

# Coffee with Gierach

Steve Cooper talks to a man about some books.

For John Lawrence Gierach, fly fisherman and author, it is *Another Lousy Day in Paradise*. John is the original *Trout Bum*. The chances are you'll find him fishing *Where the Trout Are All As Long As Your Leg*, *Flyfishing the High Country* or *Fly Fishing Small Streams*. He could be *Standing in a River Waving a Stick*, perhaps talking about *Sex, Death and Fly Fishing* or absorbing the *View from Rat Lake* in *Fool's Paradise* where *Even Brook Trout Get The Blues*.

The names in italics are among John's book titles. Most are still in print and his prolific output continues. His next book, *No Shortage of Good Days*, is due for release in 2011.

John met me in the small town of Lyons; about 30 minutes drive east of Denver, Colorado. Lyons has less than 2000 population yet has two newspapers.

John had given directions to a coffee shop, The Stone Cup Cafe. When I saw the place I knew this was Gierach country. Halloween was two weeks away and already the café was festooned with witches hanging from the veranda, along with a skeletal mad professor. The goat cut-outs at the front door looked real enough and I guessed they were part of the year-round ambience of a café that was once a hippy hang out.

When John arrives he is easy to spot with his outdoor (pockets everywhere) clothing, a wide brimmed hat

with red mosquito wrap band and a traveller's coffee cup in hand. He is a lean, fit looking 64 year old and only the white beard hints at his age.

John has made time for the meeting before heading into the mountains above the Upper Frying Pan River catch-and-release area to hunt elk.

"When I leave here we'll load the horses up," he says, explaining that elk were hunted on foot but horses were used to pack the animals out.

... A SPORTSMAN OF MY  
CALIBRE CAN'T POSSIBLY  
LIVE WITH SOMEONE WHOSE  
DUCKS AREN'T IN A ROW.

"We've been hunting there for deer and elk for 20 some years; we split whatever we get; only in one year nobody got any so it's good odds.

"If we get our animals hung early enough I can drive down to the catch and release stretch of the Frying Pan in half an hour."

John grew up in the Midwest. He was born in a little town in Illinois and his family moved around; he lived in

Ohio and Minnesota, before going to college in Ohio to study philosophy with an English minor.

He moved to Lyons, Colorado in 1968 after graduating from college, was there for a while then lived in New York City for a short time.

"That didn't work out so I came back out here in 1969 and I've been here since," John says.

"I came out of the '60s counter culture thing where everybody was an idealist and I just wanted to do what I wanted to do. It was different then. I didn't worry about making money. We (my generation) figured the world would be over in 10 years. We thought we could live off the land. They were good thoughts and they made for a lot of fun."

As the years rolled by, John continued to have a lot of fun—catching trout. He will fly fish for anything that swims—not necessarily using a bamboo fly rod.

"I am fishing more and more with graphite rods," he says. "I think the breaking point was salmon and steelhead and spey rods; I'm just not going to fish a 14-ft bamboo spey rod."

In *Trout Bum* John tells the story of the cost of being properly outfitted. *I was still married to my second wife at the time, and I can recall the long, serious discussions over the kitchen table at two o'clock in the morning over the relative values of \$300 worth of fly tackle (plus \$80 for a bigger vest to carry it*

# Coffee with Gierach

... continued

all in) and, say, getting the leak in the roof fixed.

The fact that I'm single now only illustrates that a sportsman of my calibre can't possibly live with someone whose ducks aren't in a row.

In the same book he relates: A friend once asked, "How come a guy who dresses in rags and drives a smoky old pickup can afford such snazzy tackle?"

"It should be obvious."

As a fishing writer, John spends a lot of time travelling through the season; as much as two weeks a month for six or seven months.

"There are many one and two day trips and I kind of like it when each trip is over and I get to stay home and write, cut firewood, take long walks and put my feet up."

Life wasn't always like this. To make an income during the early years in Lyons, John did various jobs including driving a garbage truck, logging, cutting firewood and installing insulation.

"Shit, I worked in construction, I did framing, I did deliveries, worked nightshift at convenience stores," he says. "Any job, anything to make some money. The more dumb shit job it was the better because I didn't have to waste all my energy thinking about it. 'Just dig a four foot hole from here to here'. 'Yes sir'."

He tied flies for a while but didn't care for that and he tried his hand at guiding and didn't care for that.

"People don't pay attention; they don't do what you tell them to do," he says. "People you want to guide don't need to hire a guide—it's a weird Catch 22 situation. A good guide is a separate skill."

In his foreword to the 20th Anniversary edition of *Trout Bum*, John wrote that after stopping and starting several jobs: *It became obvious that if I wanted to get competent as a writer – let alone good – I'd have to do it full time instead of with whatever juice was left over after work.*

To that end he developed a subsistence program where he cut his own firewood, raised chickens for eggs, meat and wet fly hackle, tended a vegetable garden, and hunted and fished for some of his groceries.

