KAMCHATKA: FROM DREAM TO REALITY

Jeff Mishler, a resident of Portland, OR, is a professional videographer. He was part of the first-ever joint Russian-American scientific team that fished Kamchatka in September-October 1994, sponsored by the FFF Steelhead Committee.

Fly fishermen are visualists. Throughout most of our lives, sometimes daily or hourly—in extreme cases like myself—we daydream about a river that is new to us. A place which is familiar only because we create it in our mind from past experience: first hand on the river, from literature, or from stories told by fly fishing friends. These places are always beautifully set, yet challenging to fish. We are always successful. The questions are answered, the puzzles are solved and the fish come to our fly often. For that moment, we are legends in our own mind. That’s the brilliance of daydreams...

What would you recommend to a stressed out fly fishing film director, coming off a hectic shooting schedule, who recently broke up with his girlfriend, who hasn’t been fishing in nearly two months and couldn’t stand the sight of a girl scout selling cookies? Therapy is too obvious. I’d suggest a fishing trip; better yet an expedition to a remote land mass at the western edge of the Pacific with more wild salmonid species than any other place on earth, throw in the highest known population of brown bears and for the heck of it—no firewood. Make the trip an extended one, maybe two or three weeks, as far away from civilization as possible, with only a pack on his back, his fly rod, and maybe some other cases of gear to support him. Put him in a tent with strangers, other fly fisherman who will smell as bad as he will in two weeks, and see what happens.

This was not a day dream.

While on the plane from L.A. but before landing in Portland, I had checked my messages. I had four of them. Back home, I tossed my keys on the table and pressed the blue “messages” button on my way to the fridge. As I cracked open a cold one, a voice from that little white box echoed throughout my apartment; up the staircase, back down the stairs and through my head. “Jeff, it’s Guido. Hey, I just got a call from Pete Soverel up in Seattle. He’s the FFF Steelhead Committee chairman and a board member of Wild Steelhead and Atlantic Salmon magazine. I hear he’s a steelhead guru. Anyway he’s putting this trip to Kamchatka together and I can’t go so I gave him your name. Sounds like a great trip, give me a call when you can...” beep.

“Hm... Russia...” All I knew about Russia was that the people there were not fairing so well under their new government. What I knew about fishing was even less. Guido Rahr, my friend and fishing partner, had returned from Kamchatka’s Bolshaya River in June of 1994. After two weeks of pursuing chinook he’d caught only one fish. I had no reason to be impressed with the opportunity and didn’t give it much thought...that is until Pete Soverel called.

“Jeff, this is Pete Soverel. Guido Rahr gave me your name. He said you might be interested in our expedition to..."
Kamchatka.... Yeah, we don’t know much about the numbers of fish... they’re supposed to be large... we’ll be the first ones to fish these rivers... it’s going to be cold... two-handed rods mostly... the Dean was great... how’s the Deschutes been?... about $6,000 plus airfare... for about three weeks... bring a Thermarest... say aren’t you a photographer?... OK, $5000...” We got along great.

The expedition was called a scientific exchange. Our objective, to catch and release native steelhead on the fly, collect tissue and data for genetic analysis at the University of Washington and help the National Marine Fisheries Service define what the term “wild” means. (The significance of which I didn’t fully understand until nearly two weeks into the trip.)

I must emphasize the word “expedition.” Having—or knowing were you can find—an adventurous spirit is critical before you embark on a trip like this. It would involve collaboration with Russian scientists and biologists, outfitters, Aeroflot personnel, and custom officials who didn’t really care where you were from or where you were going—they just looked in your bags. There were too many logistics variables to assume that anything would go as planned, specifically, delays and the remote possibility that we wouldn’t arrive in Kamchatka at all. The sooner I surrendered myself to fate, the better. We would be going to the end of the earth to fish for a species I can catch twenty minutes from my home. Ah, but we would be the first to do it, “kind of like Lewis and Clark,” as Pete would say.

As I boarded the plane in Seattle with my new traveling companions, Terry Vance and Denise Nichols from Portland, OR, Dr. Maunsan Prince from Salt Lake, our fly fishing biologist Barry Berejikian from the University of Washington, and Pete Sorel, a calm came over me. I felt anxiety and stress, products of my recent frantic pace, leave my body. I placed my fate in the hands of our fearless leader, Captain Pete, and waited patiently to unroll my Thermarest on the banks of our river, though I had no idea what those banks looked like. None of the members in our expedition really knew what to expect.

Two days, three planes, one helicopter, and one meal later I found myself standing on soggy Russian tundra in Kamchatka, Russia, surrounded by a mound of expedition gear, seven American anglers, three Russian scientists, and six or seven smiling Russian camp helpers. I remember wishing I had eaten a second teriyaki chicken dinner on the Alaskan Airlines flight from Anchorage. The “fatty soup with a bone” I had eaten during our 24 hour lay-over in Magadan didn’t exactly stick to my ribs.

“I placed my fate in the hands of our fearless leader, and waited patiently to unroll my Thermarest on the banks of our river, though I had no idea what those banks looked like. None of the members in our expedition really knew what to expect.”

As the helicopter lifted up and away I popped a few pictures with my F1. The Russian helpers shuttled the gear to our tents while the others either took pictures of their own or tried to communicate with the helpers using a combination of large hand gestures and the Russian they had picked up during the long flight. At least I knew what they were trying to say.

Sometime during the commotion I put my camera down, turned my back to the camp and scanned the tundra before me. The low afternoon sun, setting towards the small mountain range at the west, raked the entire scene. The earth was exploding with color. I can’t remember a landscape so vibrant, with so many hues which changed slowly as the sun dropped below the horizon. (It was one of three days during our three week stay that the sun actually shone.) I pondered for a moment... This was home for the next three weeks. We would sleep on flimsy cots in red Arctic army tents and eat whatever we could catch or kill—preferably coho salmon and reindeer. At that point though, I would have settled for a well-prepared rodent.

The river flowed through the flats below our camp. Its smooth flow and moderate pace reminded me of a fertile limestone stream except that the water was the color of tea. It was not your typical steelhead river and I wondered how we would fish it. There appeared to be little or no bottom structure to break the current where a steelhead might rest. Had I not known differently, I might have been skeptical about the river. John Aalto, our interpreter, liaison to the Russians, and fellow angler, had hooked and lost a large steelhead earlier in the afternoon. Actually, I was feeling very optimistic. After the sun set behind the mountain range and the colors in the clouds faded from a deep purple to black, I turned away from it all and walked up the hill towards my violin abode, our tent, which resembled a giant red thimble. I smiled for three reasons: I was sleeping on my Thermarest tonight, tomorrow would be a full day of fishing with new friends, and my first day of fishing in Russia was also my birthday, September 25th.

