COMMERCIAL FISHING IMPACTS ON STEELHEAD

Trey Combs

[With this issue The Osprey welcomes Trey Combs to its growing list of contributors. Unless you are very new to the sport, you will know him as author of Steelhead Fly Fishing and Flies, (1976) and The Steelhead Trout (1971), recently reprinted. He is presently completing a third book -- you guessed it -- on steelhead: on important rivers and the people who fish them; and on flies, tackle, and innovations.]

I was not until our third day on the Dean River in British Columbia that I caught a steelhead that bore fresh gillnet wounds. My companions, John Farrar, Jim Honeycutt, and Bruce McNair, were also locating such fish with their flies. These steelhead were almost entirely bucks of approximately 12 pounds. We reached four steelhead in the 20-pound range and all were pristine. This was just a matter of luck, for the nets do not discriminate.

These mutilated steelhead were not unexpected. Our seven-day permits were for the second week in August, and the chum salmon fishery at the entrance of Dean Channel was well advanced. (No commercial netting is allowed in the channel itself.) Here miles of nearly invisible monofilament gillnets with a 6 1/2- or 6 3/4-inch mesh are set in the path of steelhead bound for the Dean.

When a Canadian commercial fisherman sells his catch to a fish buyer, he notes the statistical area from which the fish came. Failure to do so can result in the loss of his license. This data includes steelhead, because when ocean-caught they can be sold commercially. Most Dean steelhead are caught in Area 8 Commercial Salmon Fishery.

While steelhead may be canned as "sea trout," "deep-sea trout," or simply as steelhead, most are sold fresh, in the same price range as coho salmon. However, an executive with B.C. Packers told me of steelhead selling in deli markets for as much as $15 per pound.

All saltwater fish in Canada -- and this includes salmon -- are under the authority and management of the Ministry of Fisheries and Oceans, a federal agency. Conversely, all freshwater fish -- and this includes steelhead in rivers -- are managed by the Ministry of (Continued on page 2.)

Quickly...

The word from most Washington and Oregon rivers is of greatly reduced run sizes and fair to poor fishing. In Puget Sound rivers this was expected, to some extent, because two years ago hatchery eggs and juveniles were destroyed when found to contain IHN disease. But reports from elsewhere are bad, too. Good numbers of fish are headed for the upper Columbia and Snake, though fishing in the lower Columbia tributaries has been disappointing, so far. The Willamette, however, lost about 80 percent of its juvenile hatchery fish due to excessive temperatures when planted as smolts.

The worst news is from the North Fork of the Stillaguamish. Three years ago, the State Department of Natural Resources sought to rectify the infamous slide at tiny DeForest Creek, a tributary of Deer Creek, home of the famous run of wild summer steelhead. They obtained a plan from a private consulting firm and, against advice of many, extensively graded the headwalls of the slide area but put no check dam or filter blanket in place. With the rains of October, there came a massive blowout. The substantial run of adult fish was staged within a mile downstream. Forty dead fish were found and others presumed buried in silt. By the end of August, 1989, only one confirmed Deer Creek fish was caught and released. Appropriately, Walt Johnson caught it. "But it takes two to tango," Walt noted, sadly. . . .

When federal agents seized salmon illegally taken by a Taiwanese fishing boat recently, The Seattle Times reported that among the 38 salmon were two steelhead from (Continued on page 3.)
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(Continued from page 1.)
Environment, a provincial agency. Information gained on steelhead is not always shared between these two agencies, sometimes because of their separate nature, and sometimes by design. But beyond any internecine mixing of provincial and federal politics is the fact that ocean steelhead fall into a grey area, and are not the direct management responsibility of anyone. This is astonishing, considering the fact that more steelhead are killed incidentally in Canada's Pacific Ocean than are killed by licensed anglers fishing in British Columbia rivers.

Steelhead generally make up a very small portion of the total commercial take of salmonids. In Area 8, during the period that gillnets took 200,000 chum salmon, seine nets accounted for 8,000,000 pink salmon and 250,000 chum salmon. These are staggering totals compared to the suspected take of 10,000 steelhead, and the recorded commercial take of 2,478 (1988). There are a number of reasons for the disparity. If only a few steelhead are found in the nets, they often end up on the galley stove, home canner, or smokehouse. This practice may be more common when the steelhead have a lower market value than targeted salmonids, such as chinook and sockeye. Some of the steelhead caught in June and July are kels, either Dean summer-run or Bella Coola winter-run steelhead. They have virtually no market value. It is also likely that a steelhead here and there is tossed in with the salmonids -- kels, for example -- during a canning run. But far more significantly, not all Dean steelhead are caught in Area 8, nor do all the steelhead caught in Area 8 have Dean-River origins. Thousands of steelhead caught in commercial nets are simply trawling the area. For example, it is known that Thompson-River stock arrive at the Fraser River either by entering the Queen Charlotte Strait and coming down the inside of Vancouver Island, or by entering the Strait of Juan de Fuca, between Washington and Vancouver Island.

When I returned to my home in Port Townsend, Washington, I contacted Fisheries and Oceans in Vancouver and spoke with Maureen Kostner. She was able to provide me with charts and a complete commercial catch record for all steelhead caught in Canadian waters, week by week, for each statistical area over a two-year period. The monthly totals on the Dean (1988) were as follows: June 2 to July 1, 755; August 721; September 0. Far more revealing were the weekly totals, beginning July 5 and running through August 15. These were as follows: 246, 432, 487, 590, 511, 210. It was obvious that the Dean run peaked over a three- to four-week period from mid-July to the first week in August. Using this kind of information, it has been possible to move the commercial fleet from areas steelhead intensely traffic, provide open periods ("windows") with no commercial fishing for the preservation of steelhead stocks during peak escapements, and prevent seine netters from tying to the beach and intercepting steelhead where they favor travelling along shores.

