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Fly Fishing

By Todd Tanner

Here's a heads-up for our loyal readers. We're looking for a few adventurous fly fishermen to join us next summer for our inaugural *Sporting Classics* Angling Adventure in the wilds of British Columbia. If you're interested, I'll have more info at the end of the column.

First, though, I'd like to tell you about a river I fished last week. It runs down out of the high country where lumbering grizzlies pick their way across barren avalanche chutes and shaggy white mountain goats climb sheer rock faces. The currents are cool and strong, with just a tinge of color from the glaciers that ring the valley, and like as not your day starts in the shade of towering peaks. Trees line the banks, ancient cedars and lithe, bone-white alders, and bald eagles soar over fresh wolf tracks in the sand. It's the Dean.

Most anglers who visit the river are looking for steelhead, those oversized anadromous rainbows that spend two or three years in the salt. As you may have heard, Dean steelhead are special. A waterfall a couple miles upstream from the river's mouth acts as an impassable barrier for

Join us next summer for our first ever Sporting Classics Angling Adventure. We'll visit two spectacular fly fishing destinations in British Columbia.



Anglers April Vokey and Steve "Mac" McFarland work a magnificent run known as Upper Tidal. Opposite: April fought and landed this incredibly bright Dean River steelhead less than two miles from the salt.

weak or injured fish, so only the strongest make it over the falls to spawn and pass on their genes. Consequently, after thousands of years of natural selection the Dean is home to some of the planet's most athletic steelhead; fish that

catapult themselves out of the water and literally melt the backing from your reel.

Even better, most of the Dean River steelhead arrive in July and August when the days are long and the weather is warm. I've done just enough winter steelheading over the years to form an indelible mental link between big fish and nasty weather. After all those cold and rainy winter days, it's a real treat to wade a steelhead river in the golden sunshine of an August afternoon.

Which is exactly what we did. My friend Mac and I, along with steelhead angler extraordinaire April Vokey, joined a handful of other fly fishermen for a week of gorgeous weather and gorgeous fish at John Blackwell's Dean River Lodge. Not that those steelhead

always come easy. If you've ever fished British Columbia for steelhead, you know that anything beyond one a day is excellent. Fortunately, the Dean, especially the stretch between

the saltwater and the falls, is one of the most generous rivers around.

Truth to tell, my ongoing relationship with steelhead has been a little uneven. Some trips have been great, while others . . . well, not so much. Sometimes you stand in the rain and the sleet and the freezing cold, trying to wade a river that's been blown out for days, and you know in your heart that you've come a thousand miles or more with no hope of success. None. Then there are times, like last week, when you hit the lottery. The water is perfect, the weather is perfect, and your fellow anglers, who share your passion for wild fish and wild country, seem to shine with an uncommon light.

The reality of the whole experience sinks home with your very first grab. That first steelhead strikes and your rod surges and he goes airborne, luminous and transcendent, as your mind races through a litany of "Thank you!" and "What a gorgeous fish!" and the inevitable "Son-of-a-.....!!!" At

the same time, tucked in behind your screaming drag and the high-octane adrenaline rush is the unspoken knowledge that your life, in this one glorious moment, is everything you could ever hope for.

I was standing waist deep when it happened, throwing a long line across the river and swinging my fly through a skinny current seam. The take was absolutely electric and I ended up holding on for dear life through all the aerials and the power runs until April and Steve Morrow (who, by the way, just earned my vote for "Guide of the Year") finally tailed the handsome buck and held him for a handful of photos. Sometimes things work out exactly the way they're supposed to.

Mac's first fish came from the very same run. He was casting his big two-hander when his rod tip dipped and a stunningly bright steelhead started leaping toward the far bank. He played her with his typical combination of flair and nonchalance

and then, after a few minutes, slid her in tight. She wasn't big, maybe 26 inches, but she was gorgeous, with ephemeral silver sides and translucent fins. In a bit of alchemy, the sunlight streaming down from the deep blue sky reflected off her body and turned the water's surface to quicksilver. It was as if some elemental magic linked the fish and the river, and maybe even the man, for a moment or two. Lord, you should have seen Mac's smile. It was incandescent.

But while I had a hell of a week, and while Mac was his typical exuberant self, April was the real star. She just lit it up. Big fish after big fish, effortless cast after effortless cast – Ms. Vokey set the river on fire. I'd never fished with her before, and while it's hard to believe that someone so young can be so good, it was obvious right from the start that April was part artist and part predator.

I watched her land her first fish of the trip, the one in the photo at



They're there. And if you look hard enough, you can see them. Big elk and big mule deer. But if you want to see them through a rifle scope, you've got to give us a call. This September we're opening up the High Ranch to a select number of archery and muzzleloader hunters, the first time in a decade. 350 B&C elk. 190+ B&C mule deer. This fall, come on out to The High Lonesome Ranch. You'll be sure to see more than just the leaves drop.

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the beginning of this column, and she was such a natural that you'd think she'd been born and raised on the Dean. I've fished a lot of places over the years, but I've never seen anything quite like April tailing that steelhead with those huge mountains and ancient glaciers as a backdrop.

It wasn't just April, Mac and yours truly, either. Everyone at the lodge had a hell of a time. Dan, who's a neurosurgeon from Seattle, hooked and landed more nice steelhead in a week than should be humanly possible. Lee Ann, who's home water is Oregon's Deschutes, seemed like she was into a fish every time I turned around. Even the European neophytes, Ralph and Manfred, finished up with big smiles. It was truly an epic trip.

Before I forget, I should offer kudos to Justin Blackwell, who manages Dean River Lodge and who ultimately made all our big fish possible. It's not easy to run a wilderness fly fishing operation, and it's even harder to do it well.

In addition to the steelhead, Justin was also responsible for making sure our meals were delicious, our beds were comfortable and our showers were hot. He, his guides and his staff all did a tremendous job.

So by now it should be obvious that April, Mac and I had a wonderful time in British Columbia. The fishing ranged from very good to excellent, the scenery was amazing, and Dean River Lodge . . . well, it's an awesome place to spend a week prospecting for some of the strongest, most beautiful steelhead in the world. I've literally never seen fish like we caught on the Dean. They're incredible. ✨

With that in mind, lets circle back to where I started this column. *Sporting Classics* is proud to announce its first-ever Angling Adventure. Next summer, most likely during the prime week of July 29 - August 5, I'll be hosting five *Sporting Classics* readers at Blackwell's Dean River Lodge.

We'll spend a week swinging flies for steelhead on the Dean. And believe it or not, it looks like April will be one of our guides. The \$4,700 price tag includes everything except fishing licenses, tax, gratuities, alcohol and commercial air travel.

Oh, and if steelhead fishing doesn't appeal to you, the magazine is also hosting an exclusive week at Blackwell's Moose Lake Lodge, June 24-July 1, for five anglers. *Sporting Classics* Senior Editor Mike Altizer, author of *The Last Best Day*, will lead the trip, which will focus on rainbow trout and chinook salmon. The cost is \$4,900 plus airfare and incidentals.

If you have any questions, or if you'd like to sign up for either or both trips, call Matt Coffey at 800.849.1004. You can also e-mail him at matt@sportingclassics.com. To see more images from my 2010 trip to Dean River Lodge and my 2009 trip to Moose Lake Lodge, visit my new website at www.castingwest.com.

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