

# THEM TWO-FOOTERS

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It was late in the afternoon at the Waterwheel RV Camp on Williamson River in southern Oregon.

“How’s fishing?” I asked the well-tanned fisherman at the boat ramp as he climbed out of his drift boat.

“Caught a few...none of them two-footers though,” he said.

Two-footers?

Had they actually expected to catch a 24-inch trout on a fly in this beautiful, but only medium-sized river? Really?

I was about to say something, but they were busy putting away their boat, and so I walked back up the ramp and left.

Since then I have talked to fly anglers, guides, biologists and others about those so-called, “two-footers;” and yes, Virginia,

those fish do exist and more than a few anglers have successfully caught them on a fly. Usually, I am a somewhat lackadaisical angler, happy with most any what I call a “meaningful” fish, one that can run a bit of line off the spool. But two-footers...hmm... yes... Yes! Suddenly, I discovered a worthy fly-fishing goal: to catch a two-footer trout on a fly



I can't tell you all the foibles I have had during this past decade in trying to catch such a robust trout. I'm sure many other anglers are accustomed to hooking and landing such fish, but not me: eighteen inches, sure, and I am delighted when one comes to hand. Twenty inches? Yes, I have landed some on stillwaters, but few in moving waters. I'm sure I have watched several very large trout shake the hook and swim away, too, but that does not ring my bell. I wanted to bring the fish to hand, press the flesh, see it, photograph it... if only briefly.

The locus for my task was the Upper Klamath Lake in southern Oregon, the largest freshwater lake west of the Rockies. While 4,140 feet in elevation it is some 20 miles long, eight miles wide and mostly very shallow, rich in all manner of prey for trout. Specifically, the trout in question is the native redband rainbow trout, one that is indigenous to a half a dozen states located east of the Cascade Mountains. These fish are similar to standard rainbow trout, but they can survive in warmer water better than can most other trout. They look much the same, too, but have many black spots and often with white tips on some of their fins. Most of these fish that end up on the end of a fly line's tippet are relatively small, but not in this sea-like lake. There, many grow large and some are salmon-sized; but I didn't need a record breaking three-footer, a two-footer would be fine.

Over the years I have traveled to seek those fish, less in the lake itself, but rather its headwaters. There in the summer the fish migrate out of the warm shallow lake to the cold spring-fed headwaters, such as the Crystal, Wood and Williamson rivers. Some of those waters originate from the slopes of Crater Lake, others from the remote, interior marshes of the Sprague River. From July to October those fish are available. Only you have to figure out how in the world to hook them as they have been around the block and know the real McCoy from the fake. The waters in those areas are generally clear and relatively shallow so the clumsy caster goes empty handed. The experts tell you to tie up long leaders, fluorocarbon tippets, and well-tied flies. They suggest an intermediate sinking line, leech patterns, bait fish imitations, and sometimes caddis or mayfly nymphs. Generally, there is little top action, but it can happen.

Learning to cast a long and delicate loop is more than helpful. I know one guide back in the day who used to first take his clients to the boat ramp early in the morning and show them their casting moxie. If the distance was short and sloppy he told

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them to save their money and their time and leave. Tough love.

It had been a bit more than ten years since I had first chatted with the fisherman at the Waterwheel who told me about the two-footers. Now, myself and my friend, Brian, were ensconced in our guide's (Craig's) drift boat floating down that very same river. The river looked much the same as it was back then, but we were not: we had less hair, grayer, more wrinkles -- and a void within me since the recent loss of my beloved.

All the same, it was a splendid early September day, sharp and chilly in the early morning. It warmed up quickly with the bright, flame-orange orb peeking over the eastern horizon while the orb to the west was growing paler and paler. The river was not a glass-surfaced spring creek, nor was it a white-water river either. Its banks were lush with grasses and brush along the water's edge, but a few feet upslope were sagebrush and Ponderosa pine. Virtually

all the land along the river was in private ownership so there was little public bank fishing and a drift boat was the conveyance by which we were to wet our lines.

I had traveled downstream with Craig before over the years and had hooked a fish from time to time, including one that was probably a two-footer, but it shook the hook after a blistering run downriver. I also had sought those two-footers in other nearby headwaters, back when I owned a drift boat myself. With my trolling motor and with another friend named Dick, we explored the marsh-like Wood River and later Pelican Bay, the upper reach of the lake. Dick lost a two-footer near the boat in the bay on of all things an adult damselfly pattern, for big fish were slurping up those dainty, blue-neon delicacies at high noon in the shallows. In the evening of that same day I saw more large fish rise to something...something that I could never figure out: one despondent angler.

