

*Only in this
land of magic
and mystery
can you catch
the two
biggest
steelhead of
your life in
less than a
half-hour
of fishing.*

The Gift of
Haida Gwaii
by Todd Tanner

I've been cursed.

How else can I explain the fact that, despite years of trying, I can't catch a steelhead to save my life. I've spent days swinging the "hot" pattern. I've had one fish after another roll right in front of me. I even had a double digit steelhead on Oregon's North Umpqua leap out of the water and land on my fly line. But with the exception of a few diminutive smolts, my steelhead catching days have been as barren as the Siberian tundra. So it was with both hope – ah, that fair lady springs eternal in every fisherman's breast – and some degree of trepidation that I decided to visit Haida Gwaii and ply its waters for the great silver fish. Haida Gwaii. The Islands of the People. The name rolls off the tongue, an invitation to mystery and adventure.

Haida Gwaii.

Of course, you might know the islands by a different name. They're frequently called the Queen Charlottes. But Haida Gwaii is their true name, the mystical, spiritual title that both fits and serves the place. Centuries gone, the Haida were rulers of the British Columbia coast, their name invoking fear from Alaska all the way to Vancouver Island, and who knows what doom those ancient spirits might rain down upon my head if I wax too free with their secrets?

I can tell you, though, that the islands are perhaps 75 miles out in the Pacific just south of Alaska, and that they possess both great beauty and sadness. The beauty comes from the ocean and its bounty, and from the forests, which are vast indeed and which are home to eagles, huge black bears and black-tailed deer. This beauty also springs from the Haida culture and its incredible artistic tradition.

The sadness, of course, comes from a great people brought low, and from the occasional signs of human greed. There are places on the islands where clearcuts scar the landscape and stumps the size of Cadillacs sit low and mute, poignant reminders of forests that no longer exist. Thankfully, the islands contain vast provincial and national parks where nature still reigns supreme, and where you can walk for miles without seeing a beer can or a candy bar wrapper. But tread lightly, for lore has it that Haida Gwaii's ancient forests are home to the unseen and eternal, and these guardian spirits have little love for despoilers.

Four of us left Vancouver in February, flying north in a little West Coast puddle jumper. My wife Molly was along for the adventure, as well as our friends Bill and Kristy McConnell. Both Bill and Kristy are instructors at Tom Brown Jr.'s world famous Wilderness School, which means they're exactly the kind



of folks you'd want along on a trip to a sparsely populated, heavily forested island off the northern coast of B.C. Of course, Bill is also a serious steelhead fisherman, and it had crossed my mind that some of his fish-catching mojo just might rub off during the course of the trip.

The islands of Haida Gwaii came into view about an hour and a half into our flight, poking up out of the Pacific like the backs of salmon spawning in a tiny creek. It was a beautiful day from my window seat, though fog covered everything down at sea level and those first dark humps of land projecting up from the mist seemed hardly larger than whales.

We landed on Graham Island and met up with our host, Peter Dymont of Kumdis River Lodge. Peter, who's young, handsome, and one of the island's only fly fishermen, drove us back to the lodge, got us situated, and then cooked up a delicious mid-afternoon lunch. Afterwards he asked if, perchance, we wanted to spend a couple of hours catching sea-run cutthroats on the outgoing tide.

Now I sure didn't travel all the way to the Haida Gwaii to concentrate on cutthroats, a fish I can find by the bucket load here in Montana. On the other hand, I'd never fished for sea-runs before, and I did want to get a fly in the water as soon as humanly possible. So Bill and I grabbed our rods, threw on our waders, and walked through the woods to the outlet of the Kumdis river, which is about fifteen minutes by forested trail from the Lodge. The path wound through trees that predated the arrival of Europeans on the Islands, huge, shaggy old grandfathers who cast immense shadows on the moss-covered ground, and it only took us a few minutes to figure out where we were.

Fairy Land.

God, what trees! Cedar and hemlock and spruce; the forest primeval.

And then we hit the river and saw, I kid you not, rising trout. We were damn near to Alaska, it was the 12th of February, and there were trout rising. I almost cried.

Which isn't surprising, especially considering the fact that every one of my thousand or so dry flies was sitting back in my truck at the Vancouver airport; victim to airline weight limits. Still, only an imbecile would leave behind all his dry flies, and if the name fits . . . All I can say is that it will never happen again.

Peter, who had the grace not to laugh at my expression when I first saw those rising trout, looked through my boxes and picked out a pink Polar Shrimp. Bill, who shall henceforth be referred to as "Quick," hooked up before I even had my fly tied on, and that, my friends, was my real introduction to the waters of Haida Gwaii. Cast, swing . . . nobody home. Cast, swing . . . son-of-a . . . He ate it!