I had extensive discussions with Jack Leggett, Section Head, Caribou Fisheries, and Dennis Wilgers, Fisheries Technician, in Williams Lake, B.C., regarding their ongoing sonic-tag program. This consists of capturing steelhead in Dean Channel, fin-clipping them, and putting a 3-1/2-inch-long stainless-steel tube -- the sonic tag -- down their throats. The steelhead are then released and tracked 24 hours a day, even after they have entered freshwater. (Anglers are asked to kill any fin-clipped steelhead and return the $100 sonic tag.) Leggett determined that steelhead usually travel in the upper four feet of water and within 100 to 300 feet from shore.

A study by Steve Cox-Rogers, Scale Pattern Analysis of Skeena River Steelhead Trout (Salmo gairdneri) Harvested Incidentally in the Area 4 Commercial Salmon Fishery: 1984-1985, must also be mentioned. The author demonstrated through analysis of scale samples that the river origins of steelhead in the Skeena drainage could be determined with fair to good accuracy while the races were mixed and still in salt water. This information is contributing to a remarkably clear understanding of how and when various racial stocks of steelhead proceed through Canadian coastal waters.

A commercial fishing friend called me later that summer to tell me about a 19-pound steelhead he had caught in a gillnet set for sockeye just south of Washington's San Juan Islands. This particular fish was kept, hidden, and cooked before I could obtain scale samples. (He nets a few very large steelhead this way each season, though he once caught more than a dozen in a single night.) I have heard stories of 20 or more steelhead caught each summer night for several days by a single boat along the north coast of the Olympic Peninsula. I am convinced that at least some of these steelhead are Thompson River stock.

Gary Mittenberger, who has waged a long and courageous fight to save Skeena steelhead stocks from commercial nets, told me of immense numbers of steelhead caught in gillnets in extreme South-East Alaska. I have spent weeks in this area, and there is not the slightest doubt in my mind that many of these steelhead are bound for the Skeena system. It is illegal in Washington and Alaska for a non-Indian to catch, kill, possess, or sell a commercially-caught steelhead. Steelhead are managed as gamefish. This is a fine thing, except that when caught in gillnets they usually are brought in dead. Thrown away, they contribute absolutely nothing to our understanding of their ocean movements. But if the fisherman retains them, he is breaking the law. This is a lose/win situation.

I propose that Washington and Alaska commercial fishermen be allowed to keep steelhead incidentally caught in gillnets if brought in dead, with these two provisos: the fish could not be sold commercially, and the exact location of the fish would be
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be recorded. (Almost all boats now have LORAN (3) masts) samples of the fish were removed and sent to the appropriate state agencies, (4) these agencies would fund

FIRST DEER CREEK ENHANCEMENT EFFORT

[Wall Johnson is a steelhead fly fishing pioneer and was fishing our waters with the dry fly and mudge rod at the same time Lee Wulff was fishing in Canada for Atlantic salmon. Wall developed a series of beautiful, complex flies in the Spey Style tradition, which are now widely used. Additionally, he is a master trout fisher and holds the Washington State record for the biggest sea-run cutthroat. We’d like to take this occasion not only to welcome him as a contributor but to publicly acknowledge and thank him for his donation of flies to the FFF auction in behalf of the Steelhead Committee, which brought us $500 worth of funding, the approximate cost of printing and mailing a single issue of The Osprey.]

For several years, back in the mid-1940s, the Washington Fly Fishing Club had been alarmed by the extensive fishing for downstream migrant steelhead in the North Fork of the Stillaguamish River. Many innocent anglers, presuming that they were angling for small resident rainbows in feeder streams and the Stilly itself, were taking their toll. This prompted the club to request the adoption of a fly-only closure by the Game [now Wildlife] Commission as an experiment in conservation. It was the first of its kind ever attempted on a steelhead river and it was met with remarkable success.

At the same time, Deer Creek was closed to provide a sanctuary for summer runs. The main North Fork above Deer Creek was a beautiful stream with good spawning areas which were utilized only by winter runs. There was a troublesome clay slide which caused a salty condition when the river was high. Steps to remedy this were unsuccessful. Some believe that the colored water protected the fish and helped maintain the run, while others thought it was detrimental to spawning and rearing conditions. Perhaps the summer fish favored the waters of Deer Creek because of the silting condition of the Stilly itself. At any rate, extreme fishing pressure along the holding water below the mouth of Deer Creek for several miles downstream has always existed, particularly during the hot summer months. Liquid water, when steelhead are unable to ascend into the protected waters of the creek due to its low flow.

a clearinghouse for this vital information. Data collected in Washington and Alaska would contribute greatly to an understanding of the movements of steelhead to our waters and more accurately determine escapements in participating states and in British Columbia.

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Washington hatcheries. This was not exactly accurate, according to Rolland Schmitten, regional director of the National Marine Fisheries. Actually, four steelhead were recovered among 42 fish seized. Two were wild steelhead and two were from Washington state hatcheries. The article said they were tagged with coded wires but they weren’t. All four fish are being tested genetically to identify their parent stocks and rivers. Schmitten said that the science is now accurate enough to accurately identify genetic profiles of river origins of both salmon and steelhead. When the parent rivers of these fish are established, he will notify The Osprey and we will let you know. He said that huge numbers of steelhead are being taken. The total bag of salmon and steelhead exceeds the combined commercial and sports catch of these fish. He and his department are pledged to do all they can to halt this illegal interception. As we go to press, there is word of a pact that will put transponders on Taiwanese fishing vessels to allow satellite tracking of the squid-fishing fleet. . . .