We awoke the next morning to gray skies... I mean gray. The sky is large in tundra country and it’s overwhelming to be surrounded by so much of it. Yesterday’s colorful landscape was now a band of blended monochromatic tones that stretched forever in every direction. It felt like a heavy blanket had been tossed over our camp but I wasn’t feeling its warmth—perfect steelhead weather.

Our river, like any other river you fish for the first time, took awhile to figure out. Its smooth flows, undercut banks, and sparse riparian zone looked more like ideal trout habit than holding water for large steelhead. I spent the better part of the first morning walking the banks looking for structure, some place where a fish could find refuge from the current. The wind blew hard from the southwest, just like it does at home when a front moves through, and made casting difficult if not treacherous when wading through a run from river right. Around noon, after working out the kinks in my casting, but not moving a fish, I put the fly on its keeper and headed to camp for a quick lunch.

The mood in the dining tent was quite somber. The combination of wind and rain had
sapped some strength from our team of anglers, but warm food, hot tea and quiet conversation seemed to put everyone back on track for the afternoon. There were fish in the river. We had seen their wakes on the shallow gravel bars as they migrated upstream, cutting corners wherever possible. A couple fish had boiled on but failed to take the fly during the morning’s fishing. We wondered if they were steelhead. The Russian biologists assured us they were. I left lunch feeling recharged.

Standing on the hill above the river, the strong wind pushed on the bill of my hat and spun my fly rod around like a weathervane. “Where to fish? Hmmmm.” It wasn’t like there was competition. We had the whole river to ourselves. Think about that for a minute. Wherever you decided to go, you could be alone and possibly be the first angler to swing a fly over the fish that were resting there. It was a comforting thought.

I decided to fish the water near camp where John Aalto had hooked and lost his fish the day before. The river ran straight for four hundred yards. Spaced randomly throughout this stretch were submerged clumps of tundra which had fallen into the water and come to rest in midstream. There were small pockets behind each of these clumps. The stream was no more than a foot deep from bank to bank and those pockets, however insignificant they appeared, were the only holding water for a quarter mile.

The first cast landed upstream and short of the nearest clump. I mended once and let the fly swing slowly alongside the hidden structure, down the crease between conflicting currents, and then out into the shallow water. I took two small steps downstream, stripped in ten feet of line and cast again. The fly landed behind the clump in the slower water. I mended hard to keep the fly in the pocket and held my arm out to the side. With the line leading the rod, the current pulling the fly down and through the bucket, I felt the faster current at the crease pushing the whole works up and out of the lie. Then the line came tight...

Happy Birthday Jeff!

Hello Kamchatka!

Length 33”
Girth 18”
Full Data... yes.”

Kamchatka Report

As the director of the joint Russian-American Kamchatka Steelhead Project, I am pleased to report that the 1994 expedition was extremely successful. Under the direction of the Wild Salmon Center, the 1994 expedition program established that the concept of coordinating and combining funding from US, Canadian and Russian governmental agencies, private charitable trusts and individual conservationists provides a viable fiscal base to conduct wilderness expeditions in Kamchatka. These expeditions have and will continue to produce important scientific results, stimulate local economic benefit and help promote democratic institutions in Kamchatka. As reported previously, Kamchatka steelhead are categorized as a “disappearing species” in the Russian “Red Book,” the Russian equivalent to our Endangered Species Act. All fishing and taking of steelhead throughout Kamchatka is illegal except for participants of expeditions directed by the Wild Salmon Center.

The expedition conducted 20 days of field work on two western Kamchatka rivers from a base camp located about 15 miles inland from the Sea of Okhotsk. The 1994 expedition consisted of Russian and American scientists including the project’s scientific director, Dr. Ksenya A. Savvaityova, Head of the Laboratory of Systematics at Moscow State University and author of The Noble Trout of Kamchatka. Additionally, six American fly fishermen accompanied the expedition to help gather biological data through catch and release fly fishing.

Fishing was excellent and an effective, be-
kilogram steelhead—that is world record class—was caught;

- display an extremely wide diversity of age groups, year classes and repeat spawning histories. This diversity is especially unusual when compared to our heavily exploited North American steelhead stocks. Repeat spawners make up about 75 percent of the run. Over half the spawning population had made at least two previous spawning runs. Two specimens were on their SIXTH spawning migration. The extremely high percentage of repeat spawners is especially striking and certainly has significant management implications. Our stocks may well have depended on repeat spawning to sustain abundant populations. Continued harvest may have skewed American populations dramatically;

- Kamchatka steelhead exhibit complicated and varied migratory strategies. Most steelhead appear to spend 2-3 years in the sea before their first spawning migration which begins in September. After spawning in the spring, the steelhead return to the marine environment but return to spawn again in the following September after only a few months at sea.

The camping conditions were spartan but comfortable. We slept in arctic tents which did not leak. Each participant brought a sleeping bag and the expedition provided light-weight cots. The food was whole-some but not gourmet. The camp support was friendly and helpful. The cook was especially innovative.

The weather was mostly overcast. We had one day of hard rain which put the rivers out for about 12 hours. There was frost on four nights. The temperature never remained below freezing for the entire day.

Local officials in the Koryak Autonomous Region and the Kamchatka Oblast as well as the local outfitter were extremely excited about the expedition and the prospects for steelhead conservation and the potential for local economic benefit arising from a future recreational steelhead fishery. Following the field work, Professor SavvaMito and I spent a week in discussions with the deputy administrators for the Koryak Autonomous Region and the Kamchatka Oblast. They joined with the Wild Salmon Center and Moscow State University in memoranda of understanding governing future expeditions. These written agreements provide for a comprehensive to a 20 year research project for the scientific examination of steelhead trout populations, distribution, life histories and genetic composition of steelhead stocks on the Kamchatka Peninsula.

The participants agree that they wish to avoid an uncontrolled “gold rush” on the endangered Kamchatka steelhead, especially in the absence of sound scientific data. To minimize these risks to steelhead, the parties agreed that the central Russian government and local Kamchatka administrations will issue steelhead permits only to those participants in Kamchatka Steelhead Project expeditions directed by the Wild Salmon Center. Translated—until individual, river by river steelhead populations are removed from the Red Book, the only steelhead angling that will be lawful will be conducted as part of official scientific expeditions under the direction of the Wild Salmon Center. Thus, any angling for Kamchatka steelhead or soliciting guided angling trips for steelhead is a violation of both Russian and American law (under the terms of the Lacey Act).

In this context, readers should note that only the central Russian government can issue permits and exemptions to the Red Book prohibitions on steelhead angling. Anglers may be able to find Kamchatkans who will take them to steelhead rivers and promise that all permits are in order but, without prior written approval from the central government, such anglers are violating both Russian and US law.

