# CROOKED RIVER REDBANDS

SCOTT LINDEN

# AVOID THE CROWDS ON THIS DOWNSIZED VERSION OF THE DESCHUTES

LY FISHING'S WORST-KEPT SECRET—THE STORIED DESCHUTES RIVER—HAS AN UGLY STEPSISTER. MAYBE YOU'RE WEARY OF THE NOTORIOUS "RUBBER HATCH" OF RAFTING SPLASH-AND-GIGGLERS SHOUTING "ARE YA CATCHIN' ANY?" OR YOU'VE ENDURED YOUR LAST LINEUP AT THE BOAT RAMP. DON'T FRET. A SHORT DRIVE COULD PUT YOU ON A MINIATURE VERSION OF THE LEGENDARY RIVER, SANS MOST OF THE ANNOYANCES. NOT SURPRISINGLY, IT'S A TRIBUTARY OF THE MIGHTY DESCHUTES. IT'S THE CROOKED RIVER.



S cott Linden discovered fly fishing four decades ago, and created the fly-fishing TV show Cast & Blast for Outdoor Channel. He is also creator and host of the Wingshooting USA television series, hosts the Upland Nation podcast, and blogs at findbirdhuntingspots. com. Scott's book Training and Hunting Bird Dogs: How to Become a Better Hunter and Dog Owner (Skyhorse Publishing) will be available May 31, 2022.

#### UPLANDNATION.COM FINDBIRDHUNTINGSPOTS.COM

(O) @SCOTT\_LINDEN\_WINGSHOOTING

Outward appearances are off-putting on first glance. I shrugged in disappointment on my first visit, wondering why anyone was wasting their time on this inferior trickle. As early as the 1850s, fur trapper Peter Skene Ogden called the area "a most dreary barren country." But I soon learned the Crooked has redeeming qualities, and if you plumb its cloudy depths, riffles, and runs, you will too.

The Crooked River has splendid volcanic vistas, plenty of access, and a stunning strain of Interior Columbia Basin redband trout. They are hard-fighting, vibrantly colored, and punch well above their weight. And in a good water year, the Crooked has more wild trout per mile than many other famous Western rivers. These are firm, bright fish born of the desert's harsh conditions—they are the thoroughbreds of trout.

If you've got cabin fever, there's nowhere better to wet a line in late winter or early spring, even with the risk of ice in your rod guides. The 6-mile stretch downstream from Bowman Dam is where most of the action takes place, and on the occasional summer day it can look busy. But on a weekday afternoon during ski season, it is a hushed, beckoning, juniper-scented paradise.

Epic Blue-winged Olive hatches erupt in clouds at midday, when the desert setting and low elevation moderate winter temperatures. It's a tailwater, so water temperatures are favorable for all but a few frigid weeks per year. There is risk in the summer of irrigators holding back most of the flow, so be mindful of low water conditions and dial back your fishing pressure at that time, when trout are forced into the remaining deeper pools.

My first winter in the area, a newly arrived pair of waders conspired to send me to the river. As I pulled on my boots, a sidewards glance became an open-mouthed stare as mayflies rose in a steady wave off the chocolate-colored water. For one epic hour, I lived the charmed life I'd only read about in magazines—nonstop upstream, dry-fly fishing in shirtsleeve weather. There was not another soul in sight. A bald eagle soared overhead.

Then, it was over. Like watching an old-school burlesque dancer tease and taunt, I'd seen just enough to buy a ticket to another show. And that, my friend, is how the Crooked River rolls when she's in a playful mood.

In this desert terrain, the river sometimes looks like something spilled on a Starbucks table. But if you're interested



The best fishing on the Crooked River is the 6-mile-long tailwater below Bowman Dam near Prineville, Oregon. There you'll find public access on U.S. Bureau of Land Management land along Highway 27. There is also public access downriver in Smith Rocks State Park.

in a unique angling experience, you've come to the right, and right-sized place. Lucky for us, it's not pretty enough for many anglers' aesthetic sensibilities. But it is for mine. If you love a stark desert tableau, basalt hoodoos haunting the summits, and turkey vultures soaring above, you're welcome. Even on a big day, there's always room for one more angler in the dusty, craggy cleft through which the Crooked meanders.