*This was equal parts practicality and idealism – the direct acquisition of real physical wealth instead of the cold sym-*

*bolism of money – and there was plenty of room to stretch. For instance, if you could shoot a cottontail for dinner (boiling the leftover carcass for soup stock) then tie some fuzzy nymphs with some of the fur and homegrown hackle and use one of them to catch a brace of brown trout, you'd have turned a single .22 bullet into two and a half meals.*

John credits his book *Trout Bum* as the turning point in his writing career. "It wasn't that I did so well after that book right away but people still refer to me as the *Trout Bum* and that was like a quarter century ago.

John says it is difficult to make a living as a fly fishing writer; difficult to this day.

"Nick Lyons (publisher) actually said I was the highest paid fly fishing writer in America but I don't know whether that's true."

And John makes the point that fishing writers "can't make this stuff up. Yeah, you can't do this stuff over the phone, you have to go do it, which is the beauty of it."

One of John's credits is a column called *Sporting Life* in US magazine, *Fly Rod & Reel*. In the autumn issue, he writes about steelhead fishing in Washington State: *There's the story of a local steelheader who's so persistent that he'll pee in his waders rather than stop casting for five minutes to take care of business. It's said that he stinks from stewing in his own juices, but he's widely admired for his purity of intent.*

No wonder, with insights like that, that *Sports Illustrated* magazine once wrote: *If Mark Twain were alive and a modern-day fly fisherman, he still would be hard put to top John Gierach.*

He wrote a newspaper column for 28 years in the *Longmont Daily Times-Call* but these days restricts his newspaper column to the local Lyons paper, *Redstone Review*.

John laughs as he says the *Redstone Review* is "run by the woman I live with, Susan McCann, and she's got this T-shirt that says: *Not tonight honey I have a deadline.*"

He says the column is not about fishing.

"She started out calling it humour, then a couple of them in a row weren't very funny so she changed it to insight. It's social commentary, politics, whatever but it's not fishing," John says.

"I've been writing the column for 10 years now on a monthly basis and it has taught me a tremendous amount about writing.

"You know when you're in a genre you are into all these little shortcuts. There is the assumption that the reader knows what I'm saying. I don't have to explain to you, for instance, what a tippet is; I don't have to explain to you what a barbless hook is.

"But when you are writing for a general audience on more general topics you can't make that assumption. You have to bear down. And you can't make your little inside jokes and your little quips and I think it's probably made me a better writer."

John says he is a writer, not a businessman, and he has an agent.

"I didn't start with an agent. I was up in Montana—I don't know when this was—but I went up, travelling around by myself, camping and fishing and I ended up fishing with Nick Lyons (publisher) and that was where we made the deal to do *Where the Trout are All As Long As Your Leg*.

"And I ended up fishing with Tom McGuane and I think I had just published *Sex, Death and Fly Fishing* with Simon & Schuster.

"Tom said: 'Do you have an agent?' And I said 'No'.

"And he said: 'A, you have to get an agent; and B, this is the time to do it'.

"Tom said agents are like bank loans, once you don't need one you can get a real good one and then Nick turned me on to his agent, Knox Burger.

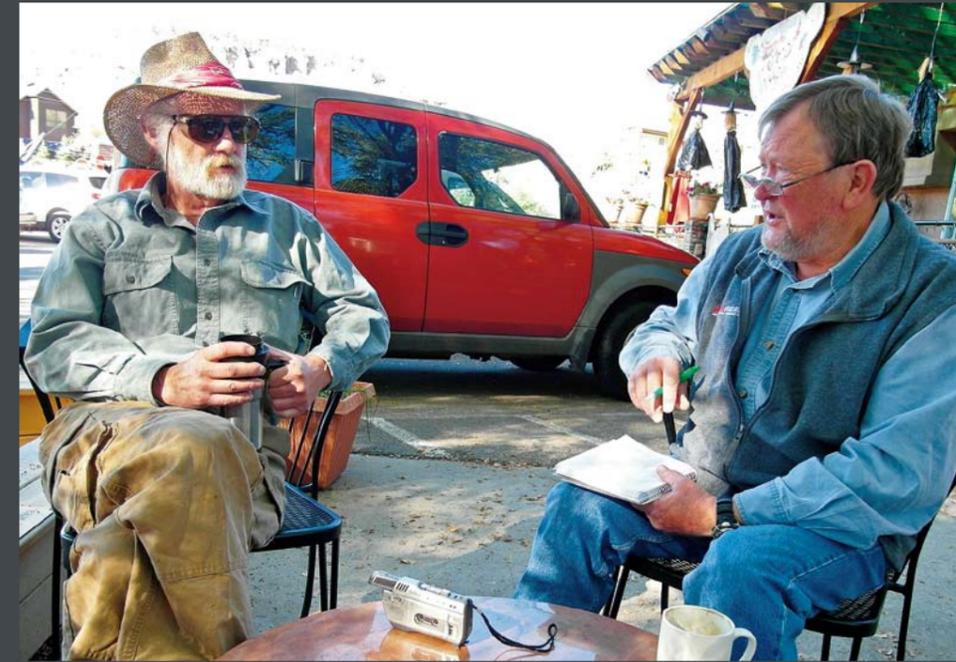
"It was absolutely easy. I mean I've known people who have gone through hell trying to get a decent agent, and it was just people helped me out. Knox died a few years ago and now I am with the woman who was his assistant, Pamela Malpas, who does a great job.