Building upon the successful 1994 program, the Wild Salmon Center will conduct three separate expeditions in 1995:

**Expedition #1**: three separate groups consisting of scientists, camp assistants and six anglers. The trips are two weeks in duration each and will return to the general area studied in 1994 but will also include visits to additional rivers. Groups depart Seattle Sept. 9, Sept. 23 and Oct. 7, 1995:

**Expedition #2**: two groups consisting of scientists, staff and six sponsoring anglers. Each trip is three weeks in duration. This expedition will study a second watershed in a remote region on the west coast of Kamchatka during the period of Sept. 9-Oct. 21, 1995. Groups will depart Seattle Sept. 9 and Sept. 30. This is a large river system with numerous tributaries:

**Expedition #3**: two groups, each including five sponsoring anglers. The Groups will study the middle reaches of many west coast watersheds. The third expedition will be mounted on horseback and will be in the field in an extended period. These groups can expect to catch large numbers of big trout (3-10 lbs.) during the period of Aug. 5-Sept. 30. Groups depart Seattle Aug. 5 and Sept. 2, 1995.

The expedition camps will be comfortable but not luxurious. Since few steelhead specimens must be collected lethally, the expedition party will eat them as well as caribou, ptarmigan, ducks and other food available in the wilderness. Alcohol is in scarce supply.

The 1995 60-day horseback expedition will be a Lewis & Clark type trip into the wilderness. THIS IS AN ARDUOUS EXPEDITION. The party will camp on tributaries for 3-5 days gathering data from the vicinity of each base camp. They will relocate the camp to the next drainage, typically 15-20 miles apart, every few days. The horseback party will be resupplied at the 30-day point with basic food stuffs—flour, sugar, coffee, rice, pasta, etc. For the most part, the expedition will subsist on wild sources of protein and greens. We hope to have an indigenous person accompany the
Niagara River
Steelhead Perspective  by Jerry & Rick Kustich

Jerry has been with the Winson Rod Company for eleven years and at present works with bamboo. He writes and illustrates a weekly column for the Montana Standard daily newspaper. Rick has written several articles on the Great Lakes tributaries and recently completed a second book. The latest on New York’s Salmon River can be found in Frank Amato Publication’s river journal series. Both have spent decades fishing extensively throughout the United States and Canada.

The Niagara River is by no means a typical steelhead river, yet the possibility exists that anadromous rainbow have visited its lower reaches below Niagara Falls dating before the turn of the century. Even during the most polluted era of the 50’s and 60’s there were reports of an occasional rainbow being caught in the waters near the village of Lewiston. Since the early 1980’s large numbers of steelhead have entered the lower river as a part of a comprehensive stocking effort designed to reclaim and restore a resource that was sacrificed during the industrialization of the East. To what extent this run is presently comprised of naturally reproduced fish is uncertain. It is an accepted fact that some steelhead ascending the lower Niagara River are wild, although there has been little effort to assess naturalized populations in the Niagara at this point in time. Furthermore, the lack of historical data makes it all but impossible to link modern day fish to original stocks dating back to the late 1800’s. Nonetheless, this corner of the Great Lakes system offers a speculative puzzle worthy of attention too intriguing to ignore.

The Niagara River, a natural border between the US and Canada, is a 37-mile strait that connects Lake Erie to Lake Ontario. Its average 200,000 cfs is a volume of water greater than most other large rivers of the world carry. Over half of its 328 foot drop in elevation occurs at Niagara Falls; 20 miles below Lake Erie. As a part of the largest freshwater system on earth, the Niagara is considered an integral element in one of North America’s most important ecosystems.

Playing a vital role in the formation of our nation, the Niagara is a river rich in historical significance. Before white settlement, the Seneca Indians regarded the Niagara Frontier as sacred hunting grounds and, as a member of the six Indian nations of the Iroquois Confederacy, protected the region from western intruders. When the French and English began to colonize the area in the 17th and 18th centuries, it became clear that whoever controlled the river eventually would control the region. Once matters were settled after a series of wars including the French and Indian War, the Revolutionary War, and the War of 1812, events began to unfold that led to the complete environmental disintegration of the region by the mid-20th century. Because of the cheap power the river offered, industry developed at an accelerated pace. Waste of all kinds was conveniently swept away by the roaring waters of the river.

Commercialization of the spectacular Niagara Falls brought in great numbers of visitors while the whole area continued to grow and prosper economically as the country entered the age of industrialization.

After over 150 years of environmental degradation a Remedial Action Plan (RAP) has recently been developed by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) in cooperation with citizens concerned about the river’s revitalization and an action committee comprised of representatives from 26 diverse but interested groups formed in 1989. The mission of the RAP is “to restore the chemical, physical, and biological integrity of the Niagara River ecosystem... (while) protecting and enhancing the human health, fish and wildlife, aesthetics and recreation, and the economy of the Niagara River Area of Concern.”

Though various stages of rehabilitation have already taken place from Lake Erie to Lake Ontario since the 70’s, the new RAP is thoroughly comprehensive. Its most recent summary from March 1993 delineates long range goals and the implementation it will take to attain them.

The toxins threatening the fish and the survival of aquatic life listed in this plan are disconcerting: PCB’s, mirex, chlordane, dioxins, and polynuclear aromatic hydro-
State biologists at present believe that although some natural reproduction may take place in select areas throughout the river, it is an insignificant occurrence. Since there is no effective means to measure spawning activity and its success rate in this vast volume of water, there has been no major attempt to evaluate the possibility. It is certain, however, that some fish establish redds in limited locations along the American shoreline, they are clearly visible during April and May.

The sheer power and size of the lower Niagara intimidates anglers, especially fly fishers. However... the fly fisher can find action here for many months of the year.

Nineteenth century naturalist DeWitt Clinton investigated Atlantic salmon propagation during the early 1800's in the lower Niagara and noted "the lack of suitable spawning accommodations in the heavy flow of the river." (New York Fish and Game Journal, 1982). The same problems seem to apply to steelhead.

Following chinook salmon and lake trout in the fall and lasting for at least nine months of the year steelhead move into the lower river below Niagara Falls, a section less than 20 miles in length. The run continues into late spring. The steelhead feed on the ever present schools of small gizzard shad, alewives, and emerald shiners. There are estimates that up to 30 percent of these fish are wild, likely nomads and explorers from more naturally productive areas of Lake Ontario. Fish to 16 pounds are common during the winter months and the possibility of fish close to 20 pounds does exist.

New York's DEC remains committed to its annual stocking program. Despite lower stocking numbers that reflect a decrease in Lake Ontario's forage base, the DEC intends to actively maintain steelhead runs on the Niagara. Twenty-seven thousand six hundred fingerlings from the Salmon River strain will be planted in the spring of 1995 along with an additional 18,000 Skamania fingerlings. The Skamania fish are being introduced in some specific Great Lakes drainages and at present represent the only new strain of steelhead planted in years.