On the other hand, according to the UW Fisheries Research Institute (FFI), the Japanese are trying to cooperate with U.S. officials and establish that they are not illegally netting our fish. To this end, they have carefully tagged and released salmon and steelhead caught on the high seas or in their waters. When these tags are recovered, valuable data about migration routes and distances of various stocks of fish is learned.

For instance, a 31-inch tagged steelhead was caught in March 1989 in the Soleduck river near Forks. The Japanese research vessel Eisun Maru had tagged it on June 17, 1988, 3,700 miles from the Washington coast. Kate Meyers of the FFI says a 21-inch summer-run caught by a plunker on a Columbia River bar last August 21 had been tagged 37 days earlier 1,700 miles away. Thus, it had traveled an average of 46 miles a day. (If they could swim like that, no wonder they fight so well.)

Two types of tags are in use, small, flat red and white disc used by the Japanese and SRI, and a four-inch tube used by the Canadian Pacific Biological Station. Both are attached above the dorsal. Contact FFI if you catch a fish bearing either tag . . . .

The FFF’s Washington Steelhead Committee met in August and formed goals for the protection of wild steelhead. General policy is to work for the release of all wild steelhead statewide and a ban on steelhead months. However, from a practical standpoint, it was decided to push for wild steelhead release.

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DEER CREEK (Continued from page 3.)

Department in the experiment. In the summer of 1945, 72 mature fish were trapped in Deer Creek. From this original lot, a loss of 42 fish resulted from the trap and from handling. The surviving fish were transported to the Arlington Trout Hatchery nearby, where they were placed in holding ponds to await their spawning time, many months away.

Out of their native habitat, they proved to be wild and unmanageable. Regularly, they attempted to leap out of the ponds and the hatchery attendants had to place covers over the ponds to restrain them. Of the 72 fish trapped, 30 survived, 17 males and 13 females. Two females proved to be unproductive. In the spring of the following year, 1946, 35,340 eggs were taken and artificially fertilized; from these eggs, 22,628 fry were reared to about two years of age. They were beautiful little fish, and we all hoped they would grow up to be five- to eight-pound packages of dynamite.

Now came the slow, tedious job of tagging and fin-clipping the fingerlings so they could be identified when and if they returned. They were marked according to where they would be planted. A small red celluloid tag was inserted into the body cavity just above the anal fin. First, an incision was made with a special instrument and the tag inserted with tweezers. The combination of cold spring weather and slippery trout made the job difficult. We had to marvel at the calm efficiency with which the fish biologists did their job. Each tag had a number, as well as the inscription, "Return to the Washington State Department of Game."

Through special arrangement with the Department of Fisheries, which has jurisdiction over salmon, 550 steelhead fingerlings were placed in Miner Creek, a small stream that flows into Puget Sound, where facilities permitted an accurate count of downstream migrants. They were marked with clipped adipose and left ventral fins. Later, 45 of these fish passed through a special screen where they were counted. The rest of the fish were destined for the Stilly system.

April 10, 1948, was a cold, dreary day, with a steady drizzle. Members of the fly club and Game Department personnel met at the Arlington Hatchery to start the long trip into the wild upper reaches of Deer Creek by truck. In the tanks of the big truck milled 4,950 restless steelhead fingerlings, 6 1/2 to 9 inches long. About 60 percent of them had smolted and showed definite migratory characteristics — shiny loose scales, puffed black tail band, etc. After about fifteen miles of rough going over secondary roads used for logging, the truck rolled to a halt. Below us could be heard the rumbling of a swift cascade. After a careful check to see that all was well with our charges, a bucket brigade was formed. Down over the steep, slippery rocks, bucket after bucket was relayed, until all the fingerlings were put gently into the clear water. We planted them in two different locations, where the stream temperatures were 39 and 40 degrees F., and watched with great concern as the confused fish sought shelter behind small boulders. When and if they returned as adults, would some of us be fortunate enough to catch them? Besides the missing adipose fins, they carried tags marked #1-2, we all knew.

Other tributaries soon received their own plans. On April 20, Squire Creek, a tributary upstream from Whitehorse, received 4,655 fish; the water temperature had warmed to 44 degrees. These had adipose and right ventral fins removed and weighed 15 to the pound. About 40 percent had smolted. Next, Brown's Creek, a tributary of Squire Creek, received a plant of 11,764 fish. The water temperature was 47 degrees and they weighed but 47 to the pound, which put them in the fry class. Only an occasional one showed migratory coloration; 509 unmarked fish were also planted in Brown's Creek. The job was done. Now we waited for results.

The water was receding after the first Spring rains in 1949. An angler stepped into the current of the Elbow Hole, a mile below the mouth of Deer Creek. He began casting a large, bright bucktail into the cold water, searching every inch. Another step, another cast. Would the planted fish return as big, healthy adults? The fly swung around over the boulders on the bottom and hung there, lifelike, probing the depths. Suddenly the line grew taut, the reel screamed, and the rod jerked violently downward. A silvery form hung momentarily suspended in the air and fell back in a shower of spray. The angler regained the gravel bar and gathered in line lost a moment ago. He matched each run with all the skill he could muster. Minutes later, the long snowy form of silver and pearl slid unwillingly onto the gravel beach. The fly no longer was a thing of beauty and hung frayed and torn from the steelhead's jaw.

