



By Denis Collins—The Washington Post

Ben Schley and Mark Kovach head out for an excellent day of fishing, with little time for story-telling, on the Potomac.

No Time for Tales on the Upper Potomac

HARPER'S FERRY, W.Va.—It was a dark and stormy night on the ghostly quiet waters of the Potomac River and Mark Kovach, chained to the oars of his Iron Maiden, was reciting his epic tale of the "Talking Catfish."

"You know how a catfish will sometimes make a croaking sound when you squeeze it?" said Kovach, a 34-year-old fishing guide with a fierce, black, handlebar moustache that looked like the world's largest pair of catfish whiskers, in the dim light of occasional lightning flashes.

"This one said, 'Throw me back.' I swear that's what it sounded like. I shook it up a little and it said, 'Throw me back' again. Then it made another croak that sounded exactly like, 'Please.'"

When you pay a guide to take you fishing, you expect to hear a few stories along the way. And when you share the trip with Ben Schley, 68, a retired U.S. National Marine Fisheries Service officer, internationally known fly rodder and author, you figure to spend much of the day in skeptical pursuit of the truth.

But last week, on a nine-mile float-fishing trip down the Potomac, the fish behaved so badly, there was little opportunity to hear those masters practice the fine art of fabrication. As soon as Kovach would begin a story, some impudent bass would yank at both his line and his attention. When Schley would attempt to fill the suddenly empty spotlight with his own remembrance of fishing with Howard Hughes, a sunfish would pounce upon his hand-tied fly.

Kovach had warned us before we started that the fishing was likely to be fierce. As he packed rods, lures and lunch into the Iron Maiden, a 14-foot-long rubber raft that he has outfitted with an aluminum superstructure and swivel, bucket seats, he told us about the record that he and two paying customers had set the day

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before. "The old record was 142 fish," said Kovach, who has been working as a guide on the upper Potomac for the last three years. "Yesterday we caught 172."

If that sounds like an incredible number of fish to catch in one day, it is. Of course not all of those were citation size, conceded Kovach. Any fish big enough to get its mouth on a hook, and that includes the smallest bluegill, is clicked onto the Kovach's hand counter.

"The fish were just knocking the hell out of our hooks yesterday," said Kovach, who teaches auto mechanics for General Motors during the winter and fishes for a living the rest of the year.

"I'm glad you're giving us a guarantee," said Schley slyly. He and Kovach have been friends for five years. But last week was the first time the two had fished together since another guide and good friend of both, David Lee, was killed in a freak accident on the Potomac.

Lee, who began his guiding service at the same time as Kovach, was crushed by a tree earlier this summer while float fishing with a client. According to witnesses, there was no wind at the time and the tree gave no sound of warning before falling.

"I look at trees very carefully now," said Kovach. "When I float close to shore, I'm always figuring how tall the trees are and how far out they'd fall."

"They call them widow-makers," said Schley, who said no more.

The section of the Potomac that Kovach fishes begins a few miles above Harper's Ferry where the Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers merge. The river there is not at all like the deep, brown Potomac you see flowing under the 14th

Street bridge. It is shallow and clear, rushing over limestone ledges and through rock gardens.

You need no depth finder to find the fish on this stretch of the Potomac. Cast into eddies beside falls, in slack water bordering fast currents or just downstream of rocks and ledges and the fish will keep you working full-time.

"I really have my heart and soul in this part of the Potomac," said Kovach, who can tell you a good deal of the river's history when he is not distracted by suicidal fish.

After four hours of fishing, our party had caught and released 66 fish. I would have been more than satisfied to spend the rest of the day talking about river legends like Mosa Kline, a local peddler who drowned in the Potomac around 1900. Since then Kline's ghost has been credited with saving a number of foundering swimmers by alerting authorities on shore.

But Schley who has a moustache only slightly less impressive than Kovach's, let it be known that he intended for us to break Kovach's day-old record. As each fish was caught and released, Schley would remind Kovach to make another click on his counter.

By the end of the day, however, we had just 111 fish. But there was some consolation in the fact that we had been forced from the water for a time by a ferocious afternoon thunderstorm.

When daylight and the good fishing finally disappeared, there was only time enough for Kovach to tell his talking catfish story before we arrived at trip's end.

He told the story so well, with such so-help-me-God sincerity that I resolved the next time we go fishing, I'm going to invite Kovach and Schley to one of my favorite fishing spots where the fish have the good breeding to leave the hooks alone.