It was perfect. The river slid down into the bay, bugs and shrimp and salmon smolts were hitching a ride to the deepwater sanctuary of Masset Inlet, and those cutts – Peter said a few make it up to six pounds, the ones we were hooking averaged thirteen to sixteen inches – were defenders of the salt, doing their absolute best to make sure no tasty tidbit slipped through their picket line into the fertile waters of the bay.

Beautiful, beautiful fish, and I decided right then that if the steelhead didn't cooperate, I was going to be spending a lot of time at the mouth of the Kumdis river.

The next morning, a Thursday, found us a ways south of the lodge on a tiny dirt road off of a smaller dirt road, which had itself branched away from a decent sized dirt road. Not much in the way of pavement on Haida Gwaii.

And here, at this particular point in my story, I come to a



TODD TANNER

Peter Dymont, the handsome young manager of Kumdis River Lodge, is one of the few fly fishermen on Graham Island.

moral dilemma. Do I name the river? I think, given the events that follow, that my answer must be no. I'll offer a hint, though, for those of you who care to do your homework. The Haida called this fair sylvan stream "The Giver of Life."

If you come with a fly rod in hand, and if you ask politely, I'm sure Peter would be happy to show you around.

We parked overlooking a waterfall that dropped a small tributary creek into the main river, and Peter, who is not only the lodge manager but also its ace guide, gave us the skinny.

Slide down the sheer side hill to the water, walk upstream until we hit the shallows, and then cross over to the far side. At which point we'd be presented with the first of three prime spots, the aptly named Waterfall Pool. Below that were our ultimate destinations, the Corner Pool and the Twenty Pounder Hole. As we were rigging up, I asked Peter about the possibility of heading straight to the Twenty Pounder Hole. He just smiled.

I'm not, I must confess again, a good steelhead fisherman. Sure, I know the routine. Cast, mend, swing the fly – slowly – until it's directly below you, then step downstream, lift the fly and cast again. It's a strange rhythm for a trout fisherman, far more structured than the typical dry fly angling I enjoy, but it does have its benefits. Not the least of which is that it catches fish. At least, that's what I've been told.

I ended up following Mr. William "Quick" McConnell down through the Waterfall Pool that morning, where he earned his nickname for the second time in less than a day. He dissected the top of the pool to no avail, carved the middle into nice little slices without any action (during which time an eagle flew a dozen feet over our heads on its way up-river), and then stuck the trip's first steelhead next to a big log toward the bottom of the hole.

Ben Franklin had his kite, Bill his first Haida Gwaii

steelhead. Both, I believe, felt the electricity.

That damn fish beat the hell out of Bill for a minute or so, and then just as I was about to snap our first, and perhaps only, picture of a nicely bent fly rod, the line parted. *Coitus interruptus*. Ouch. I didn't say a word, but it was pretty clear that my curse had laser-beamed down the lens of my camera and sliced Bill's line from afar. Sorry about that, my friend.

Bill, of course, had no idea that my hex had proven

more virulent than ever. He just figured that a monster of a hot fish, twelve pounds at a minimum, probably closer to fourteen, had worked him over and was now enjoying a good chuckle at the bottom of the river.

Still, we were less than an hour into our first day and a steelhead had been hooked. I've seen weeks go by without a steelhead at the end of a line. Things were definitely looking up.

An hour or two later we

were finally down at the Twenty Pounder Hole and I asked Peter how the spot got its name. Turns out it was from a twenty pounder. Go figure.

It was my turn to lead through the run, so I quizzed Peter about what to expect. He told me that there were usually a couple of fish in the hole, with the first typically sitting in a deep slot where two currents converged. I ran a fly through there once, then again, then a dozen more times for good measure. No dice. Pretty spot, though.

As I moved down the run, I started noticing one particular underwater boulder. Now I'd never caught a West Coast steelhead on a boulder, or anyplace else for that matter, but that rock sure looked like a prime spot. I pointed it out to Peter, and he said yes, that's where the fish should be. So I made my cast and started my swing. My fly never made it to the rock. It stopped mid-current five feet short of my target. Bottom, I thought. Well, maybe . . .

Continued on 118



TODD TANNER

Bill McConnell wears one of the brightest smiles you'll ever see after landing this huge steelhead that snapped his fly rod.

Gift of Haida Gwaii

Continued from 109

Steelhead!!!

She shook her head a few times, the “low head-shake” that gets Bill’s juices flowing even more than the aerials, and then she came up and wallowed on the surface. Thrash, roll, headshake, swirl, throw the hook. Everything was going great until the “throw the hook” part. Double ouch. Thirty seconds of ecstasy and she left me standing with my fly rod gone limp in my hand.

I reeled in, cut my fly off, tied it on again with a fresh knot, and looked back out at that underwater boulder. What the hell . . .