The angler bent low to inspect his fish, a light shining in his eyes. There was the telltale mark he was searching for! The missing adipose and right ventral fin told him that this was a Squire Creek fish. It weighed close to four pounds, after only one year at sea. He gently returned the fish to the water, knowing that it was the realization of all his work, hopes, and dreams. All seemed right with the world: the man had helped nature in his small way to complete the vital biological cycle.

During 1949 scattered returns were tabulated. The Minter Creek Hatchery reported one fish on March 31; on the next day, a three-year-old female weighing approximately six pounds was observed. On the 21st of August, a 21 1/2 inch male fish, weighing 3 1/2 pounds. Six or seven early fish were taken on flies in the Stilly, some having Squire Creek markings and other ones marks from Deer Creek. How many planted fish escaped the anglers' flies and went on to spawn is unknown. But the experiment proved that steelhead enhanced from their own stocks will survive and return. This experiment may have led the way to the (Continued on page 5.)
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development of specialized hatchery stocks from other rivers, including the Skamania Hatchery on the Washougal that provides summer-run juveniles to be planted in other rivers of the state. And, of course, those fish are now widely planted throughout the nation and the world.

By the 1960s, many changes had occurred to thwart the steelhead's chances for survival. The steadily increasing population in the Puget Sound area produced a great number of anglers. Naturally, they wanted to catch the great game fish, the steelhead trout. The riffles of the Sully below Deer Creek became more crowded. River habitat began to deteriorate. The market for logs increased greatly and clearcut logging moved up the valley of Deer Creek. There were no forest practices rules and regulations then, and landowners were permitted to cut timber right down to the stream's edge. Reduced flows of late summer made possible the tractor yarding of logs across the tributaries of Deer Creek and, in certain wide, shallow spots, the creek itself. Silt flowed into the river with every rain and Deer Creek became slower to clear afterwards. Logging moved onto the steeper slopes of Forest Service lands. During the '70s, damage to the stream accelerated.

What followed is common knowledge among steelheaders and environmentalists. Today the run of steelhead borders on extinction, in spite of efforts of concerned anglers. Logging that stopped briefly as a result of negotiations by Wildlife and the FFF is slated to begin again. Even the Forest Service is talking about resuming cutting their old growth. About all we can do now is hope and pray that the wild steelhead find small sanctuaries in the upper Deer Creek watershed and manage to hang on. We know them to be a hardy, adaptable fish. But there are limits to what they can endure.

Quickly . . .

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Bill McMillian of Washougal, WA, and Keith Stonebreaker of Lewiston, ID, are cooperating in efforts to trace the evolution and westward journey of the popular wading fly, the Bomber. Keith writes that it was originally called the Cigar Butt. Alan Johnson's friend, Doug Vanerka, had just returned from an Atlantic Salmon fishing trip to Maine and brought back "dozens of locally tied patterns." Among them was the Bomber; they were of uniform size and color, and several were tied without the palmed hackle. Keith asked Alan if it had a name and Alan replied that "if it wasn't already called a Cigar Butt, it should be," referring to the two wisps of white hair fore and aft. Keith added that he "particularly liked its lively tipping and bobbing motion," but he has difficulty moving steelhead with the larger sizes -- #2 and 4. Eights and 10s work best for him, but he has had problems losing fish after he thought he had them solidly hooked. He thinks the "perfect" hook, if he can ever find it, will solve his problem and is considering the use of doubles. He said he tried Bill's trick of dropping the rod tip, but it didn't help and he missed all three fish raised that way last season.

Bill states that the pattern was developed by a Father Smith for use on the Miramichi in 1967, according to Joseph Bates. The original one was yellow. It probably had been in use on the Clearwater by 1973 or 74. Bill was introduced to it by Keith and Steve Petitt when they visited him on the Washougal in 1975. The Grassed Line Shoppe soon carried it. Bill says it quickly spread from there to the Deschutes, the Umpqua, and the streams of British Columbia. And of course variants spun off it, including the idea of leaving the hackle off. Bill thinks this happened over a relatively short period of time and the fly is destined to be one of the great patterns in the history of steelhead flyfishing . . .

Ralph Wahl's new book, One Man's Steelhead Shangle-La, has now been published and is available in stores or through Frank Amato Publications. It costs $19.95 and contains many of Ralph's fine photographs, in addition to articles about early days with Judge Olson on the Skagit. Ralph was The Osprey's very first benefactor and a portion of this book appeared in the June 1988 issue. We understand it is setting a sales record . . .

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STREAM STRUCTURES
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answered by looking at the many reasons for prescribing structures: deepen and concentrate low flow; provide cover for all age-classes of fish; improve upstream fish passage; rearrange substrates; stabilize or manipulate streambank and beds; provide depth and velocity diversity, including forming and containing pools; and generally increase habitat complexity. Site-specific prescriptions demand a thorough knowledge of limiting factors. Undoubtedly, the best fix is letting natural processes and time heal these streams and fish habitat. But, in order to address the public demand and desire for more high-quality salmonid habitat in the Pacific Northwest, the Forest Service has taken an active role in accelerating the natural healing and recovery processes.

The second and more serious charge is based on a mistrust of public-land stewardship. Unfortunately, there are too many examples of accelerated mass erosion and severe hydrologic changes resulting from watershed management that only focus on logging and road building. Some natural in-stream structures have been removed, rearranged, and buried by sediment and floods related to upslope land management. Natural forests in the Pacific Northwest that have a history of such man-caused or man-influenced events are required to address these effects in their Forest Plans.

