

# Wounded Veterans San Juan Float Trip

The sky is dark and the temperature cold as we head out on the first day of our 6th annual Wounded Veteran's San Juan River Float Trip. This annual trip is sponsored by the White Mountain Fly Fishing Club. There are over 20 Veteran alumni, including this year's participants!

We are about to enter the waters of the San Juan River located in northwest New Mexico, a "Blue Ribbon" river for rainbow and brown trout. The cold air will quickly turn warm as the sun rises over the valley.

Two of our three Veteran guests have never fished before, let alone fly fished! I can sense some nervousness as they and their guide dogs get set to enter the float boat with their guide. The third Veteran guest is a member of our club's Healing Waters program which is a nationally recognized program that uses fly fishing as a tool for healing.

Our journey will be two full day float trips on the San Juan River. It is a journey we have taken with many Veterans, male and female, over the past 5 years. We have had as few as two and as many as 6 Veterans participate on our trips. Some have flown directly from Walter Reed Hospital, others from Phoenix area and Show Low. Each Veteran volunteered to participate and no matter what their physical or psychological situation may be, they have all experienced a common healing/calming denominator - the beautiful river and the thrill of catching a trout.

Once the Veterans and their guides are on the river they are in their own world, the only goal to catch a brown or rainbow trout. Fortunately, all caught fish on the first day! Or I should say the fish "caught them". There are not many other experiences that can take your mind from wherever it may have been like feeling a strong trout hit your fly line. Whatever issues our Veterans may have or are experiencing in their personal lives are completely put on hold as they feel the fish pulling.

One Veteran stated it best, "The tug is the drug!" They are at one with one of nature's greatest thrills. There is something about nature and the effect it has on us that brings peace of mind and stability to our over stimulated every day lives. Other past Veteran participants have stated:

"War has over stimulated our senses negatively, nature on the other hand, over stimulates our senses positively."

"I am proud to say my experience has been life changing. I was really lost when I first was a participant on your trip. The river and you gentlemen exposed me to the most influential tool to my individual recovery: the river and connecting with nature."

As you can see, this experience has a powerful impact on the Veterans. It also impacted some of our White Mountain Fly Fishing Club members so much that they have donated funds to help purchase a float boat which was named "Float for the Fallen" (see photo). This boat continues to serve our Veterans year round on the San Juan and is actually guided by a past Veteran participant in our program. This truly is "passing it forward" and helping our Veterans heal.

After our two days of fishing the San Juan and reflecting on the "big one" that got away, our Veteran guests, volunteer guides, and club members now share a common bond that only the San Juan River and nature could forge. New friendships and adventures are shared at our final dinner. What started out as an unknown adventure is now a very comfortable experience shared by all.

A very special "Thank You" to all our donors, club members and volunteers past, present, and future, who have helped make this program so meaningful to our Veterans.

Also, I would like to encourage you to think about trying the sport of fly fishing. It is not just a great therapy for our Veterans.

The Veteran San Juan Float Trip adventure is already scheduled for next year, October 9 - 12, 2017. If you would like more information, make a contribution, and/or participate, please contact:

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