Some fishery managers question the wisdom of introducing a new strain of fish at this time.

While New York's management of Lake Ontario's steelhead depends greatly on the hatchery program, the province of Ontario's contribution to the lake's steelhead population comes mainly from natural reproduction. The provincial government does plant the north shore with 300,000 fall fingerlings, offspring from Ganaraska River stock. The Ganaraska flows into the lake east of Toronto. The Ministry of Natural Resources believes that three times this number enters the lake naturally each year, spawned in several fertile north shore tributaries. Ontario managers feel an attempt to introduce the Skamania strain would be in direct conflict with current plans to rehabilitate a viable spawning run of Atlantic salmon in several of the traditional Canadian salmon streams.

The Niagara River attracts thousands of fishermen who annually pursue trophy muskellunge and smallmouth bass in the calm waters above the falls, and chinook, lake trout, steelhead, walleye and smallmouth below the falls. After the placid upper river plunges into the deep gorge below Niagara Falls it passes through a gigantic vortex named the Whirlpool. From there it continues into a huge set of rapids culminating at the Devil's Hole region of the river. Below Devil's Hole the Sir Adam Beck power plant on the Canadian side and the Robert Moses power plant American side deliver large volumes of water from flows diverted above the Falls through a system of channels and tunnels. This turbulent gathering of fluctuating water flats throughout the Lewiston-Queenston area before calmly joining Lake Ontario near historic Fort Niagara.

The sheer power and size of the lower Niagara intimidates anglers, especially fly fishers. However, with a little understanding of the river's nature and the creative techniques required to fish it, the fly fishing angler can find action here for many months of the year.

The management of Lake Ontario continues to improve but the encouragement of enthusiastic well-informed followers is needed to help define long range directions and goals. Problems stemming from the exotic zebra mussel infestation to funding lamprey control programs persist. A decrease
SKEENA: WHAT’S IN STORE

1994 saw the best steelhead fishing in the Skeena country in a number of years. Not surprisingly, the improved steelhead fishing coincided with a major reduction in commercial salmon fishing effort. Part of the reduction can be traced to the official commercial fishing plan developed by the Skeena Watershed Committee under auspices of the Canadian federal Ministry for Fisheries and Oceans. The Skeena Watershed Committee consists of representatives from the federal and provincial governments and commercial (including tribal) and recreational fishing interests.

The objective of the fishing plan was to meet the DFO promise—reduce steelhead interception by 50 percent in three years. The plan provided for:

- extra commercial fishing days early in the season for late and early chinook (some observers are concerned about the health of both of coho and chinook in the Skeena);
- reduced commercial fishing days during the height of the steelhead migrations;
- participation by natives in the commercial fishery, especially at the river mouth;
- incentives for a change-over to a trap fishery to replace the net fishery;
- an annual process to develop a fishing plan.

With the plan in place, Nature intervened on behalf of steelhead in the form of extremely low sockeye returns—the preferred commercial target species—and virtually no pink salmon. As a consequence, there was essentially no commercial fishing during the peak of the steelhead run—all the commercials had left for other fishing grounds. Thus, steelhead (and the Plan) escaped pressure for additional fishing days during the sockeye run.

Readers will recall that in 1993, DFO caved into commercial interests and provided additional sockeye days even though steelhead escapements were well below agreed levels. Similarly, DFO continues to allow commercial fishing to take place, even though it is known to intercept a significant percentage of Dean River steelhead, fish which have not met escapement levels for a decade or more. (eds.)

Overall, The Osprey believes there is some room for optimism, mostly because finally there is a process which addresses steelhead (and other species) conservation issues in a venue where science and escapements are, at least nominally, important considerations.

But, there are a couple of dark clouds on the horizon. First, we remain skeptical (even if eternally hopeful) that DFO will have the guts to make the plan stick in years of higher sockeye abundance. They have not won any accolades in such years before. Maybe a new day has dawned.

Second, DFO has repeatedly demonstrated a willingness (determination) to provide commercial openings even on weak stocks so that commercial fishermen can qualify for full unemployment benefits. It of course boggles the mind that a seasonal activity such as commercial fishing for a few weeks a year should generate enough unemployment insurance benefits to qualify for payments for the rest of the year. DFO and the AFAFWU union fixation on these benefits bodes ill for sustainable management practices based upon sound science.

Third, the Moricetown natives harvested at least 1,500 steelhead in a gaff fishery at the falls. Who knows how many steelhead were mortally injured in this ghastly fishery.

Last, as the Skeena steelhead fishery improved this year, so did tourist angling pressure. After years of dismal fishing and associated local economic worry caused by the paucity of visiting anglers, the return of non-residents in modest numbers has revised local complaints about “outsiders.” Non-residents, of course, have provided substantial financial support to Skeena steelhead conservation. Nonetheless, there is substantial sentiment among BC residents, even within such esteemed conservation organizations as the Steelhead Society of BC, for further limiting access by non-residents.

The BC Provincial government has apparently decided on a major review of the classified waters permit system. Based upon past experience, non-residents, some of the most ardent and supportive backers of Skeena steelhead conservation, can probably expect to be under intense pressure from local outfitters that will limit their access to steelhead fishing in BC. You may wish to make your views known to:

HARVEY ANDRUSAK
Director, Fisheries Branch
Ministry of Environment, Lands & Parks
780 Blanshard Street
Victoria, BC V8V 1X4

The Osprey would appreciate copies of your suggestions regarding the BC classified waters program.

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Niagara, cont. from page 6

in the lake’s forage base also figures into the management scheme, as does the progressive cleansing of toxins from the lake.

To the credit of many individuals, groups and agencies, the entire Great Lakes system has shown significant improvement since the 60’s. The value of the wild or naturalized steelhead is beginning to gain more recognition, and the understanding of steelhead dynamics, as it pertains to the Great Lakes, is improving. As for the Niagara River, it is one of a kind. Even after years of abuse, the river still lives. ▲
One year ago, in this newsletter’s Issue No. 20, Kent R. Bullfinch described the plight of wild steelhead in the Klamath River of Northern California/Southern Oregon. A longtime FFF activist and currently the Inland Sports Fishery representative to the Klamath River Restoration Task Force, Kent here reports some encouraging signs of progress. What follows are his remarks from a prepared statement delivered to the Task Force November 30, 1994.

Everyone is concerned with stream flows in the Klamath watershed, particularly in the current drought cycle.

But attention has been focused on water quantity, with barely any notice of water quality.

In considering the requirements of flows for anadromous fish, there seems to be a perception that the main stem of the Klamath is merely a highway to allow spawners to proceed upstream: a conduit to flush juveniles to the ocean as rapidly as possible.