In watersheds subject to chronic mass-slope failures and in-stream instability, Forests have now been given guidance and direction to incorporate state-of-the-art Best Management Practices (BMPs), in addition to standards and guidelines to disperse logging over space and time. Logging could not even be planned in some watersheds until watershed recovery has taken place. All three of these strategies will be part of the Final Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest Plan. These BMPs, standards and guidelines, and management constraints will be applied to watersheds before fish-habitat restoration or enhancement occurs. Habitat managers already have added structures to speed up the natural restoration of stream conditions after several channel disruptions. But no responsible land manager would allow the addition of in-stream structures to mitigate for expected adverse impacts of sediment from upslope land management. Protection of habitat is paramount and also more cost effective than repair.

There are several examples of watersheds in the process of multi-agency reviews and investigations to see where in-stream structures and upslope soil stabilization work is needed. Canyon Creek, tributary to the Nooksack River; Deer Creek, tributary to the North Fork of the Stillaguamish River, and Greenwater River, tributary to the White River, are three basins on the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest where some structures have been prescribed by a watershed planning group.

[Editor's Note: Having worked with Alec Jackson and others as part of the Deer Creek Group cited above for more than five years, I must insert a word. As a result of logging on USFS lands, their own assessment of fish spawning and rearing habitat in 1983 rated "poor." Since then they have committed large funds to mitigate the damage. It took a different agency, the State Department of Natural Resources, to destroy the little that was left. See page 1 of the Quickly section of this issue for an update.]

Jim Doyle, USFS; Gino Lucchetti, Tulalip Tribes; Matt Longenbaugh, USFS, L to R, examine a river reach for possible rehabilitation.

UPDATE ON PROPOSED B.C. REGS

Pete Sovorel

The Osprey is tracking proposed regulations in British Columbia that may restrict fishing opportunities for steelhead for non-Canadians. Pete Sovorel brings us up to date. Pete is chairman of the Washington State group of anglers hoping to affiliate with the Steelhead Society of British Columbia and welcomes new members. His telephone number was incorrectly listed in The Osprey, May 1989. It is (206) 742-4651. He is a captain in the U.S. Navy and fishes extensively in Canada.

B.C. authorities are refining their proposed guide management regulations. Legislation is being developed which would empower the Ministry of Environment (Fisheries Branch) to limit both guide licenses and, where necessary, recreational anglers.

The legislation, if adopted, would permit the Branch to propose limits to the B.C. Cabinet on non-resident anglers on particular rivers. The B.C. Cabinet would have to approve the proposed limits on each river before those limits could become part of the fisheries regulations.

The ministry program aims at: (1) eliminating unlicensed guides and limiting the number of guides on particular systems; (2) designating the Dean and Babine as Class I rivers and limiting non-resident licenses to one week; (3) developing a program to identify non-resident use for various Class II rivers so that future regulations (restrictions) would be based upon fact, rather than conjecture. Some form of day-use permit, perhaps a three-to-five-day license, is under consideration.

At this time, the Branch does not envision limiting the number of non-resident anglers on any rivers other than the Dean and Babine. In the future, the information developed through the day-use system may provide justification for some form of restricted entry for non-residents.

As the B.C. authorities develop their program we American anglers should remind ourselves when fishing B.C. that we are guests and act accordingly. It does not take many inconsiderate American anglers (or, worse, illegal American guides) to make the rest of us unwelcome.

Pete adds that the real concern is the horde of Europeans and Japanese who fish with unlicensed guides, who drop them off to fish in large numbers on river gravel bars. Ed.]
O. MYKISS, THE STEELHEAD SALMON?

Rory E. Glennie

In its journal, Fisheries, Vol. 13, No. 6, the American Fisheries Society (AFS) states: "Taxonomists now agree that native "Salmos" trout of northern Pacific Ocean drainages are more closely allied with Pacific salmon Oncorhynchus sp. than with Atlantic and Eurasian Salmo species (among which are Atlantic salmon S. salar and brown trout S. trutta). Recent evidence, culminating in new data presented during the June 1988 meeting of the American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists, has persuaded the AFS to accept Oncorhynchus as the appropriate generic name for all native Pacific-drainage trout that presently are called Salmo. The evidence indicates that species of Rhadophario (fossil trout), Parasalmo (proposed to replace Salmo for living Pacific-drainage trout), and Oncorhynchus are not distinctive at the generic level. Of these names, Oncorhynchus has historical taxonomic priority for this group of fishes." (Page 24.)

Rory Glennie, President of the Steelhead Society of British Columbia, Vancouver Island angler, conservationist, and iconoclast -- takes exception. It is one of the things he does best, and we welcome him to these pages.

In the 1939 literary classic, The Western Angler, Roderick Haig-Brown wrote: "Most ichthyologists agree that all trout, all char, all Pacific salmon and the Atlantic salmon have been evolved from a common ancestor within what is geologically speaking, a comparatively short period of time. It is not known exactly whether this common ancestor was originally a fresh-water or salt-water fish. Many scientists believe that it was a salt-water fish and that the habit of migrating to shallow water to spawn and of working along the shore to get as far in as possible, led the fish to the heads of inlets and bays and so inevitably up into the streams. Another opinion is that fresh-water fish, driven by the search for food, gradually worked farther and farther out to sea. . . . I am inclined to believe . . . the second theory." (Page 147.)

