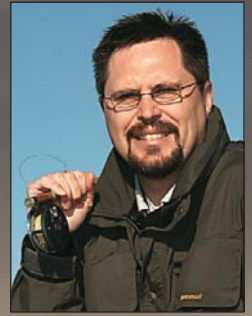


back cast

By Ron Wilson



As the sky darkens and lightning hopscoches across prairie hilltops, I put my back into the oars of my pontoon boat, cussing between strokes for staying on the water too long. But, man, the fishing was just getting good as the mood of the fish matched the enthusiasm of the building storm.

Finally on shore, I load my boat and worm out of chest waders as the first raindrops tap the bill of my cap. I quickly turn my pickup around and park in a draw facing the lake, thinking it's likely the safest place to be this far from home if things get really hairy.

The wind isn't here yet, but it's coming. I can still see fish feeding, eating tiny insects within casting distance of where I'm sitting. The trout leave rings on the water's surface just like the raindrops, but only bigger. I eat cold chicken wings and wipe greasy fingers on an old fishing shirt that should be retired or maybe burned.

The rain is coming harder now and the wind is right behind it. The trout rings are gone, replaced by whitecaps that would be having their way with my inflatable pontoon if I were still out there.

It's a horizontal world outside now. The rain no longer falls straight down, but is blowing parallel to the ground. The tops of Russian olive trees lay nearly flat as if temporarily surrendering to Mother Nature.

I increase the windshield wiper speed and notice cliff swallows dipping and diving into the teeth of the wind. How they're able to continue their hunt for insects in this nonsense is beyond me. The birds weigh just ounces and should seemingly have been blown to the next township by now, but instead they carry on.

For a second the swallows make me feel like a wimp for

riding out the storm in my pickup, eating chicken and listening to a ballgame on satellite radio. But I snap out of it knowing how ridiculous it would be to be running around during a thunderstorm and casting a 9-foot boron rod as lightning dances across the prairie.

When the cliff swallows finally do tire, they'll retreat to gourd-shaped mud nests they've constructed in the picnic shelter near where I've pitched my tent. The nests are further testament to the grit of these birds as each structure, I remember reading somewhere, is made up of 1,000 or more mud pellets, each marking a trip to and from the nest.

I don't know how long it takes for a pair of swallows to build a nest or how long it takes for the mud to dry before it's inhabitable, but I do know it took me less than 15 minutes to pitch my tent and roll out a pad and sleeping bag.

There's maybe two hours of the day left and I want the storm to end. I want to fish again. I'll fish on foot this time, wading through shallow water and the same mud holes the swallows repeatedly frequented to build their nests.

Yet, before the storm passes, it puffs its chest and lets slip with one more act of bravado, sending my tent's rain fly on a short, straight-line trip into some bushes. The damage is minimal, if I discount a few missing metal stakes and one tent pole that now resembles a recurve bow. I collect rocks from a fire ring to shore up the shelter, then poke my head inside before going fishing to see how soggy my night's sleep will be.

As I make my way to the lake, I watch the cliff swallows continue their uninterrupted bug hunt. It's impossible to tell how successful they are as their prey is tiny, but I have to imagine they're catching their share, which is about all any of us can hope for.