

Jeff Currier *global fly fishing*

Rob Merrill remembered as a passionate fisherman.

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by Rachael Horne



There is little doubt Rob Merrill died doing what he loved. The fly fisherman was remembered this week as passionate and enthusiastic. A boating accident on the Snake River Sept. 1 claimed his life.

The body of the 49-year-old Victor resident and fishing guide was found Friday afternoon between the Heise Reservoir and Twin Bridges on the South Fork of the Snake River, almost 30 miles from where his boat capsized last

Wednesday evening near Swan Valley at the Spring Creek boat ramp.

About 50 rescuers responded Wednesday evening and officials dropped the level of the river from 8,000 to 6,000 cubic feet per second to aid recovery efforts. The drift boat was found submerged under five feet of water and upside down, officials said. Merrill was wearing rubber chest waders and no life jacket.

Friends and clients remember Merrill as someone with a big heart and a passion

for fishing.

“Rob was the kind of person who probably had one of the biggest hearts of any person I’ve ever known,” said friend and colleague Rob Waters. “He cared more about everyone else more than himself.”

Waters worked with Merrill for the last 15 years, most recently at the Three Rivers Fly Shop in Driggs. Waters said Merrill helped give him his start in the sport as a guide. He described Merrill as a guy who would drop everything to help someone. If someone was at the river and needed help, Merrill would close up shop and drive to wherever they were, Waters said.

Merrill managed the fly shop in Driggs for the past six-and-a-half years. Tuesday, two clients from California said they considered Merrill a friend, even though they only came into the shop a few times a year. The woman, who didn’t want to give her name, said Merrill was always encouraging her to go fishing, even in the middle of winter. The two clients said they would light a cigar in Merrill’s honor Saturday at 6:30 p.m. since they wouldn’t be able to make the memorial service planned here in the Valley. The two said they would often buy small cigars from the shop.

Waters was working at the shop Wednesday before the accident and said he had a bad feeling about the day. It was cold, cloudy and snow had fallen at upper elevations. The temperatures had dropped significantly and Waters said Merrill was having a hard time deciding what flies to take and ended up taking 45 to 50 different kinds so that he’d be ready for anything. Waters said they even talked about rescheduling the trip, but Merrill, ever the optimist about fishing, said they’d be fine.

Waters said one of the clients he was guiding that day had gotten a line wrapped around an oar. Merrill took the oar out of the lock and before everything was

situated the boat was about to slam into the bank. Waters said a log in front of a willow bush caught and flipped the boat. It was a “yard sale,” after that, Waters said.

The clients, Robert George and Barbara Roberts of Florida, both in their 60s, survived the accident. George was pulled from the water by a guide in another drift boat while Roberts was able to make it to shore. Both were treated by Swan Valley emergency responders and released.

Merrill was a seasoned fly fishing guide for Three Rivers Ranch. Waters said he was the first American to guide on the Kolpakova River in Russia. He described pictures of Merrill with Russians who had rocket launchers on their backs. He said Merrill had a weird smile on his face in those pictures, sort of questioning if he was going to make it out of there alive. Merrill has been all over the world fishing and called the Tetons home for the last 20 years.

He also battled bladder cancer for three years and survived.

Waters said Merrill loved fishing and to spread his love to others. Often he would use his days off to show someone how to fish or work on their skills at no cost.

“Sometimes he’d even take you to his secret spots,” said Waters.

An informal memorial service for Merrill will be held at the Timberline Bar and Grill in Victor Saturday, Sept. 11 from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. Waters said it will be a chance for people to get together, toss back a few drinks and talk about the good times.