But on this bright day in September

I was ready, very ready, once again to hopefully catch one of those big fellas. The water was clear and with a tad tea-colored tint to it. In places there were large boulders mid-river in six or seven feet of water and close by there was swift, choppy water only inches deep. Craig was able to deftly guide his craft through the thread of the "V" in the current. When anchored on a good run you could send your fly out to either bank. We both had intermediate sinking lines and had medium-sized dark leech patterns on our tippets.

"Feed it, feed it," Craig told me after I quartered the downstream cast and let it swing into the erogenous zone.

My fingers pulled the line off the spool, the line still swinging, hopefully the fly swimming its way closer and closer to a fish. Around me were no other boats, US Highway 97 was off to starboard, and many river miles were ahead of us. In that high elevation, dry terrain east of the mountains the cold dawn changes quickly. Soon you



peel off layers of clothing, don your sun glasses, and gob on the sunscreen—all before 9 a.m.

*The Tug, hard and satisfying, and suddenly the line is taunt. The water's surface explodes as a large fish thrashes about and then jumps once, twice, thrice. I let it run when it wants to, and then I try to reel line in when it stalls, when it decides to stay put, near the bottom, mid-stream, one stubborn SOB. My nine-foot, #6 Scott rod does its job silently, leveraging itself as I pump it upwards and then reel in a few inches as the rod goes back down.*

Before long I was able to lead the tiring fish toward Craig's net. He gently removed the hook and the fish, my fish, for the moment, was mine. Halfway still in the water, its glossy flanks were a brilliant silver color, brushed with an iridescent rosy stripe and black spots on its back. After a few minutes Craig let it go and the fish vanished, back wherever it wanted to go, probably to lick its wounds. Well, there were not really any wounds, save a pinprick in its lower jaw, mostly just a trauma in body and soul for disrupting its once leisurely morning.

And me? Delighted. Absolutely. It was not quite up to the two-foot measurement, but it was close. It was a bruiser, for sure.

As we continued floating down the river, mile after mile, I landed three more fish, two of them larger than the first one. The largest one was the type of fish, like some steelhead, that ignore the current and decide to run upstream. This fish had struck at the lip of a reef, virtually a surface take, and in a nanosecond, it was, like a barracuda, knifing through the water, racing across to the far bank.

Eventually, I was able to lead the fish in toward Craig's net. As a catch and release landing, we had to keep the fish in the water and release it quickly so we just had a moment to ascertain its dimensions. Darned close to the goal line—maybe over the line.

That was good enough for me. My ten-year goal had been accomplished. More than I had hoped.

Later in the afternoon the bite died down and the wind kicked up. At this time of year, the wind tells you something; it tells you that a grasshopper or two may have been blown off-course, ignominiously ending up in the river. As such, I grabbed my dry line set-up, tied on a hopper, and cast it out on the water within inches of the streamside grasses.

"Feed it, feed it," said Craig again. I long-lined it downriver within a foot of the shore, hoping for a dry fly attack. Eventually, way downriver where I barely could



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see the hopper, I swung it back toward mid-river, preparing to pull the line back up. The fly skated across the surface, creating a little "V" shaped wake.

"Wow!" Craig and I cried out in unison. Brian looked over, but he was in the stern and could not see what we saw: It was a boil a yard wide that had exploded where the hopper had been skating. A beat... another beat...the hopper gone...silence... more silence...no one said a word...my hand gripped the becalmed rod.

Then the ruffled flow of the river began to flatten out again. The hopper popped back up. No cigar.

Another cast. Then one more and it was time to bring my rig back into the boat as we were about to move into some rapids.

I stuck my rod into its holder and looked out at the parched, rainless late summer vegetation. Then I looked upwards, beyond to the powder blue sky, where a wispy cirrus floated high above, effortless, rudderless, unawares.

I looked back down again and fumbled around for my water bottle, picked it up and took a long drink. It had been more than just a good day—and the void within me was not quite as what it once had been.

*Tom Alkire lives in Oregon. See his free blog on his author's website at: [tomalkire.com/blog](http://tomalkire.com/blog). His books are available there, too, including his latest book published by Stackpole Books at "Western Waters: Memories and Lessons from Twelve Rivers"*

