

A fly in the woods

Spey casting often yields a bounty on B.C.'s Skeena River

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For The Register-Guard

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Like many steelhead anglers, I'm susceptible to dreams of landing a 20-pound steelhead on a fly.

Hooking into one of these ocean cruisers on a fly rod connects an angler to a force majeure that sucks the wind out of most mortals. In conversations about which rivers offer the best chances of hooking into such a steelhead, invariably the name "Skeena" gets mentioned.

Known for 15- to 30-pounders that will take a fly, talk of the Skeena River in northern British Columbia solicits a misty-eyed glint from many anglers.

When my fishing buddy, David Bayles, suggested recently that we head to the Skeena River to chase steelhead with flies and Spey rods, however, I thought he was joking.

"David, you know I don't Spey cast," I replied.

True, the biggest steelhead I'd ever landed was a 13-pounder years ago on the Rogue River — using a plug, not a fly. However, I could list a number of winter steelhead streams in Oregon that produce 6- to 14-pound ironheads that are a lot closer to home and way less expensive to fish.

But the allure of the Skeena piqued my curiosity. David had presented the idea like a Parachute Adams deftly cast on a spring-fed creek. So I decided to call the outfitter in Terrace, B.C., with whom David had suggested we book our trip, and explain that I was not only an inexperienced Spey caster — I'd never held a Spey rod in my hands.

"No problem," Walter, the outfitter, said. "We like teaching people like you how to Spey."

That quelled some of my reticence. After more discussion, and with David's contagious enthusiasm, we decided to book it.



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Watching really good Spey casters ply their craft bears witness to a poetics of motion. As more anglers show up on the Willamette or Deschutes with Spey rods, I've found myself mesmerized as they work their two-handed scepters in flowing arcs and spirals. Hundred-foot casts sail across the water with little effort, and the lack of a back cast has advantages where trees and brush crowd the bank.

My resistance to Spey fishing is in part due to the expense and added accumulation of gear. Most grizzled fly anglers have acquired quivers of fishing rods and tackle over the years. Investing in two-handed rods, and the obligatory big-spool reels, late in life begs the question: How much more gear does one need in one's autumn years?

In an attempt to allay some of my concerns, David took me out for a casting lesson below Dexter Dam on the Willamette before our trip. He gave me his "short" rod — a 13-foot wand with a shooting head designed to load the rod and sail line out of the tip like shot out of a cannon.

My first cast resulted in line wrapped around my neck. The next attempt was better: but the line wilted about 10 feet in front of me and piled up in a rat's nest of coils and tangles.

"Maybe a lesson from a pro ...," David ventured as we headed back to the rig.

As our plane broke through the clouds into the Skeena Basin, the dense forests of the North Woods came into view. The Skeena River flows 385 miles from the Canadian Rockies to the Pacific and drains 15,000 square miles of largely intact habitat before reaching the ocean near Prince Rupert.

As we approached the airport in Terrace, I looked across a valley carpeted with spruce and hemlock. Major tributaries include streams such as the storied Babine, the Bulkley-Morice and the Kispiox Rivers — all names that quicken the pulse of seasoned steelheaders.

On our first day of fishing, our guide took us to the Kitimat River. Getting a lesson from an experienced Spey caster jump-started my learning curve. With the rains washing down on us in sheets, and the canyon soaked under a leaden grey bunker of clouds, I caught and landed my first northern B.C. steelhead with a Spey rod: a 34-inch, nickel-bright, 14-pound hen.

Spey casting, it turns out, is an efficient way to work a fly. It takes less effort than a single-handed, overhead cast. The fly is working the water more because there's no "false casting" that keeps the fly in the air as line is fed out.

I stripped in line until the shooting head was just past the rod tip, brought the fly up close to me in the water to "anchor" my cast, and then swept the rod in a spiral motion before letting the line go with a forward cast. Eventually it became one fluid, efficient move. My fly was "fishing" a greater percentage of time, and as I got more proficient, I could throw more line out, covering a greater swath of the river

Any steelheader who's spent time chasing these elusive denizens knows patience is required. While the Kitimat is known for prodigious runs of steelhead during early April, the fish I caught was one of three landed on the Kit during our entire stay. As

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more rain flooded the region, the river became a steelheading wasteland. And it wasn't offset by hot angling on the other rivers.

The recreational steelhead fishery in the Skeena region has grown since the early 1950s, when word began circulating about "trophy" steelhead. In 1952 a local angler netted a 36-pound steelhead on the Kispiox River; in the early 1960s, an angler from California caught a 33-pound steelhead on a fly from the same tributary.

The Internet and social media have broadcast the Skeena's reputation, and increased the fishing pressure. According to one local guide, the Department of Fish and Oceans (British Columbia's equivalent of our Department of Fish and Wildlife) is contemplating scaling back the number of guided fishing boats a lodge can launch each day. Although such a move would economically affect the guides, most we spoke with were in favor of it because the increased angling pressure is taking its toll on the fishing, and the fishing experience.

Before 1940, no limits existed on the number of trout or steelhead that a recreational angler could catch. Managers defined a steelhead that year as a trout weighing more than 5 pounds, and the limit was set at 15 trout and three steelhead per day. Today, fishing for native steelhead in the Skeena basin is restricted to catch-and-release on barbless hooks.

Recreational angling is now controlled on sections of the Skeena and the Copper River, a tributary, in what the Ministry of Environment terms "Classified Waters." These are sections where guided angling is restricted, and "resident-only" angling on Saturdays and Sundays provides the locals access without competition from nonresident anglers.

Despite increased restrictions, the dearth of returning steelies during the first week of April, when we were there, had local guides scratching their heads. That week has traditionally been a sweet spot for catching late winter and early summer fish: after the major winter storms have subsided, and before the warmer spring temperatures melt the snow and ice, raising the river levels. When I asked what might be causing the lack of fish on nearby rivers, the five guides I asked gave five different responses.

Another concern that locals talked about is the change they see in the weather patterns each winter. People spoke of seeing the Skeena River "blow out" in the middle of winter from high glacial flows because of warmer temperatures and melting ice. They also noted how the winter precipitation has shifted in recent years to more rain and less snow. As a result of the diminished snowfall, the glaciers are more exposed, and glacial silt clouds the rivers more often.

While ocean conditions have a major influence on how many sea-run adults return to a river system each year, the trend the past few years has generated concern. Local anglers and guides still talk about 2013 as a banner year on the Skeena, when two to four steelhead were caught daily on flies. However, the early spring fishing since then has been less stellar.

Yet, not all was lost in the Great North Woods. One day we sneaked up a tributary of the Skeena River for a memorable day. We boated into a narrow "box" canyon, with vertical granite walls that bolted out of the floodplain. Glaciers hung in the crevices, and scores of waterfalls cascaded down to the river. The stunning environment would warrant National Park status in the States.

We saw mountain goats, wolf and moose tracks and bald eagles feeding. An immature baldy swooped down onto a snow bank as we fished, picked up a bone left over from a recent wolf kill and perched in a nearby tree as it tore into lunch. We heard grouse drumming nearby as we fished, and the fishing was excellent: four steelhead hooked and two landed in four hours.

Although my preference at this stage in life is to accumulate experiences and skills rather than more gear, I am looking for a Spey rod. One take-away from the Skeena trip is that it pays to maximize the amount of time the fly is in the water while chasing steelhead.

Given the endless hours spent stalking these fish, that rule applies in Eugene, as well as in the Great North Woods.
