

School for Smolts

The noble trout deserves the sanctity of the deep water, and if you cannot entice her up to your dry fly on the surface, then you are not a fly fisherman. – Anonymous

I'd rather be catching fish on nymphs than not catching fish on dries. – David Paul Williams

No one has ever gotten into the backing with a tenkara. – Japanese proverb

When I tire of multi-tasking with my thumbs, answering ‘respond now or else’ texts and emails all day, every day, day after day; when I can no longer abide the middle-finger-bestowing Tesla ‘emission elsewhere vehicle’ non-drivers; when the insults pile up and overwhelm me, I cry “Enough,” and retire to fly-cast the nearest freestone stream. Not so much to catch fish but for the Zen of it.

But the tech zombies are already there, combat fishing with \$10,000 rigs, muttering obscenities between gritted teeth, and selfie-posing for proof of a ‘balanced’ life. To escape them, I must go far – farther still, high up into the Blue Mountains of northeastern Oregon, to the upper, Upper North Fork of the John Day River - to the wilderness there.

For thorough respite from the urban hassle, for a dozen years, fellow fly fishing club members, my daughter, and I fished Oregon’s lower John Day River. We liked to float down the stream for multiple days and even a week at a time. We took our time slow-fishing the thirty-mile wilderness segment from, why not, Thirty-Mile Creek.

We fished for the capstone Smallmouth Bass. One-hundred-a-day fish counts were common. Big bushy dries, hoppers, poppers; they all worked. Hopper with a dropper caught two fish every cast. Add another



nymph, three. The ferocious predators feed in wolf packs. When the desert canyon heats up the water, their metabolism forces them to eat. Eric Olson once tied a strip of aluminum foil on a bare hook and it worked just fine. Cast out a giant imitation mouse or Hamster on a hook, and you’ll have a gang of teenagers hit hard trying to bite morsels off.

The warm water lower river is now on the Instagram tour. Having too much fun splashing about, the mobs clog the stream and hog all the campsites, sometimes trashing them, forcing the Bureau of Land Management to require permits for access. To escape the hordes on the lower river, one must go spartan, light-boat in extremely low water or not at all, with all your gear in a single backpack.



Some who have seen their favorite fishing spots overwhelmed, give up. For me, there is still too much left out there to love.

Since the river comes up in the afternoon and drops at night, its source is in snow country. The Blue Mountains to the east? The largest tributary up high, the North Fork of the John Day, begins as a ponderosa pine-shrouded cold-water trout-bearing mountain stream. The crowds have not yet found the headwaters; too skinny to float, safe from intrusion for now.



The upper, upper North Fork above Dale, Oregon, is still a remote Chinook Salmon and Steelhead smolt-rearing gem of a stream. In the highest elevations, the stream flows through a nationally designated eighty-five-thousand-acre wilderness. You can get there on a quick, four-and-one-half hour drive down the interstate highways diagonally across Washington from Seattle by way of stream-proximate Pendleton, Oregon. Once in Pendleton, you are in the heaven the backcountry offers, so the one-hour drive to the North Fork is a treat.

Spurning further deliberations, early on a late July morning, I was “off like a prom dress.”

Stopping at the Pendleton Walmart for fishing licenses boosted my spirits. Compared to the other shoppers, I was not that fat after all. Tanking gas in Oregon reminds me of those carefree days of childhood when petrol was pumped and windows squeegeed by smiling attendants. US Hwy 395 (in Oregon dedicated to WWI Veterans) leads southwest through farm country, then follows the stands of



ponderosa pine, larch, Douglas fir, and spruce of the Battle Mountain Scenic Corridor to the invisible hamlet of Nye, and turns south towards Dale. The road drops into the carpet of luxuriant grass tussocks that enrich the stream banks of the North Fork tributary Camas Creek.

Where the Camas finds confluence with the North Fork, I turned east and upstream on unpaved Forest Service Road FS-055 along the river towards the Wilderness. Profound solitude was at hand. Just after NF-055 turned north and the river road became a tad rough, and given the low sun in the sky, with an eagerness to fish, I chose a spot above a lovely stream drift. The boondocking was abundant and riparian to the river.