The fly, an ugly little thing with weighted eyes and a black rabbit hair collar, swung toward the rock, then stopped. Again. And once again, there was the low head-shake, the massive weight, the thrashing, wallowing, rolling, and then after four or five minutes Peter had her tail and Bill, God bless him, was snapping photos. Imagine that. I had landed a beautiful eleven-pound hen, my second fish in two casts. On Haida Gwaii. On the Giver of Life. The curse was over.

The next day was Valentine’s day, and we spent it with our wives. It’s hard for me to say, in fact it’s probably dangerous for me to say, but our hours of beach combing, of wandering through the old growth forest, and of finishing up with French Chef Jean’s Surf & Turf back at the Lodge, fell just a little short of landing my first steelhead.

Saturday, Bill and I were on our own. Peter had pointed out any number of productive places for us to fish, but we decided that we’d better get back to where we’d had all the action on Thursday. We fished the Waterfall Pool at first light, but my heart just wasn’t in it. The Twenty Pounder Hole was calling my name, and I simply couldn’t resist.

I hiked down and started at the top of the run, where I immediately threw

my backcast into a tree. Bill was just coming around the corner when I got things straightened out, and Lady Luck, fickle dame that she is, happened to be sitting on my shoulder at that exact instant. I had on a big, black, rabbit-strip leech and it slipped sideways through the tea-colored water, hanging in the current just long enough for a hen of about fifteen pounds to decide that she really didn’t like the damn thing. The hookup was solid, my knots all held, and after seven or eight minutes, I was cradling the biggest fish I’d ever landed on a fly rod. Rose bled into blood red on her side, a wild sunrise etched into her scales; and she was so fat, so damn thick, that my brain couldn’t accept the size of her; there had to be some mistake, this fish was simply too big.

Incredibly, twenty minutes later her twin sister, less a pound or so, jumped on that same leech up in the Corner Hole, and took me down through a little rapid before she finally came to hand. God, the two biggest fish I’d ever landed had come less than a half-hour apart on a river so pretty it was hard to concentrate on the fishing.

No wonder they called it The Giver of Life.

Now lest you think that Bill was left with the short end of the stick, let me point out the fact that he also hooked and landed a beautiful, chrome-bright buck in the Corner Hole that morning, a fish of eleven or twelve pounds. And as the river rose that afternoon – we’d had a day or so of steady rain at that point – he stuck the fish of a lifetime.

We were working the top of a canyon at a place Peter had called King Creek when Bill yelled up to me. No, that’s not quite right. He screamed in my direction as if a wildcat was shredding his drawers. I waded over to the bank, grabbed the dry bag with the camera, and came racing downstream. When I got close, the situation became clear. Bill had hooked a huge steelhead in a little back eddy amid a swirling maelstrom, and he was basically screwed. After all, a great big fish in great big water almost always equals heartbreak.

Still, Bill is a fly fishing stud and he pulled out every trick he knew. And believe it or not, after ten minutes he had that fish at his feet. I was three-quarters of the way through a fresh roll of film when he said, “I need you to tail this steelhead.”

“I can’t do it,” I told him. “I need these photos for the story. You’re going to have to handle him yourself.”

Now another, less competent, fisherman might have cursed my offspring for a dozen generations at that point, but Bill just knelt down and tried to wrestle that fish up out of the water while still holding onto his rod. He damn near had him twice, but a three-foot-plus fish with a tail too thick to grab is almost impossible to handle with one hand, especially while you’re trying not to get swept away by the current. Bill and his steelhead eventually parted company before he could get the hook out, but I’ll still give him credit for landing that fish. You may or may not care to agree, but in my mind, if you touch a fish that big, you’ve landed him. After all, you were just going to turn him loose anyway.

That buck was dark as sin on top, scarlet on the side, and I’d bet my truck that he wasn’t an ounce under eighteen pounds. Hell, he could easily have been more than twenty.

Godzilla on a fly rod.

Now, a rhetorical question. How can you go from hooking and landing huge steelhead, to eating quail, mussels, salmon, jumbo shrimp and filet mignon, to sitting in a hot tub and looking out at Masset Inlet without feeling like the luckiest person on earth? The only possible answer: You can’t.

Kumdis River Lodge may not be the fanciest place I’ve ever stayed – the exterior doesn’t boast the glossy new wood of many modern lodges; rather it shows the gray-as-the-skies, weather-beaten patina of old porches and old sailors – but it’s as comfortable as a pair of brain-tanned leather moccasins and it’s the perfect place to sit in front of the fire and talk of days just past (or days still to come) with a couple of

your closest friends. And with Peter and his partner Kirsten on hand to make sure you're happy and well fed . . . Lord, Kirsten made crepes one night, light as sunshine and filled with coconut and oranges, and they were better than just about anything you could ever imagine. What a wonderful, wonderful place.