Timing and quality of flows have not been addressed in depth and we have virtually ignored the fact that the main stem has a double burden: to provide rearing habitat and be a migration highway for juveniles emigrating from the tributaries.

Much habitat restoration is underway on a large number of the tributaries, but increased contribution of juveniles from these streams will take time. But in the meantime water conditions in the main stem must be improved in order to receive these juveniles, and to prevent competition from main stem juveniles of either natural or hatchery origin.

While I support the instream flow needs study now being scoped, I see no need to wait for the study’s results to correct and improve present deficiencies in water quality, quantity and flow timing.

The fish are telling us some things that deserve our attention:

1. Adult returns in 1993 and 1994 show that the spawning urge drives fish upriver during minimum flows below those levels earlier believed to be “minimum.”

2. The mortalities in IGH holding tanks in 1993 tell us that water quality factors, such as temperature and oxygen content, are essential for successful spawning.

3. After spawning, the swim up fry require proper temperatures and oxygen content for incubation and survival as well as rearing habitat to allow them to reach migration size.

We are all aware of the dewatering of natural redds in the main stem in early 1994. These are the very fish that this task force is charged to protect and restore.

Studies of emigrating juveniles in the spring and early summer of 1994 indicate that pulses of water released from Iron Gate and Copco reservoirs were successful in moving juveniles downstream. These fish were small for migration and many of them perished owing to temperature and other stresses in the lower river.

IGH has solved a similar problem with swim-up fry by holding the fish in a controlled hatchery environment until they reach 75–85 mm length, then releasing them when temperatures below Iron Gate dam are optimal.

Thus it appears that flow timing is equally as important as water quality and quantity.

The California tribes were forced to aggressively insist upon their trust rights to augmented flows to allow upstream migration of 1994 adult spawners. But these emergency releases do not address water quality factors. And FERC minimum flow standards for Iron Gate dam, established more than 30 years ago, are now insufficient to assure fry-to-migration-size growth. (Water quality was not a problem then and the Clean Water Act was not enacted until 1972.)

Flow rates below Iron Gate dam have for much of the time since 1968 exceeded the FERC minimums, yet Klamath River anadromous runs have declined steadily.

When Iron Gate and Copco dams were constructed for hydropower generation we were told they would not impact anadromous runs below Iron Gate and that hatchery production would mitigate for fish lost above Iron Gate. The reservoirs were to provide water related recreational benefits in and around the impoundments. This “recreational benefit” is found in nearly all the proposals for reservoir-produced best possible cost/benefit ratios. But both Iron Gate and Copco impoundments are producing sub-par recreational benefits because of obnoxious algae growth and a complete lack of oxygen in shallow regions.

In 1992 (a good water year) the California Department of Water Resources verified this poor water quality. Its study concluded that the poor quality water released from Iron Gate undoubtedly had adverse effects on the river for a considerable distance downstream.

In 1993, at a meeting in Redding to consider flow needs, representatives of Pacific Corp told our working group that they would oppose any proposals to require draw downs for protecting secondary recreational benefits that depend on relatively constant reservoir levels.

At best this is flawed reasoning. All area reservoirs (Shasta, Trinity, Shasta Lake, Howland Prairie, Hyatt and Immigrant Lake) drawdown as needed for their primary purposes and their water-related recreational activities have adjusted.

The proposed changes in discharges at Iron Gate and Copco would not have drastic effects on reservoir levels except in drought years (when everyone is affected), which historically will be less than 10 percent of the time.

It is illogical to insist on maintaining constant reservoir levels for secondary local benefits while acknowledging that this action imperils tribal trust rights, regional agriculture and the economic welfare of downstream commercial and fishing communities.

A conceptual plan for changing the discharge regimes from Iron Gate dam includes flow, temperature and oxygen com-
binations which ensure incubation. It also calls for augmented flows during the emergence and swim up periods. This will provide best-possible natural rearing habitat, both for redds in the main stem and for contributions from the tributaries. This flow and water quality requirement certainly will be addressed in the Environmental Impact Statement incident to the upcoming relicensing of the Klamath Power Project in 2006.

However, in May 1994, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that states have the right to require suitable discharges from hydroelectric dams to protect fish life below the dams, regardless of FERC requirements.

I ask that this task force support a proposal that the tribes, Pacific Corp, CDWR, CDFG, TWG and USFWS meet to find ways and means to provide flows to help fish: properly timed flows to ensure water quality, oxygen content and temperatures.

To conclude, if only half of the water now locked up behind Iron Gate and Copco dams had been available for release to the river in late summer 1994, the devastating cutoff of water supply to Klamath Basin agriculture and its wildlife refuge would have been unnecessary.

(Eds note: Ballfinch adds that the task force accepted these recommendations and that he has been charged to facilitate task force discussions with Pacific Corp and the tribes. Further complicating this picture is a dispute between the tribes and basin irrigators over the quantity of releases. Irrigators claim the tribes have failed to quantify their requirements; the tribes counter that FERC’s 1956 minimums do that. A further difficulty is a “best biological opinion” that the Upper Klamath Lake’s level must be maintained at 4141 ft. elev. to protect the officially-endangered Lost River Sucker, a fish important to the Klamath tribe.

Kent argues, correctly we think, that he and his task force will avoid the fight over quantity, pointing out that Nature really controls that factor, and focus on quality issues. If they are successful, water quality should improve overall, regardless of flow levels at any particular time. The Osprey again urges readers, especially Californians and Oregonians, to do whatever they can to lend their support to this important work.)

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IS YOUR NAME HERE?

The Osprey thanks all whose names appear above, as well as the many others who made additional contributions or sent in the annual subscription fee of $4. To the increasing number of you who regularly make an annual contribution, no matter the amount, our very special thanks. You are the backbone of our support. Without you we cannot proceed.
You are invited to participate in one of three joint Russian-American scientific expeditions, endorsed by the Russian government and top Russian fisheries scientists, the U.S. National Marine Fisheries Service and facilitated by the FFF Steelhead Committee.*

Expedition #1: three separate groups consisting of scientists, camp assistants and six anglers. The trips are two weeks in duration each and will return to the general area studied in 1994 but will also include visits to additional rivers. Groups depart Seattle Sept. 9, Sept. 23 and Oct. 7, 1995:

Expedition #2: two groups consisting of scientists, staff and six sponsoring anglers. Each trip is three weeks in duration. This expedition will study a second watershed in a remote region on the west coast of Kamchatka during the period of Sept. 9-Oct.21, 1995. Groups will depart Seattle Sept. 9 and Sept. 30. This is a large river system with numerous tributaries:

Expedition #3: two groups, five sponsoring anglers each. The Groups will study the middle reaches of many west coast watersheds. The third expedition will be mounted on horseback and will be in the field for an extended period. These groups can expect to catch large numbers of big trout (3-10 lbs.) during the period of Aug. 5-Sept.30. Groups depart Seattle Aug. 5 and Sept. 2, 1995.

