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ARE YOU  
TOUGH  
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Page 47

**FORGET  
HAWAII,  
SURF  
WYOMING!**

Page 54

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THIS PAGE: Carson "Snug" King, Will Taggart and Greg Familian join the rodeo on a Wyoming-sized party wave. RIGHT: Taggart models the latest in Jackson Hole surf style—the body condom.



# Surf Wyoming

Think SoCal is the epicenter of surf culture? So did this San Diego-based surfer until he traveled to Jackson, Wyoming, where he found a mythical wave 900 miles from the nearest ocean.

**WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK ANDERS**





**I** SHOULD'VE EXPECTED the strange looks and incessant questions. I had it coming.

It started when I checked in with my surfboard at the Orange County airport, just outside of Los Angeles.

"So how did you enjoy your surf trip to California?" the Delta lady asked.

"I live here," I informed her, handing over my California license with a Hey-I'm-a-local smile. "I'm going to Jackson Hole to surf."

Okay, I know what you're thinking. Same thing the Delta lady was wondering as her thin brown eyebrows scrunched into funny little arches behind her glasses: What's a SoCal surfer doing headed to the Cowboy State in search of waves?

Truth is, I wasn't exactly sure myself. What I did know was that I was headed to Wyoming to meet Patrick Murtha, a friend of a friend who'd agreed to take me to a place on the Snake River called The Lunch Counter.

I first caught a glimpse of The Lunch Counter back in the early 90s—in a Mountain Dew commercial of all things. Amidst the quick cuts of sun-drenched bikinis and dudes pounding cans of soda was a cowboy hat-wearing surfer, Mountain Dew can in hand, shredding this funky standing river wave. That's when I tacked riding The Lunch Counter onto my life to-do list. It would've stayed there—somewhere

near the bottom-third, alongside learning to play the acoustic guitar and rebuilding an old Toyota Land Cruiser—had I not gotten that early morning telephone call.

"Dude, it's Patrick Murtha. From Jackson. The river's coming up," the stoke-filled voice declared on my answering machine. "The Lunch Counter is in. Get out here now if you can."

**L**ESS THAN 48 HOURS LATER, I'm walking out of the Jackson Hole airport onto a rain-slick sidewalk. Gray and black clouds glide above. The Gros Ventre Range rises from the plains to the east. I can see my breath and drizzle tickles my flip-flopped feet. Hardly surfing weather, but I have nothing to lose. The surf back home in San Diego is dismal. Flat. Actually, they're probably the worst surfing conditions we've seen in the last five years or so. In contrast, "The Lunch Counter," Murtha tells me when he picks me up in his truck, "is pumping."

"It all depends on how much water the Idaho farmers need for their potatoes," Murtha, 32, says as he steers his pickup down winding Highway 89 toward the put-in of The Lunch Counter, some 20 miles south of Jackson.

The Snake River is dam-controlled and supplies much-needed water to Idaho's farmlands. During the summer growing season, the Jackson Lake Dam releases regular flows for irrigation. But when a big winter hammers the Tetons, Jackson Lake is brimming with snowmelt by springtime and the dam has to release more. That spells regular high flows.

The river is tightly constricted where the gorge narrows near The Lunch Counter and, when flows reach around 7,200 cubic feet per second (or cfs, in river speak), the water roars over a 15-foot rock shelf about the size of the roof of a Ford Econoline van. That current is then forced to the river bottom where it folds back on itself, and The Lunch Counter wave is born. During the best years, it's surfable—day and night—from late June until August. Other years, it comes and goes in a matter of days.

In the backseat of Murtha's crew cab pickup sits Greg Familian, a balding bodyboarder in his late thirties from Los Angeles who, like me, showed up expressly to surf the wave. He lived in Jackson for 10 years and regularly rode The Lunch

I watch as the wave thunders along and the current folds into seams, sending the flow deep below the surface. This afternoon The Lunch Counter is starting to do its thing, churning out an endless waist-high-plus wave. It's not really that large, still I feel sketchy about hopping in without my lifejacket. I spent five summers as a whitewater river guide, and it just goes against all the basic tenets of river safety that have been etched into my brain over the years.

But Murtha is already pulling himself up onto a boulder on the opposite side of the river. So I paddle my board across the stiff class III whitewater, and join him on a large rock outcropping directly beside the wave.

"I definitely get butterflies the first day of the season," Murtha admits. "The hydraulics after that thing are gnarly. In the ocean, you're going to get a lull eventually. But the river is constantly going. I know a ton of surfers that live in this town, they just won't come down here and surf it because they are afraid of the river."