"I wasn't sure an agent was going to do me that much good because I had got what I thought was a decent advance from Simon & Schuster on that book.

"On the next book Knox tripled my advance and got me a few other things... splits on subsidiary rights and foreign rights. At the time I thought 'Gee that's nice but I'll never use that', and now I have Japanese, French and Norwegian editions."

*Death, Taxes, and Leaky Waders* is a collection of John's works that he says he didn't want to do—he couldn't see the point of it because all his books were still in print.

WHAT SANE PERSON  
WOULD SPEND A WHOLE  
DAY WRITING A PARAGRAPH  
THAT READS LIKE IT WAS  
DASHED OFF IN THIRTY  
SECONDS?



"The idea was that I'd been around so long that this was the introduction to potential new readers. My editor called and said the guys in marketing put this idea together, and I said I don't know if I want to do a book that was thought up by the guys in marketing.

"My agent finally called and said 'Yes you do (want to do it)' and he said 'Take the money'. And that's why you have an agent."

In the introduction to this book, John's fishing philosophy comes to the fore: *I think writing is a lot like fishing, especially when it's about fishing as most of mine is. Both take curiosity, persistence, lots of time, some skill, a willingness to put things together in odd ways, an appreciation of the process itself (regardless of how it turns out), and faith that it's all somehow worthwhile. What sane person would spend a whole day writing a paragraph that reads like it was dashed off in thirty seconds? The same kind who'd fish for one big trout all morning just so he can look at it and release it.*

Despite his fame, John has no affiliations with fishing tackle companies.

"I might be able to get sponsorship. It just never has come up. Some people have associations that you don't know about and you read the story but they won't mention their association."

John recalls a meeting with a manufacturer who was making plastic copies of bamboo fly rods: "He wanted me to join the company but I said to

him 'You don't want me to join the company because I don't think you should be making plastic copies of something good'."

"You know, I don't want to join a company. I was always the guy who was sniping at the tackle industry and I guess that they thought well he's got a recognisable name but he just doesn't like us that much.

"I get pro staff purchasing deals where I can buy stuff cheap and occasionally they send me stuff but there is no contract. No agreement or anything."

Jim Cannon, who owns the Blue Quill Angler on the other side of Denver at a small town called Evergreen, told me John had been coming to his shop every December for about 20 years for book signings.

"It doesn't matter how snowed in we are, John always turns up," he said.

And on the subject of fame, in *Fool's Paradise* John tells the story of going to a shoe repair place to have some hiking boots resoled.

*When I gave the man my name for the work order, he said: 'You're the guy who writes that fishin' column in the newspaper, aren't you?'*

*I modestly admitted that yes, it was me, and he turned to the man next to him behind the counter and said, 'Well, the guy wore out a pair of boots, so it can't all be bullshit.'*

John doesn't know how many books he has sold.

"I know *Sex, Death and Flyfishing* is around 150,000 sales in America. It's either that or *Trout Bum*. *Trout Bum* has been out so long in so many different editions and it's in Japan and Norway and France so it's probably one of the two."

John believes sales reflect the power of the book title. "If you can come up with the right title it's as important as coming up with the right book. Yes, it is. And it's not easy, especially when you get this reputation for having this kind of smart ass titles.

"A lot of sales from that book (*Sex, Death and Flyfishing*) were people who would see it and say 'I've got to get this for Dad'."

John is not sure whether he could have made more money doing something other than writing.

"It has cost me a little bit in income and security and that's fine but I want to write and fish and that's what I do all the time," he says.

"People ask if I will retire and I say 'What would I do? 'Go fishing?'

"I'll retire when they pry a rod out of my cold dead hands."

More than 20 years ago US magazine *Rod and Reel*, reviewing *Trout Bum*, said: "The way Gierach tells a story is an act of pure generosity". Nothing has changed. John is a giant of angling literature.

His new book, *No Shortage of Good Days* (Simon & Schuster) is scheduled for release in 2011. **RI**