



Jacey Hutton

By the fourth day, I had already decided I was not going to catch a fish that year. Four hours into the afternoon, the sun was beating down, and the current of the confluence kept moving like it had all week, whether I caught anything or not. Everyone else in my family had already caught a paddlefish except me. At that point I was tired, annoyed, and honestly kind of over it. So instead of really trying, I was joking around with my older brother Corbyn and not paying much attention. When a large log floated past along the shoreline, I pointed at it and said, “Five bucks says I can snag that.” I cast my line out expecting nothing, but the moment it pulled back I knew it was not a log.

I was about 15 years old, and going to the confluence of the Missouri River and the Yellowstone River was something my family had done for years. Every summer we packed up our camper and spent a full week there. One of the best parts was getting to miss a week of school, but it was more than that. Every morning I would wake up early and walk my two dogs Max, my chieweenie, and Thea, my chocolate heeler, along the river. Those mornings were quiet, with nothing but the sound of the water moving and birds starting the day. Everyone in my family had their role on the trip, and mine was always packing the cooler backpacks. I made sure we had ice cold sodas, snacks, and everything we needed for long days by the water. It was not a big job, but it was part of the routine.

Fishing from the shore felt different than it looked. We would stand there for hours casting into the current and hoping something would hit. Somehow it seemed like everyone else had it figured out. One by one my family members caught paddlefish, while I kept casting with nothing happening. As the days went on it got more frustrating. By the fourth day I had pretty much convinced myself it was not going to happen.

That is what made the moment so unexpected. When my line suddenly went tight it did not register at first. Then it pulled back hard, harder than anything I had felt before. I realized I had something big. The fish was so strong it nearly pulled me forward, and my brother had to grab me to keep me from falling off the high shore. I could feel it fighting through the line as I tried to bring it in. As I stepped forward to keep control I lost my balance and fell straight into the water. It was freezing and I was completely soaked, but there was no way I was letting go.

After everything I finally landed my first fish, what I thought was 100lbs on the end of the line ended up weighing a whopping 35lbs. But what stood out most was not just catching it. It was what happened right after. I was standing there in the water still holding the fish completely soaked. The river was cold, but the sun was shining down, warming everything at the same time. In that moment everything felt right. I was not thinking about how long it took or how frustrated I had been earlier. I was just standing there happy holding something I had worked for all week.

Looking back, that experience taught me more than I expected. I had spent days trying so hard and getting frustrated when nothing worked. But the moment I stopped overthinking it and just enjoyed being there everything changed. The river does not follow anyone’s plan. It moves on its own time, and sometimes the best things happen when you least expect them. It also gave me a greater appreciation for water itself. Standing in the river and feeling the current made me realize how powerful it really is. At the same time it is something people depend on every day for drinking water, agriculture, and entire communities. In the end, what started as a simple joke about a floating log turned into one of the most memorable moments of my life.