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Trophy Fishing

By Russ Willis

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Fly fishing, in its most advanced stages, is a passion of such consummate delight that word, no matter how eloquent, fails miserably to adequately picture or describe the full meaning to all who have succumbed to the long rod, silk and tinsel. My addiction to fly fishing – that wonderful disease – started forty-five years ago, and I can report that up to the present time I've found no anti-biotic that killed my fishing fever. It still rages on, driving my aching body to ever distant streams and lakes in quest of ever greater challenges.

I'm sure that, like many of you, I'm surely "hooked" and will continue to be as long as I can still pull on a pair of waders or stand in a bouncing Pram.

There are so many facets to fly fishing. However, I'm going to zero in on one area that you don't hear too much about, but a facet of fly fishing that can certainly add a new or another dimension to the sport for many of you. I am talking about trophy fishing, deliberately setting weight or size standards as a goal for your personal achievement. In this day of catch and release, trophy fishing may be viewed as suspect; however, catching a trophy doesn't necessarily mean one that ends up on the wall. After weighing and measuring, a trophy can also live to fight again. I have been trophy fishing for a number of years with some degree of success. Let me hasten to add that trophy fishing requires a great measure of plain ol' luck. Al Knudson and I were discussing this point together one day on the Tancheree drift and we both came to this conclusion. It doesn't take anymore skill to deceive and hook a twenty pound steelhead than it does a seven pounder. However, there are many competent fly fishers that could do a good job of playing a large fish that sadly never get the opportunity. To get that opportunity the goddess of good fortune certainly has to be smiling on you. She has smiled at me several times in fly fishing career and gave me a chance to play and land a fish of trophy size.

After I started to fish exclusively with a fly for winter steelhead in the Skagit during the early 50's, I soon learned how important it was to know the height of the river at any given time. Each fly drift fished best at a given river flow.

After a season or two of trial and error, I managed to complete a table of all the water I fished on the Skagit with the corresponding favored river flow as measured on the water gage at Mount Vernon.

To help in planning where to fish and to also save valuable time, I talked Dee Watkins into including the river height and color in the daily Bert Robinson fishing reports. I believe they are still including this information in their daily program. It was and is valuable information for those living away from the river.

My records of river flow are in storage but I recall some of the information on favored river heights. For instance, the Rancheree, probably the best holding water in the river for the fly in the 40s and 50s, fished the best and held more fish if the river was running 8' to 11' at Mount Vernon. Below 8' the flow became too thin to hold fish and if the river was over 11' it became an exercise in "dam' foolery" because once you started through the drift you had to fish through. There was no turning back as you were at the top of your waders and the water behind and next to the bank was a bit deeper than your fishing position for the first 75 yards. So once you committed yourself you had to fish through – like it or not.

Another run on the south side below Day Creek I called the "Leaning Cedar" required a river 7' or below. The run was next to the bank with a sunken gravel bar out in the river extending 150 yards parallel to the bank. In order to get on the bar you had to cross shallow but fast flowing reach of water that lay between the bank and the bar. If the river wasn't at the right height you couldn't or shouldn't try to wade across. This piece of water was quite a hike from the road so it was a good idea to know in advance if it was fishable, otherwise a hike down and back to the car wasted 45 minutes of fishing time. A 12' plus river enabled you to cross the slough to the island at the head of Cumberland Creek. With that flow the river and slough were both good water. At 13' plus don't try to reach the island, especially at the end of the day if you be crossing back at dark. Too risky – especially if the river was on the rise.

I'm sure you are beginning to wonder what all this information on river heights has to do with the tale of my "trophy steelhead". Just be patient and you will soon see the point that I am making.

(We leave Russ out there on the Skagit with water swirling around the top of his waders with the promise that the tale will be completed in the April Edition. Danny Beatty editor)

Walt Johnson, my ol' fishin' partner, and just incidentally one of the finest steelhead fly fisher I've ever wet a fly line with, rolled into my place on Friday evening, February 23, 1959. We had planned this trip for a long time and both of us were looking forward to two days together on the Skagit. However, warm rains and a thaw in mid-week had really kicked the river out of shape.

On Friday the fishing report gave the river at 19' and rising with the color of Coleman coffee. Walt was disappointed to roll into such a poor report on the river.

Knowing the conditions were hopeless we sacked in on Saturday morning and spent the rest of a restless day cussin' the weather. By Saturday night we had talked ourselves out and decided to take a drive up the Skagit on Sunday for the lack of anything better to do. At Mount Vernon we stopped and checked the river. Just less than 20' and the foam on top of that chocolate mess looked like an ad for Olympia brew. If we had any doubt

about the fishability of the river they certainly had been laid to rest. Still, we were out, so why not mosey up the river.

At Concrete a check of the Baker River showed it high and quite colored. Continuing up stream we eventually arrived at Rockport and discovered that the Sauk River was the main culprit. It was out of its banks and flowing a torrent of pure mud. Above Rockport, much to our surprise, the Skagit wasn't all that bad. High it certainly was but the color was not too bad, about two feet of visibility. Not the condition one would choose for the fly but still fishable.

