

# CROOKED RIVER REDBANDS

SCOTT LINDEN

AVOID THE CROWDS ON THIS DOWNSIZED  
VERSION OF THE DESCHUTES

**F**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.

BRIAN O'KEEFE - PHOTO





**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](http://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.

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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 sideways 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

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 electro-shocking 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

# MILE-BY-MILE ON THE CROOKED

**T**ailor-made for visitors, Oregon Highway 27 below Bowman Dam hosts a string of campgrounds and roadside pull-outs. Any of them will put you near fishy water: but the farther you walk, the fewer anglers you'll compete with. Going south to north, some of the more productive parking places include Big Bend Campground just below the dam. An old ford of fist-sized rocks is now a streamwide riffle with a drop-off worth casting to when the sun goes down. Deeper runs and plenty of rocky holding water are this stop's hallmarks.

A half mile downstream, a pair of islands are home to wild mint, another broad riffle, and several deep runs. Poison Butte Campground has broad, 2-foot deep runs and a lava rock wall with oxygen-rich water below. Cross the stream, probing small pools created by boulders along the far bank. Post Pile Campground is one long riffle, requiring a deep drift. Cobble Rock Campground is much the same with a few boulders worth a couple casts apiece. A quarter mile downstream is a gaggle of large and small islands worth exploring. Another mile on offers riffles and rocks at Chimney Rock Campground. Rock faces and bouldery runs once dazzled a fellow TV host long ago (he rated it “11” on a scale of one to ten) on that caddis day. Go upstream to the islands and bounce Elk-hair Caddis off the rock face into the roiling water on a hot afternoon just when shadows touch the water.

You ascend the lava cliff away from the river as you drive downstream on the highway, ultimately arriving at Palisades Campground and stunning vistas of ragged lava peaks and more rocks and riffles. At Lone Pine Campground, work upstream a third of a mile to some whitewater, bouldery stuff that holds more oxygen than most of the river—it's particularly productive on warm days.

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BRIAN O'KEEFE - PHOTO

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.





BRIAN O'KEEFE - PHOTO

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 in the net.

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, bead-heads 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 hook-set 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 failings. They will often nibble your nymph as it rises, Leisenring-style, at the end of a drift. Don't be misled—pursuing these halfplings 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





BRIAN O'KEEFE - PHOTO



SCOTT LINDEN - PHOTO

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.



BRIAN O'KEEFE - PHOTO

During winter midge hatches, a Grif-fith'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 peak-ing in June. Fall is the time for Mahogany Duns.

## TACKLING DOWN

I bought a 3-weight Thomas & Thom-as 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 tempting-ly 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 exponential-ly 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 camp-grounds abound. You can also play it safe and stroll the east bank, shopping for ris-ers or fishy-looking water. Picking your target, sneaking to it, and making a care-ful cast are quite doable.

But the real fun begins when you ven-ture 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 hold-ing 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 obstruc-tions 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 pres-sure 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 rambunc-tious wild trout, easy access, and challeng-ing fishing. You too might come to believe that driving past the iconic Deschutes could be the best move you never made. —



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