Three paragraphs later he writes: "Of all the native fish of the North American continent, the closest, structurally, to the Atlantic salmon is Salmo gairdneri, which is the coho rainbow, the summer steelhead and the winter steelhead -- structurally and scientifically one and the same fish, yet in practice sufficiently different from each other to require separate consideration. Drawing a dangerous parallel, match the non-nomadic rainbow to the brown trout, the winter steelhead to the Atlantic salmon, the summer steelhead to the European sea trout. The inference then is that Salmo gairdneri is the common ancestor of three separate subspecies and perhaps eventually of three separate species."

Since setting to type these thoughts, there have been some enormous changes in the world of ichthyology and I'm sure if Haig-Brown were alive today he would find the latest of species classification -- or rather reclassification -- a bit academic and unsettling. I refer to the reclassification of Salmo gairdneri to Oncorhynchus mykiss, a designation decided on by the American Fisheries Society. In effect, this changes the name of the steelhead trout to the steelhead salmon, or some such.

I asked one of the Provincial steelhead biologists what it all meant. Would we be fishing for steelhead salmon? He said, "You might, but I sure as hell won't be." Then I queried if he wouldn't be forced, as a professional in the field, to use the new O. mykiss designation in his writings? Hestantly he said yes, though he was quick to add that footnotes referring to Salmo gairdneri would be needed to save off confusion. I sensed from him a hollow feeling of loss, the same feeling one gets over the passing of a loved one.

Being somewhat of a scientific bent myself, I can identify with the need for hair-splitting accuracy in the field of fish genetics, though the real, practical purpose of such fine science of times eludes me and leaves me cold. Practically speaking, most of us can tell the difference between a trout and a Pacific salmon by looking at them. Our eyes tell us that trout have spots on the dorsal fin and salmon do not. Trout have fewer than 13 anal rays and salmon have more. Trout recuperate after spawning, while all Pacific salmon die. These observations have served many an angler in good stead and have helped him with the decision whether to release a summer steelhead or hunt a cutthroat.

The very designation of a steelhead as Salmo may have been enough of a barrier to stop those who like to lump things together from tossing steelhead in with salmon and managing them with a commercially jaundiced eye. As Salmo, steelhead have been elevated to the status of a valuable recreational game fish. Now that there is no difference, scientifically speaking, between the trout and salmon of the Pacific west, I wonder how long it shall be before some bureaucratic scientist proposes that we put all our fish into the same management basket? Personally, I rue the day when the Federal government has complete control over all our Pacific salmon. You see, in the Province of British Columbia the management of our anadromous trout is granted under license to the Province by the Federal government. Many people believe that this division has been the saving grace for our steelheads.

Through this wrangling over names and related politics, the steelhead trout remains oblivious. Scientists expound on theories of quantum genetics, politicians shuffle along their paper trails, and fishermen cast their lures into sparkling waters. In the meantime, the steelhead trout remains that wild, elusive, marvelous creature we all admire.
RETURN TO
THE NIMPKISH

Van Egan

[Van Gorman Egan was a neighbor and friend of Roderick Haig-Brown, and lives on the Campbell River on Vancouver Island. He is a retired high school biology teacher and writer. His picture book, Tyee, was recently published. Fittingly, this year he hooked his top tyee salmon, a 45-pounder, rowing near the mouth of his home river, a fine winter steelhead stream. He is secretary of the Haig-Brown Kingfisher Creek Society, which has restored the creek for coho production and educational purposes, and obtained heritage status for the Haig-Brown house, library, and gardens. We think you will enjoy his delightful remembrance.]

The lower Nimpkish River flows from Nimpkish Lake to Broughton Strait, opposite Alert Bay, about 100 miles northwest of Campbell River, on Vancouver Island, B.C. It is seven miles long and includes the tidal reach from Tyee Pool (also called Lansdowne Pool) to Fishing Island. It is a river difficult to access except at Chesterman Campsite near the Island Highway bridge, but it is navigable by raft or even by canoe if the canoists are reasonably competent in white water. The most dangerous place is at Suwash Rock where, in June 1957, 12-year-old Donald Lansdowne tipped over a canoe and drowned. Two years later Roderick Haig-Brown dedicated Fisherman’s Summer to the young victim.

For all its temperate nature when in freshest, the Nimpkish is a river easy to love. Haig-Brown lived near it in the late 1920s for two years, one of which was with the Lansdowne family. He returned to England for two years prior to moving permanently to Canada. His diaries while in England reveal the compelling attraction this river can have for a person. When Haig-Brown returned to Canada in 1928, he spent his next two years with the Nimpkish. His accounts of fishing it in The Western Angler and A River Never Sleeps are vivid testimonials of a man who strove to know all he could of a river and its fish.

I was first privileged to see the lower Nimpkish in 1962, a year or two before the highway bridge was constructed across it. To get there, I walked a pilot into landing a float plane on the river near the old Lansdowne farm and coming back for me five days later. Many anglers would have felt those five days to be the dregs of the river god’s poorest brew. It was during the Easter break from school and the river was swollen with snowmelt. Added to that, it rained every one of those five days, and the sun showed itself only twice for a few hours on the day I went in and again when I came out. As if the river god had a conscience, those two breaks in the low cloud ceiling occurred at the time of each landing. For all the rain and high water, I enjoyed the full five days even though I didn’t fish but five hours.