*"The hydraulics after that thing are gnarly. In the ocean, you're going to get a lull eventually. But the river is constantly going. I know a ton of surfers that live in this town, they just won't come down here and surf it because they are afraid of the river."*

Counter before settling in L.A. in 2001. We quickly bond about the flatness back home. The prospect of guaranteed surf here on the Snake was enough to convince him to make the trek back here for the first time in five years.

The underground sport of river surfing undoubtedly originated with landlocked surfers looking for a way to satiate their need for waves. They found a suitable substitute in standing river waves, but with one major difference: River waves never end. Catch one with a traditional surfboard, and the ride can be seemingly endless. River surfers regularly shred waves for two minutes or longer while the average ocean surfer's ride lasts more like 10 seconds. Do the math and it's not hard to understand the draw.

I'm curious to see what sort of characters would be obsessed with riding some sloppy waist-high river wave in the mountains. And how could it possibly compare to riding a real wave? Hell, would I even be able to surf the thing?

**W**HEN WE GET TO THE RIVER it's drizzling—thinking about sleeting. I unload my duffle and start rifling through my gear, pulling out my wetsuit and surf leash, and then my lifejacket and helmet.

"You won't need that stuff, bro," says Murtha. "Really. We never wear lifejackets."

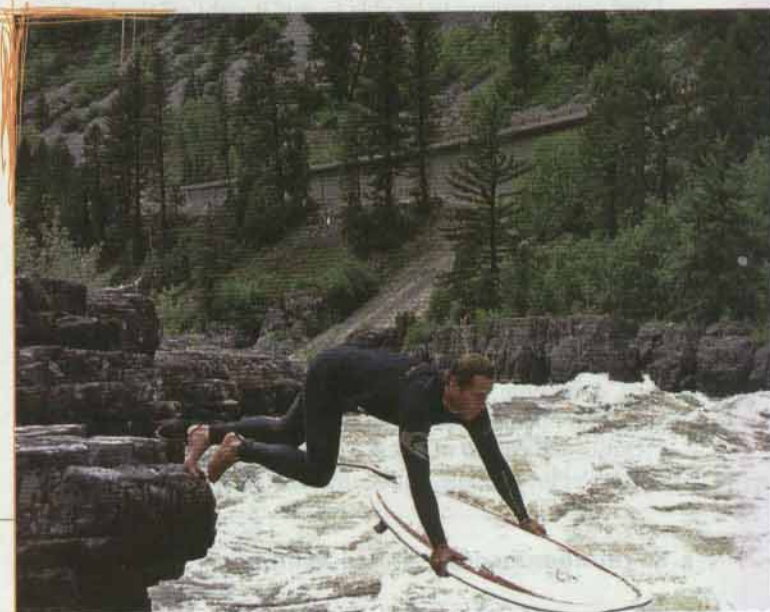
Reluctantly, I toss my safety gear back in the truck and follow the guys down a steep path to the river's edge. In the misting air, we change into our wetsuits. The wind blows stiff and the cold rocks burn my bare feet as I wax up my board.

With an intensity and thoroughness you'd expect from someone describing how to defuse a bomb, he goes on to explain exactly what I need to do to catch the wave. Then he jumps off the rock and straight to his feet. Murtha's turns are powerful and smooth. It's obvious he's grown up surfing—turns out, he started at age 7 back at his summer home on the Jersey Shore.

After about two or three minutes, Murtha turns downriver and lies prone on his board, stroking strongly for shore. Miss the eddy on the left and you're flying downriver, forced to make what's fondly known as a "nature hike" back along the steep banks of loose scree. Not fun, I've been assured.

Familian is next and rides the wave for several minutes. In a pair of waves, they've already logged the equivalent of about two days worth of ocean surfing.