Each angler will measure, weigh, and take scale and tissue samples for DNA analysis. Fisheries biologists from the University of Washington, Moscow State University and NMFS will assist and analyze collected data.

This is the second in a series of annual expeditions to help Russian scientists study and save endangered Kamchatkan steelhead. A special exemption from their endangered listing will be made for these scientific parties to permit the most-efficient population counts.

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<th>Cost: Expedition #1 or #3</th>
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(all ex-Petropavlovsk)

FFS Steelhead Committee will coordinate arrival times and Russian visas. First come, first serve. U.S. passport needed.

* These are SCIENTIFIC EXPEDITIONS NOT GUIDED SPORTS- FISHING OUTINGS.

All related expenses (tour cost, transportation, etc.) are tax-deductible as charitable contributions to scientific research.

Anglers are responsible for their own personal gear: clothing, waders, fishing tackle, sleeping bag, travel to/from and accommodations in Petropavlovsk. The expedition will provide all food, field accommodations, local guides/sherpas, air-ground-river transport from Petropavlovsk forward and return to Petropavlovsk.
very history student knows that messenger work is hazardous. Frequently, recipients of bad news take out their anger on the messenger rather than the causes and consequences of the reported activity.

In our nation’s capital as well as a number of western state capitals, there has been much commotion recently about the Endangered Species Act, especially in the context of Pacific salmon and northern spotted owls. Some politicians and lots of special interests groups propose to gut the ESA and “unlock” public lands. This nonsense is in the long tradition of shooting the messenger.

Irresponsible human activities over a very long period, not the Endangered Species Act, have caused the precipitous declines in salmon and spotted owl abundance. The federal government has engaged in a massive subsidy of western special interests with catastrophic impacts on fish and wildlife resources, particularly salmon and steelhead, causing widespread extinctions of individual stocks.

For example, timber from public forest lands have been sold AT A LOSS to the U.S. Treasury for the private financial gain of timber companies. Massive public works projects funded by all the citizens of the U.S. (dams, canals, pumping stations, subsidized electric rates, etc.) have been erected for the private benefit of individual citizens at great cost to the rest of us, especially those depending for a livelihood or cultural sustenance upon salmon.

Throughout the West, many PRIVATE ranchers enjoy subsidized grazing rights on public property paying $1.97 for each “animal unit” (one cow and calf per grazing month.) I wonder how many of these rugged individualists would agree to graze my three small donkeys for $1.97 a month on THEIR land???? The deleterious impacts of cattle grazing in riparian zones on salmon and steelhead is well documented, yet we citizens are forced to continue to subsidize these harmful practices for the private financial gain of landowners.

Citizens of the entire U.S. provide subsidized electric power to PRIVATE aluminum companies at about 10 to 15 percent of the retail electric rates in the rest of the country from the huge Columbia hydrosystem. This hydro system is the reason that only ONE SOCKEYE salmon made it back to Red Fish Lake in Idaho in 1994. The ESA did not cause the Columbia salmon declines. Public subsidies to private individuals did.

In these examples and scores of similar instances we citizens are in the curious situation of being forced to pay for (subsidize) activity which we know to be harmful to the environment, not to mention our own economic self-interest, while at the same time being lectured to by many of the recipients of our largesse. Talk about biting the hand that feeds you!

Talk about 1984 double-speak so offensive to common sense. We are free to walk on public land but many (most?) private land owners lock us and the rest of the public off their property. I wonder how common citizens, much less fish and wildlife, will benefit from the so-called “unlocking” of public lands.

Protecting and restoring salmon presents no mysteries. We know that what needs to be done is to address the root causes for the declines—habitat destruction, hydrosystem operations, hatchery practices and harvest regimes. Terminating the public subsidies supporting the myriad of activities harmful to salmon should find philosophical resonance among conservative politicians bent on ending public subsidies to private individuals or companies. Perhaps some are not committed to the premise of ending the billion dollars subsidies for the special PRIVATE interests in their own districts—irrigators, direct service industries, lessees of public grazing allotments, welfare timber sales and so on.

Answers to the salmon crisis will not be found by “unlocking” public lands or dismantling the ESA so that the last salmon may be exterminated to produce sugar beets, plywood or airplanes for private profit. Some of the answers can be found by assuring that government subsidies benefit public rather than private interests.

Salmon are us. If we do not protect the environment they depend upon, we destroy our future and betray our heritage by stealing from our children’s children.
Dear Sirs:

Here is my contribution to cover costs associated with production and mailing of The Osprey.

We enjoy your publication and the interesting articles, which we sometimes share with our readers in Oregon.

Enclosed is a copy of our monthly newsletter. Please include our Chapter in your mailing list.

Keep up the good work!
Sincerely,
Mary Beaudoin, Treas.
NW Steelheaders
Portland, Oregon

To Whom it may concern,

Enclosed please find a donation to The Osprey, a small gesture of my support for your efforts. Please send issues Nos. 21 and 22 to me asap at the above address. I will endeavor to make an annual contribution to The Osprey henceforth. Additionally, if there are any alerts, public meetings, letter writing campaigns or other matters that need to be brought to the attention of the angling public between issues please feel free to contact me at work at Kaufmann's Streamborn in downtown Seattle and I'll do my best to let our customers know.

See you on the river, hopefully with tight lines or pleasant recent memories of an encounter with a wild steelhead.
Sincerely,
Nick Gayeski

November 9, 1994

Dear Osprey Staff:

Once again another thank you for an outstanding issue. I was especially pleased to see an article [U.S.—Canada Salmon Treaty: Update] on what I feel is a major obstacle to recovery of Pacific Salmon.

We have been working directly on gaining and implementing a fair and effective salmon treaty for 13 years now and have yet to see protection and conservation of stocks and an end to directed interceptions.

This year Trout Unlimited and Trout Unlimited Canada worked with other groups to develop a position paper to take to the White House and to the Canadian Government. We were successful in reaching the highest ranking elected and appointed officials in both countries and did succeed in raising the visibility and importance of the treaty to the point that the U.S. Vice President and Prime Minister of Canada were both directly involved in last minute treaty negotiations.

We failed, however, to change the process and both nation’s overfished on depleted stocks of Coho and Chinook Salmon, and Canada recently announced that it is "missing nearly three million Fraser River Sockeye Salmon."

In 1995 we will, once again, work to change the way a U.S. position is developed and negotiated and to reduce the impacts of mixed stock fisheries and directed interceptions. For your information, I have enclosed a copy of the position paper we developed this year and cover letters from some signatory organizations. We hope you might be interested in assisting our effort in 1995.