Fifty million years of geologic history are displayed on the canyon walls. Volcanoes created a wedding cake of colorful layers of basalt, ash, and sediment. In the wide spots are parking areas, campgrounds, and pools edged by tall grasses and willows. Where sheer walls neck down there are boulder-studded rapids and riffles. The Crooked is a lush, linear desert oasis, as out of place as the unique strain of rainbows trapped inland by molten lava, eons ago.

Its broad shoulders can accommodate beaucoup anglers. I've learned to watch others while I joint up my rod. The siren song beckons, and most fly fishers high-grade the good stuff, while ignoring less glamorous pockets and tiny pools.

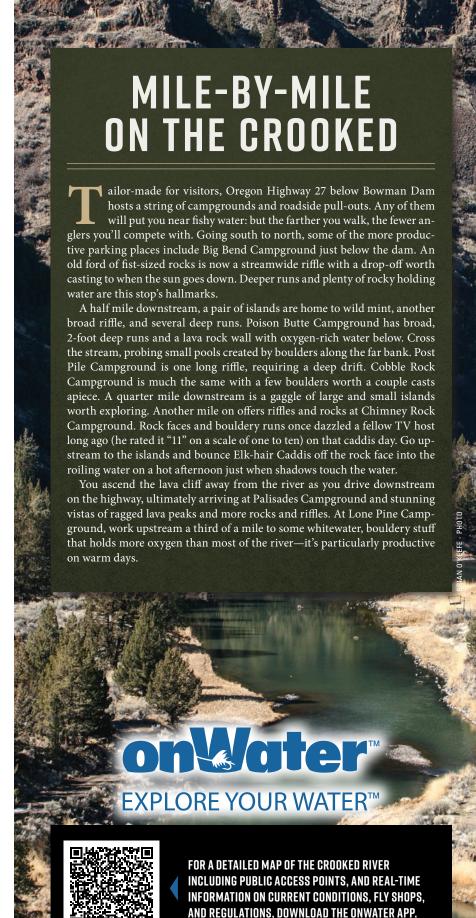
The three-ring circus never touches the subtle seams and troughs, deigns to wade to the opposite bank and its treasure-trove of runs, riffles, bathtub-sized pools, and drops where feisty redbands harbor when midstream traffic gets heavy. Placid runs between riffles can produce when the light is off the water. Deeper pools are worth a few casts.

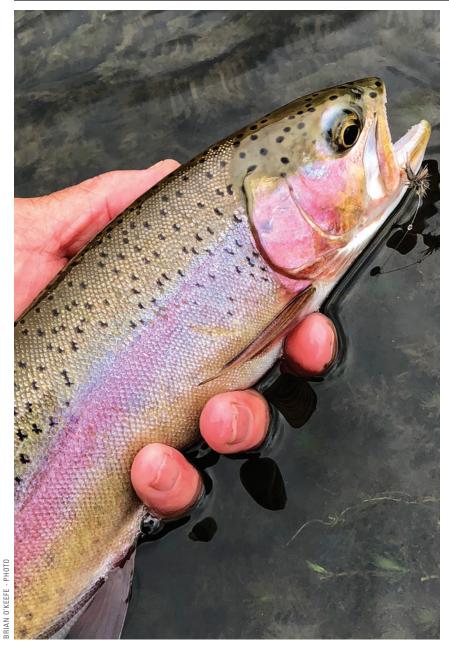
One evening, the sun sank below a basalt rim while chukars drank next to me. Out of the corner of my eye I spied a dark shape in a channel cut between rock and grassy bank. It took on trout form, rising leisurely to a parade of egg-laying caddisflies. My choice was a bow-and-arrow cast from where I stood. I broke off that time, but still visit that out-of-the-way run on every trip—wouldn't you?