Having lent my two and three-weight stream rods to my daughter, and upon seeing that my favorite cheap Redington Classic Trout rods were to be discontinued, I bought their three-weight 8’-6” fly rod. I ponied up more money for a quality, heavily forward, four-weight fly line. A novice caster despite 10,000 casts, I have counted every noodle. I prefer to line weight up an increment to better feel the line load the rod.

Keen to fish, ignoring camp set up, I rigged the rod and tied on a size sixteen Parachute Adams. May I opine that, along with the Royal Wulff, the Adams is the most reliable surface fly? Or maybe I like them because the hackles of these flies ride high, and I can see them undulate down the seam drifts. Only fishing dries, it was less about catching and more about casting and getting strikes.

Larger resident Brook, Rainbow, occasional Bull, and Cutthroat trout were upstream in the cooler feeder creeks, but plenty of eager Chinook salmon and steelhead smolts smacked the fly each cast. The

action brought a broad smile to my face. Why had I vowed to snip off the hooked part of the fly (not just the barb) if I were to catch a fish?



Catching interrupted the rhythm of rolling out the line, the gentle settling of the fly onto the surface of the water, the bobbing with the current, and the suddenness of the strikes.

After three or four casts I caught a feisty little six-inch smolt. Promptly released, I kept my promise to snip off the business end of the hook. I kept teasing them. The adolescents were getting much-needed exercise in preparation for their arduous anadromous journey ahead. They learned the futility of rising to artificial flies. To continue enjoying topwater action, I had to move up or downstream to begin new fly-shying lessons for the uninitiated. It soon got dark, and I enjoyed my flash-lit cold dinner followed by the wonders of star-gazing and, after sgrìob¹, sipped cheap Evan Williams Bourbon, neat. Hell, it beats Four Roses.

To set up camp, presto, I pushed a button on the remote key that raised the rear hatch of my Subaru. Boondocking was easy because I had the ten essentials: a sleeping pad, a fart (sleeping) bag, a pillow, two new and improved wide-mouthed pee bottles, a wag bag hung on the circumference of a Home Depot five-gallon bucket with a snap-on toilet lid, and the remote action key to open and close the rear



hatch. Sorry, that's only eight. I forgot the two mosquito screen sleeves that slid over the entire rear windows to solve the ventilation problem. No one can accuse me of conspicuous consumption.

Morning dawned thirty-eight degrees and a new cohort of smolts had replaced yesterday's graduates of my class in fly-balking. The bright sun warmed my semi-

gloved fingers. Same story: lots of strikes until the kids learned better. Hunger imposed itself, class was adjourned, and I had my morning coffee-laced smoothie using an ingenious USB-rechargeable portable blender that AI could never have invented. Unqualified for teaching graduate school with artificial nymphs, upriver destinations summoned. I broke camp with a flick of the remote tailgate closer.

¹ Originally Gaelic, for the itchiness that overcomes the upper lip just before taking a sip of whiskey – Bill Bryson in *The Mother Tongue*

The Subaru took me to the easternmost, politically-incorrect ‘Oriental’ Campground, situated as far as you can travel before reaching a jaw-breaking, jeep-destroying dirt road. Beyond the nearly impassable two-track, the North Fork Wilderness hikers trail continues upriver to the resident trout feeder streams: Big Creek, with its tributaries, Winom, and others, where I repeat, even a few Bull Trout can be found. To tread the trail and fish the feeder creek emboguments is to catch trout, even Westslope Cutthroats in the Upper North Fork itself.

In the latter part of the dry season, the creeks could be called rivulets. I needed my two-weight rod. For fear of the embarrassment of being seen using one, I eschew the tenkara, which telescope down so they can quickly be hidden down your pants leg. Cutting a reasonably straight willow branch, the longest I could find, I made a tippet-on-tippet fly line leader with first, five feet of number two tippet, then three and one-half feet of number four followed by four feet of ‘authentic’ number six tippet. To the end tippet came a number eighteen ant, which took a while to attach since I could hardly see the eye of the hook. (You can tie any knot if you can get the tippet through the eye.) If I were seen with this non-castable setup, I could always start beating the grassy banks and plead that I was clearing them of ticks.