Once again, thank you for an excellent publication and for shining some light on a very important issue.
Yours in conservation,
Jerry Pavletich
West Coast TU Representative

Jerry Pavletich, RIP

Salmon and steelhead lost one of their strongest supporters when Jerry Pavletich died November 30 at his home in Aberdeen, WA. Jerry was Trout Unlimited's West Coast representative, a job in which he covered five western states.

He was especially well known to Olympia habituées, as an effective lobbyist/conservationist. Jerry’s advice was well considered by politicians and managers alike who relied on his integrity and steadfastness. He will be sorely missed.
LETTERS

Pete Soverel,
Where did you come up with the 25 million???

(Eds note: a reference to Chairman Soverel's piece in Issue 22, September 1994, page 4) Please tell me where you came up with that exaggerated number. Many times you do this to sell your point. However, 25 million is the highest I've ever heard! Please advise.

Chuck Voss
Woodland, WA

Chairman Soverel replies:

Salmonid Foundation
Attn: Chuck Voss
Dear Mr. Voss,

As you know, there have been many efforts to quantify salmon and steelhead losses in the Columbia Basin. None of these efforts was undertaken until well after Europeans had already caused significant declines in Columbia Basin salmon and steelhead populations, not to mention population declines among the native peoples as a result of European diseases and warfare.

The most comprehensive attempt to estimate pre-development salmon and steelhead populations was the 1987 Northwest Power Planning Council report Council Staff Compilation of Information on Salmon and Steelhead Losses in the Columbia Basin. The Council estimated pre-development Columbia Basin aggregate salmon and steelhead populations at 8.35 million. The variations among population estimates result from the entering assumptions which included, among others, commercial and native interception rates, 5-year running means of harvest, estimated total pre-development native human population and annual salmon consumption. The Council has not settled on a particular number. I selected 25 million as a midpoint between the high estimates and those based upon commercial harvest rates at 67.5-85 percent.

I am not sure what your beef is about, nor do I accept your assertion that I and The Osprey fail to report accurately. The 25 million figure I used is well below the highest NW Power Planning Council estimate and only a fraction of the highest estimates cited in other literature—some as high as 60 million.

In any event, what is your point? Are you suggesting that Columbia Basin stocks are healthy or do you question the premise that salmon and steelhead populations in the Columbia Basin are tiny fractions of their historic levels? Scores, probably hundreds, of individual stocks are already extinct. Snake River spring chinook and sockeye will be soon.

R.W. Dunfield, Atlantic Salmon in the History of North America, estimated that total pre-development population of Atlantic Salmon in all the rivers of North America at 10 million. In less than 100 years, Americans have destroyed the Columbia which produced from one to six times as many salmon in a single watershed as all the Atlantic Salmon rivers in all of North America, further underscoring the profligate squandering of our natural resources in the Northwest. Regards

Pete Soverel

Dear Osprey,

As someone whose livelihood depends on the preservation of wild steelhead and who also appreciates the steelhead for the beautiful creature it is, please find enclosed my cheque for a subscription to your publication, The Osprey. Sorry it couldn't have been for more.

All the best and keep up the great work.

Tim Purvis
The Sandy River Flytier

Dear Mr. Soverel,

Yesterday I received the September issue of The Osprey and last night I read your two articles. I was so surprised to finally hear someone lay it out exactly right. But, I wish I hadn't because I haven’t been able to go to sleep all night and it's now 4 AM and I'm sitting at my table with my first cup of coffee and my first Camel starting this letter. I tried to go to sleep but your articles started me thinking of some of the countless hunting and fishing heartbreaks in my life and I thought you might be interested in a few of them.

I grew up in Glendale, California and my fondest memory of my Dad was fishing native rainbow in Backhorn Creek in the Angeles National Forest. My rod was a cut willow with some line wrapped around the end and a snelled hook. This was a hike-in situation so we would have to leave the creek in the late afternoon. The trail was 10-20 feet above the creek and I can still see those trout in every pool. That was some before I entered high school. I had a great quail and rabbit hunting spot I could get to after school but that fell to subdivisions before my senior year.

I left home two days after graduation and headed north. I ended up setting chokers in a logging camp on the north side of Mount Shasta. The year was 1952 and I was soon to be 18. I had great trout fishing every evening behind the bunkhouse. Went back a few years later and that was gone.

In the fall of '52 I moved over to the coast and started college at Humbolt State majoring in Wildlife Management. I soon found out there were salmon in the nearby Mad River. I was shocked. I thought all the salmon were in Alaska. When you grow up in Southern California you think that San Francisco is just a little south of Nome. Well, I really lost it over those salmon. I was on the Mad River every morning in the dark and back again every evening. I was only carrying 12 1/2 units and I damn near flunked out that first semester because of those fish. Many mornings I landed three big Chinook and still made an 8 o'clock class, usually falling asleep in about 10 minutes. It always amazed me how a warm room and a monotonous profl could knock me out. But I still remember those fish and the river vividly; especially being at the mouth with a good afternoon falling tide and seeing those magnificent fish half out of water fighting their way over the bar. Many of the fish we hooked in the channel leading to the estuary would turn and race back down and over the bar and go crashing through the breakers leaving us gasping for air after the race down the channel, standing in the surf watching our line go to the spindle and praying we wouldn't loose the whole line. Needless to say that at the end that first semester I changed my major to Fishery Biology. I fell in love with the salmon and wanted to spend my life working on and for them. That was the fall of '52.
REMINISCENCES
Jerry Wintle/Bob McLaughlin

Jerry Wintle, a Vancouver, BC. resident, has fly-fished the great rivers of British Columbia and Washington for almost fifty years. Because of the singular dedication and skill with which he has pursued the great fish, he is a legend even among the old timers of our sport.

One of my fondest steelhead fly fishing memories happened early in September, 1962. It involved the then little known Morice River.

The previous year, 1961, while fishing the Thompson River, I had run into an acquaintance, Jack Horner. Jack, who I believe was from California, had been among the first in British Columbia to go after steelhead with flies and, reputedly, he was the first to regularly catch Thompson River steelhead using flies. As we conversed along the river, he told me that he had heard some very intriguing stories about the Morice and several other Skeena tributaries in northern British Columbia and advised me to give them a try.

Accordingly, the next September, my wife Jean and I headed north. Five hundred miles further on, in the middle of the night, during a pouring rainstorm, and at the end of a rutted muddy road, we reached the Morice. The location was an old abandoned mill site situated several miles upstream from where the Morice meets the Bulkley.