My turn. It takes a small leap of faith to, well, leap off the

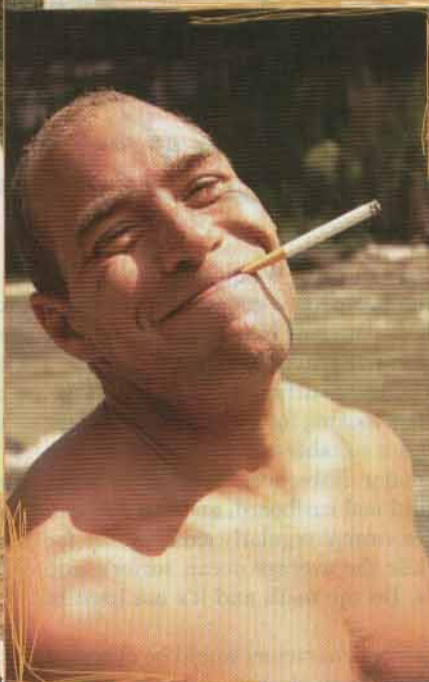
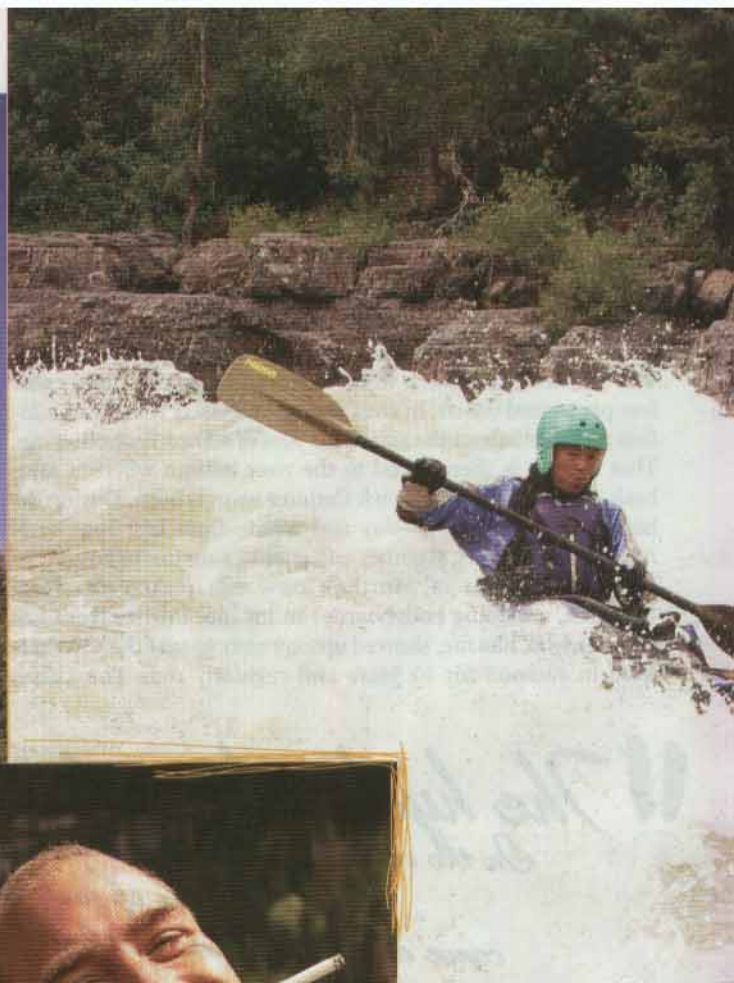




launch pad rock and onto the wave. I'm slightly nervous. And I feel some pressure to be able to surf it right off the bat. I am, after all, the California surfer who came all the way to the mountains to ride this thing.

The river surges, covering my feet then spilling away with an ebb and flow like an ocean tide. The whitewater roars. With a quick breath I dive forward—off the rock and onto my board. I lie flat in the curl for a split-second then pop to my feet, just like on an ocean wave. It takes a couple seconds to process what's happening: The water rockets underneath my board yet I stay in the same spot, facing up river with the wave breaking behind me. I make a quick carve to the open face of the wave on my left and back to the right, banking off the small wall of foam just beside the launch pad. Back and forth. With each turn, I become more aggressive, until I slide out into the smoother open face of the wave.

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice a couple rafts heading downriver towards me. Suddenly, the nose of my board begins to



submerge. I try to shift my weight to the tail. Too late. I hear a hoot from the rocks before I'm sucked under and spat downriver. The water's freezing and takes my breath away as I grab for my leash and pull my board back in. Thankfully, I muscle my way into an eddy on river left behind a big slab of rocks and hoist myself onto a boulder

