

Trouble on the Moon

Learning to take one for the team in the face of ridicule.

ADMIT IT: EMBARRASSING things can happen on the water. Ever tip over in a canoe? Be honest. Ever hook your buddy with your cast? Remember the time you showed up streamside with an empty rod tube? Or the day you dropped a lit cigar into your waders? You know what I'm talking about. Those lovely little faux pas in life; moments when you wish you were invisible.

Thankfully, most of those escapades are no big deal. Still, others are capable of whittling away at your credibility. One moment you're the epitome of the experienced fly angler, correctly outfitted, catching fish, and the next moment your friends are pointing fingers and snickering. Oh well. Regardless of how it all goes down, I hope that, sooner or later, you get a laugh out of it. Because those little, life-altering events have a half-life similar to

carbon 14. Believe me, your comrades-in-arms never fully forget, and may elect to remind you without warning. Don't sweat it. Whistle while you wade.

A short time ago I was on the Moon. That's right, the Moon—at least that's what the locals call this spot. Rugged and remote, it's a stretch of coastline requiring an arduous march in tungsten carbide cleats. Exactly the kind of place where you wish you had a lunar rover. At journey's end, you face a series of rocky points and bowls, more often than not blessed with sufficient surf to give any sane fly rodder second thoughts. Still, the moon has its merits. Monster bass love it there.

Around midnight my friend Phil and I suited up, put the gear in the Jeep, and left for this lunarlike location. The night was wicked foggy. And with a tide soon to flood, we knew things would get worse,

perhaps much worse. In fact, when we reached the parking lot, visibility was so bad, we reconsidered the trek. After all, wandering a boulder-strewn coastline in the wee hours is not an activity for the panic stricken. Do it in the fog, and you're in line to earn a high five from elite comandos worldwide.

After an exchange of false bravado, we elected to forge forward, 10-weights in hand. Now, the Moon has many good places to soak a fly, but that night we had a particular one in mind—a quaint spot we called “the Salad Bowl.” It's barely 25 feet in diameter, and because of some curse of current, seaweed stacks at an astronomical rate. So much so that in the back of the bowl, the weeds pile waist high into a wet, gelatinous mass, ripe with an odor only a blue mussel could love.

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STRIPER COUNTRY, BY ARTHUR SHILSTONE



Arthur Shilstone

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That's the bad news. Yet that same curse of current also brings a rich broth of marine life, including bass. Consequently, at times, the Salad Bowl is the Super Bowl.

We couldn't see our noses in front of our faces, so it took us forever to find the bowl. Once we did, Phil got up on a flat rock and began working out some line while I focused my flashlight into suds to see if there was any bait. Bingo, silversides scurried around in the beam, jumping out of the water. Clearly, the stage was set. We could already hear bass popping outside the bowl, and as water rose, we knew those bass would be right at our feet.

In an effort to get close, I climbed over the weed pile, slid down into the water, and waded out toward where the bass were chewing. Nothing much went down for 20 minutes, but you could feel the cool tide coming. Sure enough, the bass began to enter the bowl, hell-bent for leather. Phil got one right off. Then I hooked a doozy, a double-digit fish for sure.

The bass battled, but gradually I got the upper hand. Backing up to the weed pile, I was about to grab my finned adversary—shall we call it a lunar landing? Then I heard a voice ring out.

"Rogue wave! Watch out!" Phil barked.

Peering through the fog, I saw a tall wall of black water capped in white foam. With no time to escape, I was eyeball to eyeball with Mount Fuji. When the wave hit, I instinctually jumped to prevent water from washing over my head. *Wham!* It slammed me square in the chest and lifted me backwards—it was a sudden, albeit brief, flight inland affording sufficient time to consider life's fragility. Next thing I knew—plop—I was stretched out on my back atop the weed pile, the wave retreating around me, and my striper still attached to the line.

At that magic moment, I had at least three decades of fishing under my wader belt. I've pretty much seen it all, and have been fairly lucky dark clouds don't follow me around. I've caught fish standing on shore, seated in a boat, kneeling stream-side. But fighting a fish supine with the soles of my feet aimed toward South America was an entirely new experience.

Luckily, I was unhurt, although my

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precious dignity was in free fall. The burning question, however, was how to best respond to the situation. Fortunately for us all, when the dung hits the fan, we have options. One popular plan is to stay calm and pretend nothing really happened. Frankly, my inner Boy Scout beseeched me to do just that, gracefully get up, and get back to fishing. An alternative approach is to cop an attitude. Curse a blue streak about injustice in the world, dismiss any personal responsibility, and if possible, blame others for your present predicament. Your friends would never allow that, you say? Well, then hit 'em with the 12-bar blues, plenty of moaning and groaning. You might capture the sympathy vote.

Your last option is to cowboy up and milk the situation for all it's worth. That's right; exploit the humor in your predicament. Yes, you'll be poking fun at yourself, no question. But a little self-deprecation never hurt anyone. Besides, your angling buddies will love your willingness to roll

with the punches. That's what I decided to do at that humiliating moment. Flat on my back atop the weeds, I continued fighting the fish without uttering a word.

"Hey, man, what's up? You all right?" Phil inquired.

"Yeah, getting this fish under control," I replied as if it were business as usual.

Phil instantly recognized that I was hamming it up and began laughing. Then on cue, my bass furiously frothed up the water, zipping off line as it zoomed around the bowl. More laughter ensued.

"Dude, this is a good fish," I announced, trying my best to sound serious.

Phil stopped casting and looked over, continuing to laugh in disbelief. "What the hell is going on over there?"

"I'm fighting a fish, for Pete's sake!" I jokingly exclaimed.

By now, Phil was beside himself. "Get up!" he admonished with amusement.

"Can't you see I'm busy? Record your message after the tone. Or press pound for more options."

Our laughter echoed in the fog. Sliding off his rock, Phil started in my direction. I sat up, reeled in the fish, removed the fly, and released the striper into darkness. Then quietly inhaled a lungful of fog. Ugh.


"Man oh man, that was some rogue wave! Thing was huge. And it came out of nowhere!" Phil yelled while walking up.

"Yeah . . . Tell me about it. Couldn't get away," I grinned.

"I saw it pick you right up. You get wet?" He chuckled.

"Soaked from head to foot," I answered.

"Let's get out of here," Phil wisely suggested.

With flashlights painting the way, we stumbled through darkness worthy of Hades. It took us half an hour to reach the road. During the journey, however, Phil periodically shattered the silence with bouts of belly laughter. Has he ever forgotten me lying atop that weed pile? Not a chance. To this day, he brings it up. "Remember that rogue wave? The one that knocked you over in the Salad Bowl?" I'll never live it down. 

Ed Mitchell's website is www.edmitchelloutdoors.com. His latest book is *Along the Water's Edge*.