

The Addictive Allure Of the Steelhead's Tug

By CHRIS SANTELLA

PORTLAND, Ore. — Come September, many of this city's fly-fishing enthusiasts head about 100 miles east on Interstate 84 to the Deschutes River.

They pass mammoth Bonneville Dam, the wind-sport mecca of Hood River, and leave the highway at the town of The Dalles, where a large railroad-tie treating facility abuts the highway. The pungent smell of creosote soon mixes with the sage of the

**The fly is
grabbed,
the reel
screams,
and a faith
is born.**

high desert, and their anticipation heightens as they near the river. The summer steelhead run reaches its apex at that time, and few fish evoke such passion among devotees.

Few are more devoted than Dave Moskowitz.

Moskowitz, an environmental lawyer, first fished for steelhead — an ocean-going form of rainbow trout — on the Deschutes in 1987. "I was invited by some of my housemates to accompany them on their annual Deschutes fishing trip," he recalled.

"Most fished for trout, but one guy convinced me to go for steelhead. He said to cast across the current and let the fly swing to shore, then take two steps and do it again. He fished below me and I tried to mimic his technique.

There was a cry and I looked up to see his rod above his head, and a huge bright silver fish cartwheeling downstream. He and the fish soon parted ways. I

looked at the water around me and took several steps back — fearful of fish that large swimming around my legs."

Moskowitz was intrigued, but it would be five more years of intermittent angling before he brought his first steelhead to hand.

There is a saying among steelhead aficionados that goes "the tug is the drug," that is, the excitement of the steelhead's take keeps anglers coming back. There is a visceral thrill when a fish grabs the fly — the reel screams as line spins off, and the fish leaps madly, leaving the angler holding on for dear life and praying that all the knots will hold.

But perhaps more addictive than the take is the hope that the fish will grab the fly — or that the fish are even present. Steelhead spend their early years in the river, then migrate to the sea. After a year or more of intensive feeding, they return to their natal river to spawn, weighing from 5 to 20 pounds — and on some rivers, more.

Steelhead begin showing up in the Deschutes in late June, with new fish entering the river through October. Unlike trout that feed on dry flies or rolling tarpon, steelhead seldom show themselves. You enter a run or pool hoping some fish might be holding there. To make matters even more interesting, steelhead seldom eat once they are in the river; they seem to take a fly as an act of aggression. Even if they are present where you are fishing, they have to be in the mood (presumably, a bad mood) to bite.

For all these reasons, fishing for steelhead is one of angling's great acts of faith. Steelheaders may log long days of fishing in the cold and the rain — and thousands of casts — with



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Dave Moskowitz pursues the elusive summer steelhead on the lower Deschutes River in Wasco County in Oregon.

only a bite. But something goads them on.

In the 26 years since his first encounter, Moskowitz has learned a good deal about how to catch Deschutes steelhead. He spends 40 to 50 days on the river each season and knows all the famous runs intimately — Lockett, Hot

enough to cover the water. Professional guides and river regulars know him as someone ever willing to share a run, an effective fly or a cold beer.

Moskowitz has two children and a well-rounded life. But he is the first to admit that come late June, he is "the most

remnants of a handmade sign hang by the path leading to the river. It used to read "Life Starts Here." Fall rains had arrived early, cloaking the canyon in shades of gray. Moskowitz led me from run to run, suggesting where the fish were most likely to be resting — and always letting me cast over the most promising water. At a spot called Signal Light, I watched my line swing across the water as the gray began to give way to black. Near the end of the swing, there was a sharp tug on my line. Instinctively, I lifted the rod — exactly the wrong thing to do. The fish was gone, and that was the only tug of the outing.

Heading back to Portland, we stopped in Hood River for an India pale ale at Double Mountain Brewery, a favorite post-fishing watering hole. I began to bewail my lost opportunity, but Moskowitz offered solace: "A few years back, I lost 18 fish in a row. Another year, 13. It happens."

I knew I would be returning soon.

On a Friday afternoon in late September, I accompanied Moskowitz to a section of the Deschutes called Kloan, seven miles from the river's confluence with the Columbia. A dirt road leads to a small parking area. Weathered



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Moskowitz, who has been angling for steelhead for 26 years, knows where to look for them and often makes his own flies.

Rocks, Magic, Greenlight, Wagonblast — as well as countless little spots that most overlook. He is a competent fly tier, favoring dry flies like the Strungout Skater; and while not the river's longest caster, he throws a spey rod well

evasive, noncommittal guy around."

"Steelheading has definitely led me to give up on some relationships with women," he said. "I know myself well, and I'm up front with people about what I like to do."