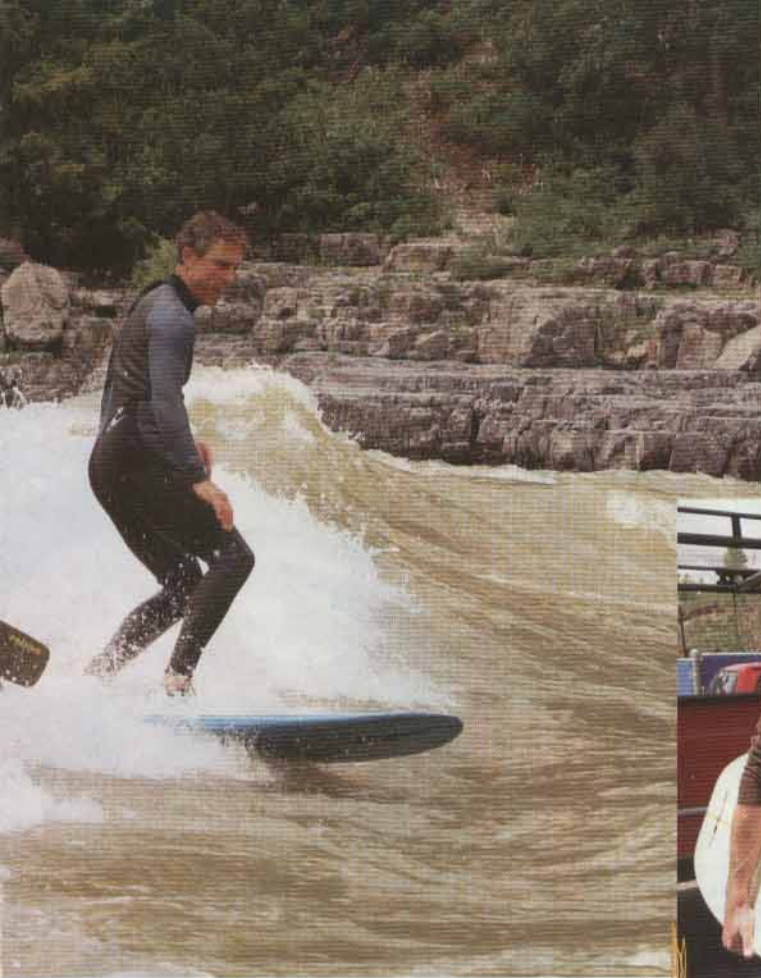
just as the first raft rolls past. A round-faced guy in a red helmet calls out, "Nice day for a swim, huh?"

"Yep!" I yell back. "It actually is."

Hell, I'd only been off the plane three hours and a local surfer had already taken me under his wing and escorted me to his home wave. Sure, it was cloudy and spitting rain, but the mountain-spun hospitality was a welcome change from SoCal and riding the wave was good plain fun.

**LET ME BURST YOUR BUBBLE:** Surfing is not all aloha and barrels and good vibes in the water. Yes, magazines and movies definitely portray it that way, but the sport has a dark underbelly. In overpopulated surf zones like Southern California, Hawaii and parts of Florida, the vibe is more all-for-one than aloha. Waves are a finite commodity and surfing is largely a selfish pursuit.

Back home in San Diego, I'm used to "fighting" for waves.



FROM LEFT: Sarah Kemper and Christine Glissmeyer represent for the ladies. "Familyman," Greg Familian, lights up the scene. "Real surfers don't sit!" When the Lunch Counter is rippin, pro kayaker Benji Thunell trades in his boat for a board.

There's a pecking order in the lineups of the best breaks, and I guarantee you if one of these Wyoming river surfers just showed up one day at my home break they'd be about as welcome as a case of genital herpes. To wit, I wonder how the rest of The Lunch Counter locals will view me. Will I get the "locals only" stink eye or a generous helping of cowboy aloha?

Most of The Lunch Counter locals learned to surf on the river long before they ever set foot in the ocean. Now though, nearly every one of them goes on annual surf trips to places like California, Costa Rica and Mexico. For Murtha, the wave is

*I guarantee you if one of these Wyoming river surfers just showed up one day at my home break they'd be about as welcome as a case of genital herpes."*

just enough to hold him over until he can get away on another surf trip. "Living here you definitely jones for surf," he says. "And I'm not going to say that this wave totally does it for me, but it definitely gets you back into the whole surf vibe."

The Lunch Counter was first surfed in 1976 by Mike "Fitzy" Fitzpatrick, a surfer from Maine who relocated to Jackson. Oddly enough, Fitzpatrick only kayaks now, but that first wave of his birthed a thriving little community of inland surfers in

its wake. Today, there are at least 30 regular Lunch Counter surfers, 20 of whom have their own boards. The local kayak shop, Rendezvous River Sports, sells used surfboards, wetsuits and surf wax (\$2.50 a bar; we pay a buck back home)—the owner even surfs now. And in the summer of 2004, Jackson's first surf shop, Summit Surf, opened its doors. This mountain town's stoke continues to grow, adding at least a handful of new surfers to the scene each year.