#### **NATIVE REDBANDS**

High alkalinity, epic biomass, and—in most years—consistently cool water temperatures balance the ping-ponging flow levels of the Crooked. While most redbands here are 10 to 14 inches long, every year you'll see a 4-pounder, and electroshocking has surfaced some 8-pound native trout.

Small pools framed by craggy boulders are a redband's living room, with fish sampling the insectivorous delights of the





Crooked River rainbows are inland Columbia River redband trout (Oncorhynchus mykiss gairdneri). They are essentially steelhead that don't go to sea.

riffly drops into them, or lounging in the quiet water along their outside seams. As Roderick Haig-Brown said, hoard your casts for these feisty trout that dawdle prior to nibbling, following a carefully drifted nymph through most of a pool. When stymied by repeated flashes glimpsed through the murk, let your nymph hang at the end of a drift for an occasional bump.

If you've slipped, slid, and stumbled to the far bank, take stock and catch your breath (you held it the entire journey, whether you knew it or not). It may pay off. After one such foray, I hauled myself out at a shallow spot, grateful just to have survived. I thanked whatever lucky stars were mine as a Steller's jay landed on the head-high rock just downstream. A small riffle dropped into the pool behind it, bookended by another, smaller rock 5 feet downstream. Riffle, pocket, seam . . . trout? Yes. Four drifts of a Beadhead Prince ultimately put a 16-inch rainbow

Now, I start every day there. It's a ritual I share with guides, strangers, brothers and cousins, new and old friends. It's disappointed me just once, in a "bad water" year when too much water was being taken from the river. Damn irrigators.

Crooked River rule #1: If you're not

getting bit, check your fly. There's likely some green, slimy goop on it. Rule #2: If you're still not getting bit, go deeper. Adjust your style, add weight. Rule #3: Dark flies contrast with the water color in most conditions. Rule #4: A little flash helps. White wings, peacock herl, tinsel, beadheads all lend sparkle. Rule #5: See rule #1.

It's a swift river, so you'll need a beadhead at the minimum, and often BB-size split-shot 12 to 18 inches up from your fly. Guide Dave Hogan of Fin & Fire in Redmond, Oregon grew up fishing the Crooked. He often throws a slack-line, dead-drifted two-nymph setup under an indicator, high-sticking and mending line around rocks and sub-currents. His flies sink fast in the deeper runs of bumpy water that most anglers avoid. Czech-style drifts are also often rewarded, as your strike-set is more direct. Hogan's go-to setup is a Duracell nymph 18 inches above a midge pupa dropper.

Put a rod holder on your vehicle so you can leapfrog from one parking area to another. Shadows lengthen or shorten, water warms, hatches move, and so should you. I tend to jump around on the Crooked. I remember finding a sheer rock wall that created the only shade one afternoon. Rainbows were lined up like football players at a buffet. They were delicately picking off small caddis that bounced from the jagged rock face into bubbly water along its edge.

You'll dance, pivot, spin, dodge, skulk. You'll make upstream, downstream, backhanded casts to cover fishy water. Prowl the banks, search for the shade from the few massive pines, sneak in a roll cast from behind a couch-sized boulder. Lob one into the sunny edge where the seam bubbles pass. Don't be averse to dapping against the weedy bank. Mend hard, watch the water just beneath your fly, and start your hookset when you see white—that'll get most of the slack up. Pop a shot to the undercut bank when the sun beats down. Be flexible, patient, and creative in your choice of targets and techniques.

As with most rivers, the little fish will tempt you with their hapless surface flailings. They will often nibble your nymph as it rises, Leisenring-style, at the end of a drift. Don't be misled—pursuing these halflings will only put down their sires lurking below.

