

Women Rise to the Challenges of Fisheries Conservation

Molly J. Good and Jordan Pusateri Burroughs

Four cars, packed to the brim with wide-eyed women peering out of dusty windows, tentatively pull up and park on a large field of grass flattened by the many cars that had come before them. Car doors swing open and the women – each one carrying a bottle of wine or a 6-pack of beer – appear as they saunter down the dirt road to Fuller’s North Branch Outing Club, a historic fly fishing lodge on the North Branch of the Au Sable River. Inside the lodge, the women are greeted by their colleagues – other women from natural resource and conservation backgrounds – from Michigan State University (MSU), the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR), the Great Lakes Fishery Commission (GLFC), and elsewhere. Also there to greet the women are Tom Sadler, a renowned fly fishing instructor and guide from Virginia, Bill Taylor, University Distinguished Professor at Michigan State University, and Bill Demmer, successful businessman and avid hunter and angler. With broad smiles on their faces and overflowing glasses of wine in their hands, Sadler, Taylor, and Demmer raise their drinks and declare a toast, “To the new class of MSU Fly Gals; welcome to the Au Sable!”



Photo credit: Unknown

Emergence of the MSU Fly Gals

Bill Taylor and Bill Demmer, old friends and colleagues, first conceptualized the MSU Fly Gals program in 2006 in response to shared observations regarding a lack of diversity within the recreational angler community. Around that time, women comprised just 32.5% of all U.S. anglers and only 20.2% of all fly fishing participants, according to the 2009 Special Report on Fishing conducted jointly by the Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation and the Outdoor Foundation. Thus, Taylor and Demmer, both fly fishers themselves, became passionate about finding ways to increase local participation among women in fly fishing and outdoor recreation.

In their quest to identify someone who shared their passion for mentoring others, particularly women, and who could also offer instruction and guidance, Taylor and Demmer needed look no further than Tom Sadler. Sadler, an advocate for natural resources and conservation and a fly fishing instructor and guide from Mossy Creek Fly Fishing in Harrisburg, Virginia, was a natural addition to the leadership team. Together, as Demmer said, “We wanted to introduce a sport and all of its related activities to a historically underrepresented group. We wanted to get the non-traditional fly fisher into the water.” Above all, “We wanted to provide mentorship and instill a connection to the resource. Fly fishing is a tool that can help participants directly connect to the resource,” said Sadler. Thus, over a steak dinner one evening in Washington, D.C., the MSU Fly Gals program was born.

In 2007, Taylor, Demmer, and Sadler brought the inaugural class of MSU Fly Gals to the majestic banks of the historic North Branch of the Au Sable River, a blue ribbon trout stream near Grayling, Michigan. There, for three full days in early summer, seven women (including J. Pusateri Burroughs!) got their first taste of the art and sport of fly fishing.



Photo credit: Molly Good

MSU Fly Gals Daily Log - Day One

The MSU Fly Gals, many of whom are new to fly fishing and new to each other, arrive at Demmer's Big Creek Lodge, where they unpack their belongings and set out their gear (e.g., waders, rods, and reels). Then, they gather at Fuller's North Branch Outing Club with Taylor, Demmer, and Sadler for a "Trout Opener," a celebratory reception that honors the opening of the trout fishing season. With tasty hors d'oeuvres and drinks in hand, the Fly Gals begin to form personal relationships and professional networks through their active engagement and conversation. Erin Jarvie ('2014, '15, '16), a Master's student in the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife at MSU, recalls that the opener allowed her to "meet other women who shared the same passion for natural resources and be a part of meaningful conversations about our field."

MSU Fly Gals Daily Log - Day Two

After a hearty breakfast at Big Creek Lodge, Sadler corrals the Fly Gals and begins his instruction on essential fly fishing gear, including the rod and reel. He also reviews basic knot tying and fly tying. Once the Fly Gals have properly set up their rods and reels, they migrate to a grassy field outside of the lodge for casting practice. Demmer notes, "This program means more than being out in streams; it builds community." Sadler echoes Demmer's sentiments and states, "The Fly Gals are told that this program is more than a few days of fishing and, instead, it is a chance to build connections through a common experience that binds us all going forward." At the end of the day, Jordan Burroughs ('07, '10, '16), an Academic Specialist in Wildlife Outreach and Education in the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife at MSU, recalls, "Evenings around the fire provided additional opportunities to interact with and mentor women about different career paths. It is wonderful to be around individuals, especially women, with the same drive for protecting our natural resources."

MSU Fly Gals Daily Log - Day Three

The MSU Fly Gals spend their third day on the Au Sable River with rod and reel in hand and waders pulled up to their chests. Sadler wades through the water and offers instruction as the women practice their new skills. By the end of this program, Sadler says, "The MSU Fly Gals have waded a mile (or more) in the traditional angler's boots. These women already know that water, fish, and habitat are important, and now that they have had an opportunity to learn and apply a recreational skill to the aquatic system, they can view those skills in a new light." In the end, the Fly Gals "can better relate to decision-makers and the public through their own personal experiences," says Sadler.