A day or two before I was to leave for the Nimpkish, Haig-Brown called me to his house and gave me two maps drawn from memory of the river. They proved immeasurably helpful in my explorations, which, because all of the high water, were about all I was able to do. From the abandoned logging railroad victims in part of a lack of enforcement of the catch-and-release regulation on wild fish.

Knowing all this, I still decided to return. One late September evening, three or four years ago, I went to the Lansdowne Pool and found the river low but slightly freshened by recent showers. The tide was flooding into the pool and slowing the race of current from the rapids above. Where the choppy water flattened, coho were impatient to get on with their journey, cutting the surface with wild slashes or vaulting into the air. Among them occasionally a 20- or 25-pound spring would roll and swirl. Seventy- and 80-foot casts

"THOSE FIVE DAYS WERE THE DREGS
OF THE RIVER GOD'S POOREST BREW."

grade I could look up Ned’s Canyon or over Dogfish Rapids and know them by name; and see the Blue Clay Banks across from Indian Island and the beautiful tidal run along it that is fishable by wading on a normal river level.

One day I walked all the way to Camp Two at the foot of Nimpkish Lake. The old loggers’ bank houses were there, boarded up, and the storage and sorting booms stretched well out into the still, mist-shrouded lake. An extensive platform of heavy timbers on which railcars were once loaded bordered the length of the booming grounds and provided a good vantage point to view the camp’s remains. Where the current began to pull and the river to take form, I watched a school of steelhead — dark fish and very edgy. And no wonder: Two seals were not far away, probably digesting two steelhead kil while resting on large boulders.

It was tough going along the river then and it is even harder today. The bush that has grown up is almost impenetrable. Even the old railroad grade has become thickest of salmonberry and alder. And worse, the great fishing stocks have been devastated — overfished in the saltwater estuary and their freshwater world logged with no regard for the health of the river. Except for the sockeye run, the Nimpkish fishery is in a sad state. The great Tyee run is as thing of the past. The coho are hanging tough, as coho tend to do, but are nowhere near their former abundance. And steelhead are but a vestige, would bring the fly to the closer fish, but they wouldn’t move to it. I changed flies several times, none of which worked, and kept coming back to a favored Silver Lady on 1/0 that had caught fresh-run coho in the Campbell.

With the tide pounding harder, the pace of the current slackened and the rising water softened the rapids. It must have been the signal for the coho to move on, for suddenly 20 or 30 in a tight school appeared 15 or 20 feet in front of me, then, seeing me, veered sharply to take refuge beneath the broken current and pass swiftly up the rapids on their way into the Canyon Pool. It had all happened in seconds, the kind of seconds that register strong images of heavy-armed, grateful, and determined fish. How I wanted one of them!

More casts followed, dozens of them, reaching, reaching, and every one rejected. Then another school of coho appeared, taking the same route, fish thick in the shoulder and acting as if they would run right over me, but swirling in time and moving on as if the others. More casts, more schools of coho. The situation was just right. Then two bloody seals showed up. They eyed me pretty carefully at first, then — deciding that I was of little risk — proceeded in chase of a late evening dinner. No further signs of coho were to be seen, but I could watch the movement of springs up the far channel, as now and then one would surface. Clearly, the fishing — such as it was — was over for the day. I started back to the car. (Continued on page 9.)
NIMPISH (Continued from page 8.)

Walking the bank downstream, with the river completely slack from the incoming tide, I saw a V-shaped wake moving upstream in the shallow water on my side. I knew it to be a spring salmon, a good one. I would get only one shot at it and waited long seconds for the right moment to place the fly across its bow. It fist a yard or more ahead of the fish, and, there being no current, the line began to sink. I had to begin a retrieve to give any semblance of life to the fly and to keep it out of the rocks. It was a situation desperately in need of a floating line. The fish passed on with not the slightest deflection of the wake. I cannot be sure it even saw the fly. Then the fish disappeared where it found the deeper pool. I suppose it was another one of those times of the impossible. Yet we all know that even non-feeding fish have moments of lapse of purpose, or anger, or whatever it is that trips the repressed taking reflex. Some day at the outset of autumn there will have to be a coho or spring in Landesdowne Pool ready to grab a Silver Lady. There need only be one, but I want to be there.

[Note: This appeared in a slightly different form in Totem Topics, No. 79, Summer, 1987.]

THE LAST WORD

Bob Arnold, Editor

Lee Wulf, in a recent letter to The Osprey, tells us: "Regarding the 'Triang on Lee Wulf' [in The May 1989 issue of The Osprey], I find myself surprised at the certainly displayed by two people who have not and who, I doubt ever will, catch a steelhead on a #28. [Rory] Gionne makes a flat statement attacking my sportmanship, something he can't back up, and then weasels by refusing to apologize or allow me to rebut in his column or in the publication [of the Steelhead Society of British Columbia].

"Bill McMillan writes: 'However, Martin's (Schmiderer) outcome was very different, and after chasing the fish three pools downstream he finally gave up.' What he should have said is not the he gave up but that he lost the fish. And that's what is going to happen with most fish hooked on so small a fly. Rarely will one go downstream two or three pools but be lost quite soon after hooking, long before it's anywhere near exhausted. With a breaking point somewhere between half a pound and one pound, few anglers can safely set the hook. From a conservation point of view, if an angler fishes with a #28 and isn't extremely skilful, he'll miss strikes from at least four out of five fish he raises. That means that four out of five fish which he'd have hooked and landed will still swim free and that's a move toward conservation, is it not? If he does hook a dozen fish he may land one and those he loses will be lost long before they're tired. Very, very few anglers could hook and hang onto a steelhead with a #28 fly long enough to kill him. The #28 is a move toward conservation.