As I walk down the trail to start my second day at The Lunch Counter, I notice a pair of surfers already working the wave, which has increased in size overnight to around chest-high. I

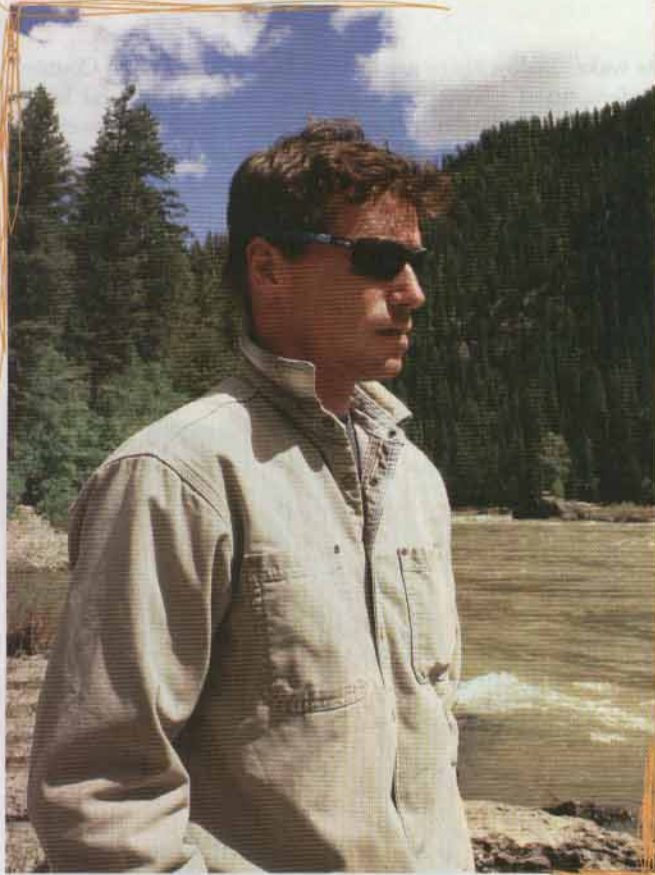
sit on a rock at the river's edge and watch as they attempt 360s and little ollies. Their style looks more rooted in skateboarding or snowboarding than traditional surfing, but they definitely have the wave wired.

Turns out the surfers are actually a pair of sponsored kayakers who switched to the dark side once they tried the wave on a surfboard about six years ago. Now Benji Thunell and Will Taggart, both 29, are fixtures on The Lunch Counter. And when the wave is in full bloom, you won't catch either one of them in a kayak.

They weren't the first—or the last—local kayakers who traded their boats for boards to become part of the Jackson surf scene. "You know deep down inside that as soon as they start

surfing it's all over," Murtha says about the handful of kayakers-cum-surfers he's seen over the years. "I mean it happens to everybody. It's like a virus."

Waiting my turn for the wave, I strike up a conversation with Taggart and Thunell. We're kindred spirits: If I didn't know better it'd be easy to mistake the duo for a pair of SoCal surfers. They've got the look and mannerisms down pat. They're sponsored kayakers from Utah though, and