Reelin' Through the Years

In May 2016, Taylor, Demmer, and Sadler brought the latest class of MSU Fly Gals to the North Branch of the Au Sable River for the 10th Anniversary Celebration of the program and the people who have helped make this program a reality. Though there are dozens of reasons to celebrate the success of the MSU Fly Gals program, Taylor is most proud of the fact that all of the program participants have made efforts to "become involved and connected, and to learn from one another." Just five years ago, in 2011, 28 women had participated in the MSU Fly Gals program. In 2016, more than double that – 68 women – have participated in the program, and each one of them has

subsequently continued or secured employment in the natural resources and conservation fields. Who better than these women will "have empathy and understanding for the state's coldwater fisheries and be advocates for fisheries conservation?" asks Demmer. No one! In addition to providing opportunities for more women to develop into skilled and educated fly fishers, Taylor believes this program has continued to "build skillsets, knowledge of the river, and of one's self." Further, he states, "The MSU Fly Gals program has helped assemble a team of leaders that ultimately comprise a network that will remain throughout the future. I want the best individuals – these women – to be our future leaders in fisheries conservation."

Through the program, the

MSU Fly Gals alumnae have gained an appreciation for fly fishing and the outdoors "in a way that being an observer of it never could," says Betsy Riley ('15, '16), a Ph.D. student in the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife at MSU. For example, Hanna Kruckman ('11, '12), a Fish and Wildlife Biologist with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, "learned a new life-long hobby." Amber Goguen ('13, '14), a Ph.D. student in the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife at MSU, states, "I learned to fly fish, which is a new skill for me, and I had a wonderful time seeing rural Michigan, hearing about the history of the places we stayed and the rivers we fished, and engaging with the other women who participated in the program." Kerry Waco Weaver ('07, '08, '09), an Environmental Biologist

with the United States Environmental Protection Agency, reiterates that the MSU Fly Gals program “instills the idea that practice makes perfect. We need to keep honing our skills in order to retain and learn more about the skills, and be better able to lead people in those skills – whether it be in fly fishing, providing technical support on a contract, conducting stream assessments, or managing people.”

Lessons learned about building and maintaining relationships, mentorship, and leadership are also evident in some of the testimonials the MSU Fly Gals alumnae have shared about their involvement in the program. The MSU Fly Gals program “has helped me realize the importance of this kind of network – one that’s not built just from relationships established in the work place, but one that is also supported by personal interactions,” says Dana Infante (‘07, ‘10, ‘13), an Associate Professor in the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife

at MSU. Similarly, Abigail Lynch (‘10, ‘11, ‘13), Fisheries Research Biologist with the United States Geological Survey states, “At first, Fly Gals seems to be about the fish, but I quickly came to realize it is much more than that. It is about the camaraderie that forms from a joint experience and the inspiration gained from learning about the diverse life experiences from the group.” The MSU Fly Gals program also instills self-assurance in its participants. “This program empowers women by not only giving them confidence in the art and sport of fly fishing, but also by immersing them with other women who are looking to change the world for the better. I left the program energized and refreshed and wanting to work harder to empower other women,” says Jess Mistak (‘11), Habitat Management Unit Supervisor with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources Fisheries Division.

Remarkably, the MSU Fly Gals program has given our alumnae presence in a field that is and has

been historically underrepresented. For example, Julie Hinderer (‘14, ‘15, ‘16), Science Program Associate with the Great Lakes Fishery Commission, comments, “I have found a new way to connect with the resource I work to protect and to connect with other professionals in the field, most of whom are men.” Additionally, this program has given our alumnae a voice in the fly fishing and recreational angler community. “This has been an experience I can draw from in conversations with recreational fisheries constituents,” says Chiara Zuccarino-Crowe (‘10, ‘11), Tourism and Recreation Coordinator at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s Office of National Marine Sanctuaries. Lisa Peterson (‘16), a Ph.D. student in the Quantitative Fisheries Center at Michigan State University, notes, “This program provided me with the necessary jargon and ‘street cred’ I need to work alongside and build relationships with fisheries stakeholders.”

Staying Afloat (No Buoys Allowed!)

Today, more women are becoming engaged in fly fishing: according to the 2015 Special Report on Fishing conducted jointly by the Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation and the Outdoor Foundation, women comprised 34.4% of all anglers and 31.4% of all fly fishing participants. Furthermore, these women are becoming involved quickly; in fact, women represent the fastest growing sector of the fly fishing industry. With this information in mind, programs like MSU Fly Gals, which provide access and opportunities for underrepresented individuals, become even more valuable. Fortunately for the MSU Fly Gals and for other hopeful students and professionals, “the fly fishing community is open to the mentoring and nurturing of non-traditional fly fishing, and this program will surely continue,” says Demmer.



Waders, rods, reels, and backpacks are tossed around as the MSU Fly Gals hurriedly find their spots at the table for their last meal.

Sadler flashes a smile and cracks a joke or two from the head position. One more year has passed and produced another class of “intelligent, focused, and confident women who are eager to learn and push the knowledge envelope far beyond anything I ever cared to do,” he says. Before everyone departs, Sadler leaves us with some additional inspiration from Simon Sinek, an author on leadership and management, as we reflect on the lessons learned during our Fly Gals experience.