We pulled off the road at the next wide spot and were soon pulling on our waders. Gathering up our rods and vests, we picked our way through underbrush down to the river where we hastily strung our rods, tied on a fly and began to look for fly water. Walking up-river 300 yards we came to a spot where high water had cut behind a gravel bar, forming an island. The water we wanted to fish lay along the island – the problem – to wade across. Walt, at 200 pounds plus, made it across with only minimal difficulty. In those days I weighed a robust 140 pounds. Lacking the ballast needed to hold me in heavy, swift flow, I edged across with due caution and respect all waders of large streams should have. Picking my way carefully, I finally joined Walt on the island.

Walt started to fish the water about half way down the island while I walked up to the head. The water along the island was heavy and fast, marginal fly water at best.

My first exploratory casts confirmed my fears; the standard ties were not going to get the depth. I had bent on one of my own creations that I used quite often called the "Chief Skagit". It had produced a number of fish for me, including my first Field and Stream winner, a beautiful 15 pound 1 ounce buck that landed in 7th place in 1956. However, that is another story. The Chief Skagit was on a 2/0 but it zipped through the water with nary a touch on the rocks. If you don't get an occasional feel of the fly touching a rock, you are just wasting your time.

It was time to change flies – but to what?

As I thumbed through my fly box, my eye fell on a group of Prey Optic patterns I had tied a year previous but had not really used seriously because of the inherent casting problems optic patterns have. Casting problems or not, this was the time for the fastest sinking fly I had and the optic, I thought, filled the bill. With the low visibility of the water I decided to go with the black optic as it would show better against the sky. Even with the optic, I was failing to get the proper depth using the standard up and across casting method so I changed to a casting system I had developed during a period I was beset with bursitis and could stand the pain of normal casting.

This is how this casting system works. Basically it is a combination of two roll casts. On the first roll cast you extend and shoot all the line you can. This cast is made either straight across or only slightly upstream. The second roll cast must be timed exactly right to produce the results you want. The fly has to have had time to sink but not too deep. When you think the fly is deep enough you slowly raise your rod over your head as you pull the rod and line back of your shoulder. Then you execute a snappy roll cast up stream of your fly. If the fly is at proper depth and you make the cast with proper force the line will lay out nicely up stream. In the process the fly will be pulled from the water and deposited a foot or two in front of your line in a pile of loose leader. In this condition the fly can sink with little or no impediment from line or leader. If the run is deep you can pull out more line from the reel and mend this line upstream for a longer drift which

gives you additional depth to the fly. Of all methods I've seen or tried, this process will produce a consistently deeper drift with your fly. The one drawback is that your fly is on slack line as it drifts downstream. Any take during this time would not be felt. However, practically all of my fish have been taken on the arc of the fly as it swings around at the end of the drift so I feel this condition is of little consequence. The ability to get depth far outweighs that deficiency.

I had fished down the island about 2/3 of its length, and to be frank, I really didn't expect to find a fish or even feel a take for that matter. My cast was about 3/4 of the way through the swing on the end of the drift when I was jarred awake by the sudden realization that a steelhead had taken the fly. This was not an explosive take like many summer fish are, but rather a heavy pull. A moment later, as he felt pressure, he swirled the surface in a typical winter – run fashion as he turned downstream and started his first run down and across.

It was of interest to me to note that the fish had followed the fly for some distance and had taken when it was a rods length from the beach and in water about 3 feet deep. This was not holding water so this fish was definitely on the move. A traveling fish is always a more willing taker – I don't know why, perhaps it has something to do with its metabolism. At any rate "ol' lady luck" sure was at my elbow that day. Why? Because if I'd made my cast a second slower or faster the fly would have failed to have intercepted this upstream swimming fish. But the timing was right and I was solidly into a heavy fish.

My first estimation was 10 pounds but as the battle progressed I jumped it to 12 or 13 pounds. Not once during the 45 minutes that I played it did I surmise how large it was.

The fight was typical and uneventful except that it kept dropping slowly downstream. I followed slowly and finally realized that the bend of the river next to the road was as far as I could go. I had only a short 25 yards of beach left to follow so I had no alternative but to put the butt of my Winston into the fish and hope I could turn him out of the fast water and get him headed toward the slow water of an eddy at the bend of the river. It was touch and go for some time and I was afraid that the hook might pull free after having him on for so long. Slowly, ever so slowly, I was able to turn his head toward me. When the current began to flow on his other side the river became my helper and not my adversary. He came into the eddy with no difficulty and the battle for all intents and purposes over. Shortly he was in shallow water and when he turned on his side, I couldn't believe the size of him.

A short heavy fish, a beautiful prime buck. He had won one battle and lost another for in the corner of his mouth along with my fly was a bait hook he had acquired on his upstream journey.

Walt had his Hardy spring scales and they gave us an overly optimistic reading. Walt said, "Congratulations Russ, you have just broken the State record for steelhead on a fly". The reading was just a shade less than 21 pounds. Wes Drain's 20 pound 2 ounce fish was #1 at the time. Our primary concern then was to get the fish to a scale for an official, verified weighing. We were able to do this at Rockport on the butcher scales in the General Store. The butcher scale said 19 pounds 10 ounces and my prize fish became the 2nd largest fish, not number 1. It still was a trophy of a lifetime and I was elated to have the good fortune to have taken it.

The moral, if any, of this story is that dedicated steelheaders should fish the hours he has available and don't let the high dirty water keep you by the fireplace. My river flow

records said stay home - - Boy! I'm sure glad I didn't. This fish placed 3rd in the 1959 Field and Stream Awards. Two Kispiox fish from Northern B.C. placed ahead of me.