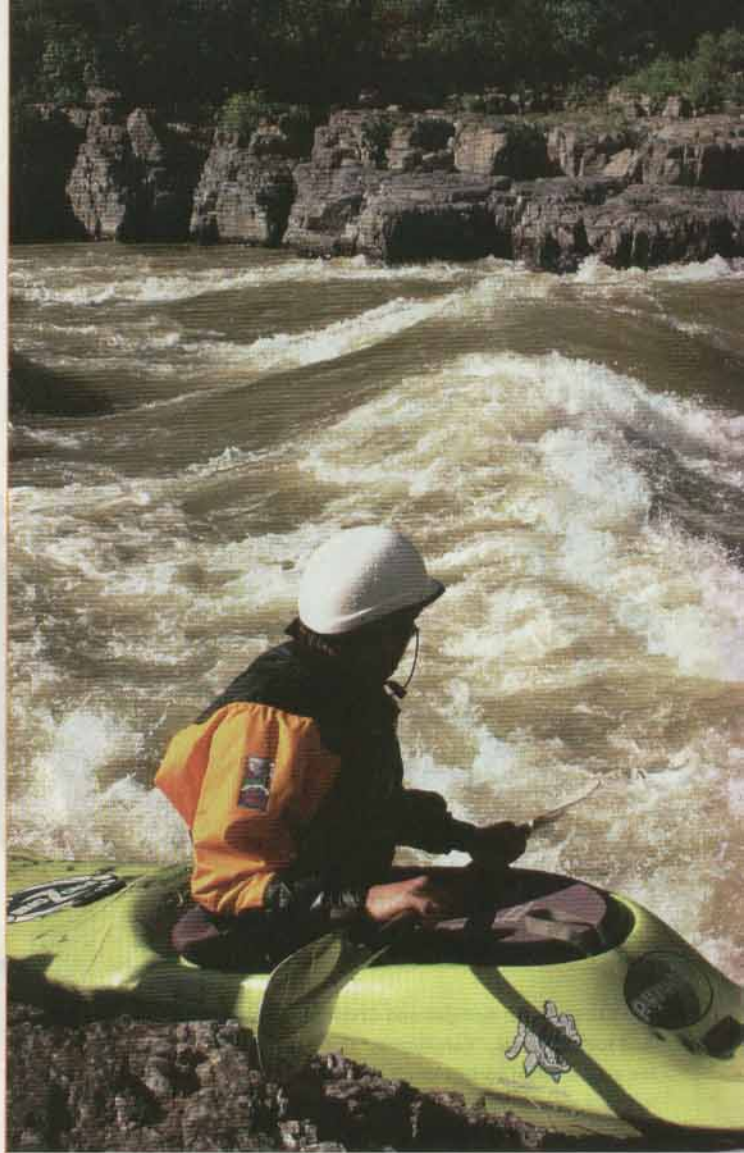
addicted to waves, just not the kind I'm used to. For a couple of summers, Thunell tells me, they even lived in a van near the river so they wouldn't have to make the 20-minute drive to the wave every day.

I catch yet another minute-long wave, and the sun breaks from the clouds. It paints the river with that light you only find high in the mountains. It's warm, maybe 65 degrees, and a gentle wind blows up the canyon, rustling the firs and cottonwoods. Standing on the launch rock, I can see snow-capped Ferry Peak and the Snake River Range lordling over the horizon. For a guy who was battling it out with 30 other dudes in waist-high slop in San Diego just 72 hours earlier, the scene is truly surreal.

Walking back up to the launch pad, I spot a pair of blonde surfer girls pulling on their wetsuits across the river. One is Christine Glissmeyer, 26, another pro kayaker who couldn't resist the draw of surfing. The other, 22-year-old Sarah Kemper, learned to surf here on the Snake two summers ago before moving to the Hawaiian island of Oahu for college. She's been surfing on the island's famed North Shore but swears she still prefers The Lunch Counter: "I like this wave better because it's all people I know and it's less crowded," she says with a smile. "We all know each other and there's no competition or fighting for waves."

As the afternoon sun soars above, surfers continue to filter down to The Lunch Counter. Soon, more than half of Jackson's surfer population is on hand. The occasional kayakers show up to surf a couple on their way downriver, but there's no doubt that the wave is dominated by this crew of local surfers.

Everyone patiently waits their turn on a huge rock shelf that steps down to the river's edge and the launch pad. We hoot the good rides and tease the bad ones. In the midst of it all is 50-



FROM LEFT: Patrick Murtha learned to surf as a kid on the Jersey Shore and now he's shredding the Snake River. "That's right, kayaker. You sit over there on the bank and watch how it's done."

year-old Dave Pennington, one of the old guard. A lifelong surfer, he moved from California to Jackson in the late 70s, and has been surfing The Lunch Counter ever since. By day, he's the town's UPS driver, but down here, Pennington is the resident soul surfer. He smoothly carves his mini-longboard across the wave. No aggression. All flow.

On the wave, Taggart spins his board in a full 360. Lately, he and Thunell have been cutting and sanding down the fins on their boards, Pennington tells me, so they'll release enough to allow for the spins they attempt.

"Man, these guys have gotten so good since I last saw them," says Familian.

Next, a 50-something fellow named R.G. rolls up in a wetsuit that he clearly hasn't worn in quite some time. He calls out to Taggart who had just walked back up to the launch rock queue: "Do you even kayak anymore, Will?"

"Yeah, but not here."

A kayaker floats in from upriver and logs several minutes on the wave. But he's not attempting any maneuvers. Just sitting there. So the surfers start to get restless. Familian hops on his bodyboard, slides out onto the wave, and pushes the kayaker



off The Lunch Counter and downstream. Taggart and his buddy Carson "Snug" King join him on the wave. They manage to ride together for at least a minute before wiping out in a maelstrom of flying boards and body parts. Back home in California, we'd call that a "party wave."