We were up bright and early on Sunday morning, and Peter went out with us. Fishing, this time, instead of guiding. We drove along Masset Inlet in the predawn darkness, and Bill and I made him pull over so we could get out and look at the full moon over the Bay. Sometimes words fail. Not often, but sometimes.

I hope that at some point in your life you're blessed with what the three of us experienced that morning, when a thing that the Native Americans used to call "The-Spirit-That-Moves-Through-All-Things" came down and touched our hearts. Whatever your philosophy or religion, whatever your beliefs, there are moments in life when something vast and incomprehensible reaches down and cradles you . . . the moon over that huge expanse of water was riven into the very fabric of my soul, and . . . well, sometimes words just fail.

Sunday turned out to be Bill's day. Not that Peter and I didn't hook and land fish. We did. Heck, Peter stuck four, and I kept the skunk off with a pretty ten-pounder. But you wouldn't have known it was Bill's day until an hour before dark. He hadn't touched a single fish and he just didn't seem to exude the confidence he normally possesses. Still, the man is a predator and that counts for a whole bunch when you're out on the river.

I was fishing downstream around the bend from Bill when Peter came charging down the bank.

"Where's your camera?"

"In the truck."

"Billy's got a hell of a fish on. I'll go grab the camera and meet you back up there."

I went racing up the bank to find Bill standing in a long, slow, tail-out with his rod bent into a shape

the manufacturer had probably never envisioned.

"Nice fish?" I asked.


His Cheshire Cat grin said it all, but he just couldn't resist adding one word. "Huge."

It was an epic struggle, not man against beast or man against nature, but rather two wonders of creation tethered together at one of the most beautiful places on the planet, one a creature of water and instinct, the other a creature of dry land and Vision, neither completely in charge, neither able to tip the scales his way for long.

Then, after minutes of holding up to incredible strain, Bill's rod broke.

It happened late in the fight, at a point when it seemed he might finally bring the mighty fish to hand. The rod simply snapped off, in the butt, no less, and the top two-thirds of the rod slid down the fly line and lodged in the monster's mouth. The steelhead went berserk. And Peter, may the Lord's light shine down on him forever, saved the day.

He went racing out into the river, made an incredible grab on that huge, thrashing fish in thigh-deep water, and came up with its tail in his hand. He staggered over to the bank, holding that gargantuan crimson buck out of the current, and presented him to Bill.

I was stunned. Bill, whose jaw dropped and then rebounded into one of the brightest smiles I've ever seen, seemed even more so. In fact, from the look on his face, I thought he was going to kiss Peter. He didn't, but he sure kissed that fish. 

If You Want To Go

Haida Gwaii was warmer than it had any right to be in February. The days were in the 40s and 50s; most nights were down around freezing. As far as the fishing, Bill and I hooked fifteen steelhead in three and a half days, and landed nine. A couple fish were in the twenty-pound class, several more were at least sixteen pounds, and only one was under ten. There aren't many places in the world where you're going to do better.

Lodge manager Peter Dyment is a true gem. Kumdis River Lodge serves up some of the best food I've ever eaten, and the whole experience, from the fishing, to the primeval forests, to the killer whales we saw chasing salmon in Bearskin Bay, was extraordinary. If you're a fly fisherman, I highly recommend Kumdis for your next adventure. The steelhead season runs from late October into April, the silvers show up in August and stick around through October, and cutthroats are available year-round. To book a stay at Kumdis River Lodge, contact Langara Fishing Adventures at 800-668-7544.

Field Tests

I tried a bunch of new gear on Haida Gwaii and most of it was first-rate. I fished a GLOomis 9'6", 4-piece, 7-weight GLX, which turned out to be a wonderful rod. It cast beautifully, and even though Peter and Bill thought I might be a little undergunned, the rod handled every fish I hooked with no problem at all. (And, I might add, without exploding.) I used a new Ross reel, the Evolution, and it was so light and sweet that I might just have to pick up another, smaller version for trout this spring. A truly excellent reel. We fished sink-tips exclusively, and my multi-tip Rio line, with interchangeable Type III and Type VI tip sections, was outstanding.

As far as clothing, you'd have to be a little crazy to travel to British Columbia in February without good, heavy wool. My Filson Mackinaw wool pants and jacket were ideal. For fishing on such a notoriously rainy island, I depended on Dan Bailey waders and my Patagonia SST wading jacket. Both were excellent. The waterproof, breathable waders and jacket kept me dry and comfortable in the rain, while interior layers of wool, fleece and capilene kept me warm in water as cold as 38 degrees. I was particularly impressed with my Patagonia Expedition Weight wool socks. I hate cold feet, and those socks kept my toes toasty all day long.