Small stream trout startle easily. I crept up on my knees. DEET kept the ticks off but strangely attracted fleas. I thought about tying a number twenty-eight flea fly but gave up on an idea that awaited cataract surgery. I ventured a flick cast a la Huck Finn, followed by several low pick-up and lay-down casting maneuvers and caught a seven-inch Brookie. Damn it, I had forgotten to cut off the hook. Going back to strike-with-no-release fishing was more fun. A garter snake slithered by, wondering what I was doing down there - eating fleas? I overdid the bow and arrow cast and found that a nature-grown carbon-composite fly rod broke just like the fake ones. Sad to quit this place where I had not seen a person since leaving the paved road access the evening prior, I had no time for continued pretend-fishing because appointments with Smallmouth Bass lower down the North Fork called.

As it warms over the 44-mile section between Dale and Monument, North Fork Pisces transitions from all salmonids to dominant sporty bass, the genera mixed in the slightly warmed waters in between. Sasha and her buddy, master angler Peter Maunsell, fished smallmouth above Monument the year before and caught larger fish than they ever caught below. I chose Monument because there was nary another motel in the region. Grant County supports 7,233 souls over some 2.9 million acres. That’s a whopping 400 acres per resident - my kind of stress-free space. There was no cell service, and the residents of the valley were proud of it. They thought that city people are addicted to their phones and divorced from their communities, which was true.

The chosen motel in Monument, the only choice, advertised kitchenettes. I had contacted the manager over her landline, telling her we were fishers after smallmouth, unsure of where the public access was. The Public Lands BLM map I found on the internet was stamped “Public Lands as Indicated Are Inaccurate.” She assured me that she would personally show me all the great fishing holes. When I told her I was glad she had a kitchenette as there were no restaurants to be had, she said, “I’ll cook for you. You will not go hungry!” I thought, “Home-cooked food after a tiring day of scores of smallmouth strikes!”

Nothing could be farther from the truth; the home-cooked part, that is. When I arrived, there was the proprietress, not glancing up from her Wi-Fi internet-connected device, sitting on a picnic table in front of the “cook shack” trailer on wheels. The spoon was greasy, open from 11 to 6, where they served maybe one customer a day MAFA (Make America Fat Again) frozen, prebreaded, even partially pre-fried embolisms, ready for hot, rendered black bear fat.

Putting on my happy face, I said I was the guy coming to fish for smallmouth. Could she show me the fishing holes on my map? Without looking up, she responded, “Pffft, there ain’t no public access here; you have to go downriver towards Spray.” Astonished, I asked, “Really?” The owner, “Well, there’s the three miles of road access close to town where the locals go to cool off and wade. But that has been all fished out for years.” To further disappointment, she added, “The private land is not posted, and they shoot and don’t ask questions after.” Great. I inspected the motel room. The kitchenette emphasized the ‘ette’ part with a tiny microwave and, for table dining, a narrow, rustic navel-high slab of sawmill offal on wobbly stilts.

My daughter Sasha was on her way up from California to join me. I borrowed the motel landline and advised her to stop for dinner along the way. She did enjoy the crepuscular drive along the river from Mitchell, Oregon. The next morning, we made the best of it and moseyed over to the busy, dusty dirt roadside “public access” up from town, rigged up, and clambered down to fish. Sasha used my new rig and caught a few, but they were on sub-surface flies. Hot, splenetic - tired and crabby from a week of work and the long drive, she released her frustration: "I hate this place, I hate this rod, reel, and fly line and I told you that we should have gone downriver." I said, “Well, let’s just break for breakfast.” We found another unadvertised cook house on wheels down the road where surprisingly they home-cooked meals. We shared a picnic table with an interesting clientele of illegal pot growers already in their cups at 11:00 in the morning.



Fashioning a new plan, we scurried up the beautiful drive to fish the trout water of the North Fork I had fished that morning and found a perfect stream drift in the cool shade of the mountain pines. Sasha was soon shouting, “Grab the camera and take some pictures. Look at me double-hauling with this little rod and shooting 50 feet of line,” catching smolts and tiny Mountain Whitefish and thoroughly enjoying the day.

We parted soon after dusk, Sasha for her work for the Forest Service in Northern California, and me to meet my brother and sister-law at their vacation home in exurban Sunriver, Oregon. But not before Sasha absconded with the despised rod, reel, and fly line she used to articulate her most elegant casts of the season.

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