As the day winds down, I soak in the scene. Across from The Lunch Counter—on the road side of the river—surfers warm themselves on the sun-baked rocks. There are lawn chairs and coolers of beer. Every once in a while, hoots or cheers erupt from that side, usually for a particularly good—or bad—ride, but mostly they just sit and talk story. I can't help but think that perhaps these Wyoming wave riders have a better handle on what surfing is really about than the bulk of surfers I know back home.

As I watch guys like Pennington and Taggart make endless turns on the wave, it's obvious they are truly stoked on the simple act of surfing. There's no posing or posturing or territorialism—maybe it's because when the wave is "in" it's there day and night, 24 hours a day, and there's plenty of surf for everyone. These river cowboys just do it for the love of riding a wave. Same reason we surf back home, but here it seems more pure somehow—even if we are 900 miles from the nearest ocean.

**T**HE NEXT DAY, I RETURN TO THE RIVER for one last surf session before catching my plane back to California. Taggart and Snug King join me for a while, but soon they take off, leaving me to surf The Lunch Counter alone. I ride wave after wave with little rest between. After a particularly long one, I decide to paddle back across the river and call it a day.

Hiking back up the hill with my surfboard and dripping wet-suit, I stop and look down through the trees at the wave once again. The river is beautiful, a kind of milky emerald color, and the riverbank is empty. No one's riding The Lunch Counter, but still it keeps perfectly grinding away.

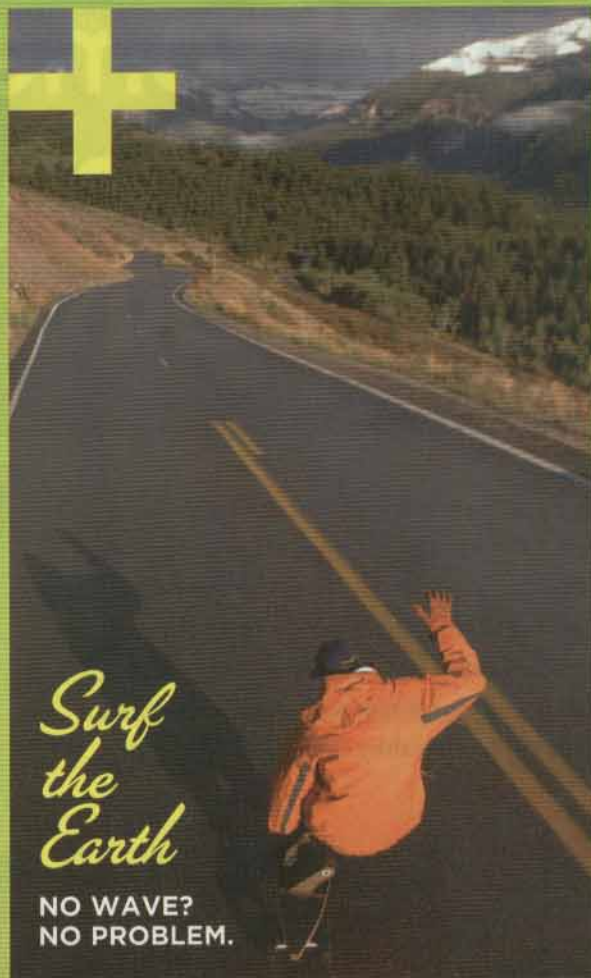
I feel a pang of uneasiness in the pit of my stomach and the

KRISTIN MURPHY

tug of the river pulling me back down the path. *Hell, I probably have time for at least a couple more waves.*

So I turn and begin walking back down the trail. One thing is clear: These river surfers and I worship a similar god. Sure, mine's saltwater and theirs is freshwater, but the stoke comes from the same place. **HOOKEO**

**IF YOU GO:** The Snake River needs to be running at about 7,200 cfs for The Lunch Counter wave to form. Check the flow released from the Jackson Lake Dam and along the river at [www.usbr.gov/pn/hydromet](http://www.usbr.gov/pn/hydromet) or call 800-658-5771. For more beta and gear, stop in at Rendezvous River Sports: 307-733-2471; [www.jacksonholekayak.com](http://www.jacksonholekayak.com).