When we awoke the next morning we found the river and surrounding countryside to be breathtakingly beautiful and in an almost pristine condition. The road up the river to Morice Lake that opened the area up to later large scale logging had only just been completed. We also saw that we were not alone. Three other groups in small trailers were camped in the vicinity, and a nearby old trapper cabin held an occupant.
As it happened, one of the trailer occupants was the redoubtable Karl Mausser. This was his third year along the Morice. A practice he was just then beginning to form, and was to continue until about 1950 when he was well over eighty, was first to drive from his home in California to the Morice and then move on for the balance of the season to the Kispiox. Jeanne and I didn't have a boat, so Karl volunteered to provide us with a tour of the river in his boat and show us where the steelhead were located. As we went from pool to pool I was amazed by the sheer numbers of fish, both coho salmon and steelhead. The darkish colored salmon occupied the pools, while the much lighter colored, almost translucent steelhead held mainly in the tailouts.

As was the practice with the other anglers, Jeanne and I first began with wet flies. However it soon became apparent that dry flies might work just as well. I had enjoyed some success with dry flies along coastal rivers and so about the fourth day I decided to try out this method.

The pool I picked happened to be a short hike downstream from where we were camped. It was named after Old Joe, the current occupant of the tractor cabin. As rumor had it, this was Old Joe's favorite fishing hole and he had once, in a single day, caught an unbelievably large number of coho and steelhead there on spinning gear.

I still vividly remember my first cast to the riffle at the head of the pool. The fly had returned about 20 feet when it was suddenly overtaken by a large steelhead on a follow-back rise. It immediately bolted to the far side and jumped well clear of the water, throwing the fly. This was but the first of quite a few fish in the succeeding days that came to my dry fly, usually a Steelhead Bee. Rare indeed was the sport.

As I experimented, I found that a dry fly could be effectively fished in any manner of ways. One of the easiest and most effective casts was downstream and across, with the fly swinging slowly back across the pool. The fish varied in size from three to fifteen or sixteen pounds. Most were in the three to six pound class, but the larger fish were also in plentiful supply. Anyone of a mind could have caught many each day.

The pace around camp during the two weeks we remained was one of repose and relaxation. The casual and noncompetitive approach to the fishing by all the campers present along the Morice guaranteed a most satisfying fishing experience. Fishing was the main reason for being there, but such other outdoor pursuits as berry picking, grouse hunting, hiking and sight-seeing also were popular. Because the fish were so abundant and so readily caught there was none of the usual rush to be first through the water that we have now come to expect.

Soon, a take and a fish making the St. George beg for mercy. The spinner running for a fork beyond which I could not follow, my unavailing attempts to slow it by pressing fingers against the backing which left scars for a time, the burning sensation, my partner's laughter when he ran down to find me splashing water onto the reel with the burned hand. Then, the fish beached, chrome bright, absolutely tightly packed with muscle. But wait, no longer beached, back into the river and off running again, then finally subdued. Later, another spinner beached.

My first steelhead on the fly was the smallest, but indelible. '69 or '70 it was. Fly fishing had begun to take hold of me. Drift fishing the North Fork (of the Stilly, of course) one winter day the thought struck me, "I can come back here next summer with a fly rod!" I hungered in anticipation. Next June I left my old Sal Trout and early glass rod, circa 1950, for a 445 Medalist and an Eagle Claw rod costing $13.50 — or was it $13.95? My second time out was a very warm sunny day. It was mid-morning when I got to the Cicero drift. I had purchased one copy of the old Devastator (silver tinsel chenille, black bear wing) which I knotted to the leader. I have no recollection whether the line matched the rod and it was years old. Whatever the manufacturer's intention, it was now a sinking line. I started at the riffle and began working down. In those days there was good bottom structure and a perfect flow. I was casting — not very far, I'm sure — across and fishing down, dead drift. A take, I set, and to my astonishment a silver fish jumped high and I knew it was a steelhead. I had been reading about playing from the reel and that's what I now did. Four jumps — I'd bet a thousand dollars it was four, it so struck in my mind — some runs, and a fish on the beach. Twenty-four inches and about four pounds, but a steelhead on the fly! From that moment on I was "blooded" to the sport.

But winter fish on the fly? Humph! One acquaintance likened fly fishing for winter steelhead to playing with oneself versus the real thing. At that time there still was some dubiousness about summer fish on the fly and almost universal skepticism regarding winter fish. I was acquainted with and later published a biographical article on Al Knudson who knew otherwise. So, one day

Bob McLaughlin is a longtime habitué of such well-known Washington rivers as the Skagit, North Stilaguamish and Skykamish, a man with well-honed angling skills, as well as possessor of a colorful and convivial personality, Bob is well-respected and popular among his riverside peers.
in the winter season of ‘71 I did what you have to do to take a winter fish on the fly — I left my drift gear home.

I elected to try the upper North Fork and began somewhere between the pools at Fortson and Skeer’s. Not far above Skeer’s, wading deep on a steeply inclined bottom, a rock rolled under me and I took an untimely, ungraceful swim. I thrashed disgustedly onto the beach, thinking my day was already over. But the sun appeared, and my wrung-out woolens gave me enough warmth to continue. I then came down into Fortson from the railroad side and positioned myself in the only place I could cast from, which was ledge rock below the pond outlet stream. I had the pool to myself.

Now this was years B.A.L.G. (Before my Armload of Loomis Graphites) but I had graduated to a nine-foot Fenwick glass rod for a 9 line, which, strung with a full-sinking Cortland type III, had taken lots of summer fish, and which I thought was just fine. I had purchased the rod from the father of the late Art Smith. Today I had strung it with a sinking head.

A few casts covered the water I could reach, so I made the “one more cast” we all know. Pulling to strip in the last cast, I felt resistance, then tugging, then a run and a jump as a hen went skyward. I shook with excitement — I wanted this fish! After another jump or two and some dogged infighting, I led the fish into a little inlet in the ledge rock and pivoted around to face it, straddling this little bay. Victory! A winter fish on the fly! But, damn! The fish bolted out between my legs and ran back into the river bending the rod tip nearly to the breaking point. But, all’s well that ends well, and I recovered the now exhausted fish. As I recall, it weighed about nine pounds at the Oso store where I stopped to purchase a ceremonial beer. I remember that I bought a Miller’s because it was “The Champagne of Bottled Beer.” At Al Knudson’s Camp I toasted the day, and going to the river to clean the fish, spied a young man flyfishing. He was decked out from head-to-toe and from reel seat-to-fly in brand new expensive gear. He was fishing a spot I thought would surely be barren, and to double the ignominy, proceeded to hang and break off his shooting head. He looked over at me and grinned sheepishly. Did I feel smug?

A few days later, the angling, tradition, and camaraderie of the sport all came together at the next meeting of the Evergreen Fly Fishing Club. I was sitting at the same table as Enos Brander when I rose to report taking my first fly-caught winter fish, on a Brad’s Brat."