An old-school orange or olive scud might be your first fly. It's put a lot of fish in the net for me. But in recent







The Crooked River is an oasis in the desert, with stunning vistas of volcanic rock, boulder gardens, feisty native trout, and at times, heavy hatches of Blue-winged Olives, caddisflies, and Pale Morning Duns. Much of the time, however, you'll need to probe the depths with orange scuds, Beadhead Prince Nymphs, and will likely need extra split-shot to drop quickly in the deep, sometimes off-colored water.

years, I've had as much or more success with a Beadhead Prince, and in a pinch when I've forgotten to tie those, a water boatman. You can also go smaller with a midge larva or pupae imitation.

There are heavy hatches at times, and if you've been kind to your mother, you might be on the river when they happen.

The winter-spring BWO hatch is one of the best. Hogan's dry of choice is now a Parachute Adams, generic enough and visible in all conditions. Start with sizes 14 to 16, just for easy visibility, but you may have to drop down to size 18 if the fish get picky and you need to match the hatch.

During winter midge hatches, a Griffith's Gnat can tempt picky fish. Small Zebra Midges and micro mayfly nymphs can also pay off. The big hatches of the year are PMDs and caddis from late spring through mid-fall, normally peaking in June.

Fall is the time for Mahogany Duns.

#### TACKLING DOWN

I bought a 3-weight Thomas & Thomas rod from a down-and-out guide who claimed it had delivered many 50-fish days on the Crooked. One sultry evening I took it for a test drive. A warm breeze wafted upstream, just strong enough to make the caddisflies skitter temptingly on the glassy runs. That T&T rod did the same for my imitation. I didn't hit the half-century mark, but came awful close.

While that venerable 7½-foot, 3-weight is still in my quiver, I've since converted to a longer 4-weight rod for exponentially more line control in the convoluted currents I'm spanning with my modified Euro nymph presentation.

Most of the people I see fishing this river have worn a path on the "easy" side of the river, where parking and campgrounds abound. You can also play it safe and stroll the east bank, shopping for risers or fishy-looking water. Picking your target, sneaking to it, and making a careful cast are quite doable.

But the real fun begins when you venture across to the west bank. Boots with cleats and a wading staff earn their keep here, as you'll battle substantial current and slime-covered rocks. Keep your fly loose and available for short casts to holding water that's unreachable from either bank. Before you wade through, poke the edges of boulders and the resting water behind. Add weight, mend artfully, and probe the depths. Multi-rock obstructions create subtle eddies—observe and anticipate the direction of these whirling currents before you cast.

You can spend weeks on the Crooked's east side without getting your feet wet. But on the west side, there's little pressure and earlier shadows as the sun dips below the cliffs. It brought out the bugs one night, as well as a family of playful otters, who gawked at me as I fussed with a wind knot. I don't know who had more fun, but I caught more fish. Now I look for them every time I survive a crossing on the Crooked.

Yeah, it's about trout. But also go for the tang of hot earth, the awe-inspiring views, the scream of a hawk on the wing. Watch for mule deer, stop and smell the wild roses, listen for quail calling on the flats. You won't find many Salmonflies or rafting yahoos on the Crooked. Instead, discover rambunctious wild trout, easy access, and challenging fishing. You too might come to believe that driving past the iconic Deschutes could be the best move you never made.





Make 2022 the year you check the Bighorn off your fishing bucket list!

## **BOOK NOW! 888.665.1321**

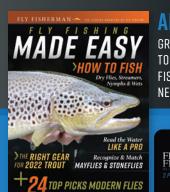
**BIGHORNFLY.COM** • BIGHORNFLY@GMAIL.COM





**BIGHORN** 

PER PERSON
DOUBLE OCCUPANCY



### **ARE YOU NEW TO FLY FISHING?**

GRAB A COPY OF FLY FISHING MADE EASY. LEARN TO TIE KNOTS, WHAT FLIES YOU NEED AND HOW TO FISH THEM, HOW TO READ WATER, THE GEAR YOU NEED, AND MUCH MORE!



AVAILABLE AT **OSGNEWSSTAND.COM**, ON SHELVES, AND DIGITALLY THROUGH THE **FLY FISHERMAN SPECIAL ISSUES** APP.