"He mentions MacHECK who claims to have landed a 12-pound steelhead on a #20 hook (I'd like to hear the story on that to know why and where), but a #20 hook is three times as strong as a #28 and a #16 is five times stronger than that. Didn't MacHECK watch his fish to see if it survived? Another thing, did he land the first and only steelhead on that size hook that he fished for and hooked -- an almost incredible feat? We're not getting the full story.

Steve Pettis's 16-pound fish on a #16 Humpy apparently did not die. Again, details are lacking. How long did it take? Why wasn't it sporting? Did he kill the fish? Was it exhausted? What was the basis of lack of sportsmanship and was there no feeling of elation to have accomplished an angling feat? Does he now always use the largest size hook a steelhead will take?

"There is much to know about playing fish. I play mine more with the psychology of convincing them that they can't win than entering into a tug of war which leaves them exhausted. One hears anglers say with pride that they took a fish of a certain size on a particularly light rod. Are they not sportsmanlike? The size of the hook used in a capture is a measure of skill, not as measure of sportsmanship. The sportsmanship measure is not to drown a fish or work him to complete exhaustion. An angler can always call a halt and cut the leader or break a fish off if he thinks he's damaging it and plans a release."

Lee then italicizes the remainder, for emphasis: "It's a simple fact that if everyone had to fish with #28, very few steelhead would be caught and a hell of a lot more of them would go on to reach the spawning grounds. Does anyone disagree? Isn't that the bottom line?"

"I PLAY MINE WITH PSYCHOLOGY, CONVINCING THEM THAT THEY CAN'T WIN..."

Well, I for one agree, Lee. I once bought some #25s at a clearance sale, as a joke. I intended to give them to Scott Noble who had taken a 16-pounder on a #16, although, as Scott pointed out, his was a Wilson #16, which is a full-size larger than a Mustad. Anyway, I kept them. After I read about your feat, I dug them out and tied exactly one. What a mess it was! Anybody who can tie them, let alone thread them on a leader and fish them, exhibits great skill. Now, I'm waiting for the right time to use it.

"DID HE KILL THE FISH? WAS IT EXHAUSTED?"

"THERE IS MUCH TO KNOW ABOUT PLAYING FISH."

"I PLAY MINE WITH PSYCHOLOGY, CONVINCING THEM THAT THEY CAN'T WIN..."

Let's give the last word on this interesting (but unpleasant) exchange to Writer/Editor/Publisher Arnold Gingrich. In his book The Well-Tempered Angler, published in 1973, when we were all young, he writes on page 210:

"I've seen the Icelandic artist Guðmundur Einarsen, a veritable giant of a man, stand on a high rock in the middle of the big Laxa, and haul in a 25-pounder [Atlantic salmon], using his Gargantuan rod as if it were a derrick. But I've seen Lee Wulf master a fish of the same size, or even a little larger, and do it in not much more than half the time, on tackle one tenth as heavy, by letting the fish run and wear himself out, rather than attempt any of the pull-devil pull-baker tactics that, in any event, his tackle wouldn't permit. And it was a lot prettier sight to watch."
Quickly... 

(Continued from page 5.)

On the last day of the Skagit's spring season, April 30, on what was purported his last cast, Jerry Wittle from Vancouver, B.C. hooked a large steelhead on a General Practitioner fly given him by Bob Aik. When he landed it, it was too dark to photograph, but Jerry measured it along his rod. It seemed too long to be true, so he subtracted a little. The great male fish went 48 inches. This must be a river record and perhaps a State record for steelhead caught on a fly. Bob York says his best Californian fish was 44 inches and weighed about 34 pounds. Conservatively, Jerry's fish was guessed to be 36 - 38 pounds. Of course, it was released.

Massive kills of pen-raised Atlantic salmon on Cypress Island, Washington, in September did not surprise environmentalists, such as Steelheader John DeYonge, who writes for the Seattle Post-Intelligencer and has warned of problems associated with introducing foreign species into Pacific waters. But State authorities, knowing that fish farms are a profitable new form of commerce, ignored the free advice and approved permits. Early signs of trouble included eutrophic vegetation blooms and large accumulations of fish feces. There was also a great fear of Atlantic salmon escaping from their pens carrying disease to healthy Pacific salmon stocks. The possibility of them cross-breeding with receptive species was advanced as an argument against their introduction. Recently, there have been rumors of escaped pen-raised fish being taken in commercial nets. And there was the question of water quality in Puget Sound, which has been subjected to task-force studies and expensive mitigation programs. But disease was always the big specter.

The fish kill of early September was estimated at a quarter million fish of varying sizes and ages. At the Cypress Island farms, most of the fish died. Huge concentrations of plankton clogged the fishes' gills and choked them. Whether they died of a toxic produced or from suffocation is unclear to scientists. Many of the freshly killed fish were frozen or taken to processing plants, since the plankton is not known to be poisonous to people and eating them is said to pose no risk. Two years ago there had been a fish kill from a different plankton at the same farms.

Meanwhile, in British Columbia, at Sechelt Inlet, scientists were investigating pen-raised fish kills there from Heterosigma akashiwo hada plankton.

In Washington State there are about 14 private net-pen operations, according to DeYonge; and 20 other ones run by Indian tribes and sportsmen organizations. Fish kills there have occurred since 1976. Lummi Island experienced a big kill then and there was one in 1985 in NanOOSE Bay, B.C.

There is ongoing concern that wild fish may die from pen-generated plankton blooms.