
governors,
CEOs,
attorneys,
physicians,
beneficiaries of trust funds),
all solo.
They were entomologists, botanists, and limnologists,
but in their own minds,
keepers of their local rivers.
More than ruggedness, grace, and spirit,
they embraced quiet, color, and camaraderie,
all at the most appropriate times.

*Brett Crawford is a conservationist, fly fisher, professor,
and writer. He enjoys exploring northern Michigan's
rivers with his family and a fly rod.*