What's a surfer to do in Jackson, Wyoming, when The Lunch Counter wave is out-of-season? "I don't hike. I don't go rock climbing. I don't do any of that bullshit," says local river surfer Patrick Murtha. "There's no point in me walking to the top of a mountain, looking around, and walking back down. It's just boring." Boring indeed compared to Murtha's activity of choice: skateboarding down Teton Pass at 50 mph. By moonlight, no less. It's actually illegal to skate the Pass, so Murtha and his fellow longboarders wait for the full moon each month to bomb the hill, which is a 4-mile run with five turns and about a 10 percent grade. For a slightly less extreme—and legal—alternative, locals "Skate the Ghee," the hill from Grand Targhee Resort that serves up 2,000 vertical feet of downhill at highway speeds. —M.A.

# CONTRIBUTORS

## Jeremy Collins

In the summer of 2002, artist Jeremy Collins sat next to our photo editor on a flight from Salt Lake City to Denver. When asked if his work was “any good,” Collins quickly replied “better than anything you have in there now.” His brash tactics worked, and his work has been found in our pages nearly every issue since (check out the illustrations for “French Fried Fuel,” on page 21 and “Epic Proportions,” page 41). Collins has a reputation as an artist on the rock as well. “I consider the vertical world a stage for expression, oftentimes via first ascents,” he says. Collins’ rock resume includes climbing the Sierra’s 2,000-foot Incredible Hulk in nothing but a Lycra Spiderman suit; an onsight of Nevada’s *Rainbow Wall* (Grade V, 5.12a); and climbing El Cap’s *Nose* route in a day as his first Yosemite big wall. His art has appeared in *Rock & Ice*, *Trail Runner*, *The Alpinist* and the *Wall Street Journal*.



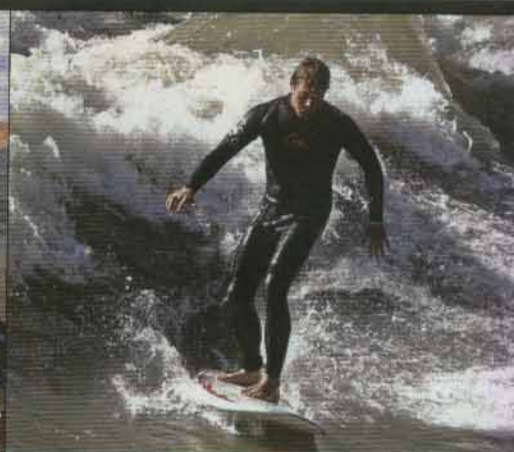
## Dougald MacDonald

Dougald MacDonald had never even run a 10K when he started training for the 2005 Leadville Trail 100 (“Get the Lead Out,” page 47), but last June’s Leadville training camp convinced him he might actually finish the daunting 100-mile footrace in August. “The training weekend is brutal—60 miles in three days—but when you’re running alongside Leadville veterans, you quickly realize it’s your heart and head, not your legs, that will get you to the line,” he explains. A regular contributor to *Hooked*, MacDonald also writes for *Backpacker*, *Climbing* and *Outside* and is the author of *Longs Peak: The Story of Colorado’s Favorite Fourteener* (Westcliffe, 2004).



## Todd Kerbs

“The best part of our once-in-a-lifetime adventure through the heart of Southern Utah had to be when this die-hard Red Sox fan (myself) saw ‘Go Sox’ painted on a rock in the middle of nowhere on Day 4,” says Todd Kerbs, who chronicles his five-day mountain bike ride in “Epic Proportions,” page 41. “And I was the only person to ride a 6-inch-travel Maverick the whole way.” Kerbs is based out of Denver, Colorado, and is a freelance ghostwriter for *Penthouse Forum* as well as a sales rep for several outdoor companies.



## Mark Anders

Wyoming ranks right up there as one of the weirdest surf destinations *Hooked* contributing editor Mark Anders has ever visited (“Surf Wyoming,” page 54). A contributing writer at *Surfer* magazine and contributor to both *Surfing* and *The Surfer’s Journal*, Anders usually covers surf stories in places like Fiji, Mainland Mexico and the fabled North Shore of Oahu—but riding waves in the Cowboy State was refreshing. “The surf at home in San Diego was the flattest it’d been in years, so I was stoked to hop a plane for the Tetons and head straight onto a fun-sized wave,” he says. “More than anything though, I was struck by the warmth and aloha spirit of the river surfers. It was definitely one of the most entertaining surf trips I’ve been on in years.”

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: JEREMY COLLINS; COURTESY MARK ANDERS; LIN ALDER; GREGG ADAMS