

Steelhead Trip 2023

Ooooh Sh**

Those words shot out of my mouth, and repeated several times, as I watched it drift away. It was the third day of my annual Steelhead trip to Michigan. It was 6 AM, dark and fortunately not cold for a change as we entered the parking lot for the launch. My Michigan fishing buddy, Barry, backed the trailer in and stopped a little too sudden and the drift boat shot out into the river. I'm yelling as he pulls away and I start running, skirting around a patch of trees and brush jutting out, to the next launch pad several yards further downstream. "What happened" he yelled. I'm yelling back, "the boat is drifting down the river." "What"? The previous couple of days we put the boat in at shallow water ramps, water so shallow that we had to push the boat off the trailer. Obviously neither one of us thought of the launch rope and this ramp was a steeper pad and much deeper water. Regardless the boat was drifting downstream in the dark.

When I got to the next ramp, I didn't see the boat and I know I ran faster than the current, so where was it? Barry came running with a flashlight and I caught a glimpse of an object on the far bank. It was the boat! I yelled "the boat is down here". He thought that I saw a boat someone put in ahead of us and their boat was tied up at the lower launch. When he got there, I pointed, "there it is across the river". The boat had pushed across the stream and floated along the far bank and got caught up in a bush. I told Barry "I'll drive across the bridge and try to get the boat from that side". The problem was going to be getting to it down the steep bank which was to my estimate to be about a 60-degree angle. I crossed the bridge, parked my vehicle, and started up that steep hill. When I got to the top, I couldn't go fast down the ridge line because I couldn't see well, but finally I saw Barry's flashlight, so I knew I was getting close. Looking down that hill at the river and the boat I was guessing it to be about 150 feet and with that angle I was going to have to do it sitting on my butt, it was way too steep to walk down and too much of a risk of falling all the way down the hill to the river. I tried to go as slow as possible grabbing trees and slowing down with my feet against trees as I slid down. Once there I knew the riverbank below the water was going to be about the same angle and deep. I slowly lowered myself into the water holding on to a bush. It was about waist deep, but I couldn't reach the boat. I pulled on the branches of the bush holding the boat, but the bush was caught on the front seat of the boat, and it served as a pivot point and only caused the rear of the boat to slowly start to swing out. Bad idea, I let go of the bush holding the boat and the boat moved back to where it was. I was going to have to get in deeper and I didn't know how deep it was going to be. Slowly moving my left leg, I slide it down the bank a little further and now I'm chest deep holding on to a bush with my right hand and hoping it holds tight, but the boat is still just out of reach. Taking a chance, I slid a little bit deeper to about 4 inches from the top of my waders and I finally reached the boat with my left hand and pulled it toward me. Now I can step back up a little, reach a log to the left with my left foot and hold on to the boat with my left hand and let go of the bush with my right. With the bush holding the front of the boat and my right hand free I pull the oars up one at a time and slide them in the oar locks and crawl in the boat. As I crawl in the push off to get in changes the angle of the boat and the current catches the back of the boat and sweeps it under

the bush. My hat gets knocked off, but I reach it in time to save it, but I won't be wearing it today, it's soaked. I row back across the river and we both give out a sigh of relief. Great way to start a 12 mile drift, an hour late, it was dark thirty when we got off the river with just a few fish to show for our effort, but fortunately our largest fish of the trip.



Nice brown trout in spawning colors



Our largest steelhead of the trip

Fishing (catching) was the least producing trip up there we have ever had since I started fishing with Barry. Not enough steelhead in the system and too many eggs on the stream floor. The few steelhead that were in the system had full bellies and didn't need to move to feed. Very similar to a Trico spinner fall... just sit and wait for the food to come to you without moving more than two or three inches. We hooked about twenty between us for the

week, which was way down from our average over the past 16 years. The trees were beautiful, and the weather was good, too good. It's always better to fish when it rains hard enough to put fresh water in the river and color it up a bit. The rise in the river gets more fish to push up. More fish means they eat most of the eggs and there are more to catch and more that are a little bit hungrier.