

# July Fishing

By Todd Tanner



Some of you might remember *It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown*, the animated Halloween cartoon that featured Linus, Snoopy, Lucy, Charlie Brown and the rest of the Peanuts gang. One particular line out of that classic 1966 TV show still rings true. When the kids asked him how he'd done trick-or-treating, poor Charlie Brown, who was wearing his sad-sack, many-holed Ghost costume, answered, "I got a rock."

I got a rock.

Well, it was late in the last afternoon of our five-day steelhead trip back to Kumdis River Lodge (*The Gift of Haida Gwaii, March/ April 2004 Sporting Classics*) and I was the one with the rock. I hadn't hooked a steelhead, much less landed one, and I was looking good ol' Mr. Skunk right in the eye.

That's right. Skunked. Zip. Nada. I could soften things up a little by telling you that a promising trip to one of the best steelhead destinations in the world had been knocked cattywumpus by a couple days of heavy rain – it wouldn't be a

*The steelhead was of such epic, heroic proportions that it seemed he'd wandered into a Greek Tragedy, where the hero never really had a chance.*



*The author and his stunning British Columbia steelhead, which took him into his backing six times.*

stretch to say that the local rivers had gone from easily wadeable to suicide-high overnight – yet the truth is that I was the only guy who hadn't hooked up.

Peter had landed a tremendous, chrome-bright fish our first day out, Troy had

connected with a dandy of a buck that he estimated in the high teens later that same day, and Billy . . . well, let's just say that Billy was *The Man*.

He'd hooked, landed and released two monstrous 18-pound-plus steelhead on Wednesday and then had stuck an even bigger fish (in water the color of mud) when we finally managed to get back on the river Saturday morning. When he landed that last fish, which pounded a black leech just as it started to swing up off the bottom, you could almost hear an angelic chorus singing praises of the man with the golden rod and the Tom Cruise smile.

As for myself, I guess you could say that at the same time I was snapping photos of Billy's twenty-pound steelhead,

I was also leaning toward humble. Which, given the number of big fish I've been lucky enough to catch over the years, might seem fitting. After all, without dark, you've got no light; without dawn, you've got no up. My point being that if you don't get skunked occasionally, it's hard to be truly appreciative of all those great days on the water.

Still, you can take the Charlie Brown thing just a touch too far and when Billy sang out, "Fish On!" the very last afternoon of our trip – the fast-dropping sun setting his fly line and backing aglow on the far side of the river – my happiness for my friend was somewhat tempered by the leaden weight of my own skunking. Not that I begrudged him this latest behemoth. I didn't. In fact, I was relieved to see that jealousy didn't jump up, grab my guts and twist. But Billy's continued success stood in sharp contrast to my own lack thereof, and in a moment of clarity I decided that it was time to regroup. I stopped fishing, waded back to the bank and took a break.

Billy was still playing his steelhead five minutes later when I stepped back into the river and flipped out a little twenty-foot cast. The fly, a size 4 pink-and-white leech I'd just tied on, drifted about five feet and then paused in the shallow water. I set the hook with no expectation of success – hell, it was an ersatz cast, a line-lengthening cast, the kind I rarely even bother to fish – and then I watched in amazement as my fly line started zipping off my reel and heading for the far side of the river.

I was dumbfounded, thinking for a moment that I was experiencing some sort of bizarre hallucination, and then, when it finally dawned on me that I'd hooked up, I let loose with a yell and tried to put the brakes on my

new friend. No point in allowing the fish – I didn't know if it was a steelhead, a cutthroat or a dolly at that point – to run me across the river and dive into a logjam on the far side.

It's still hard for me to believe, but I couldn't do it. I couldn't stop him. He was too strong. But Lady Luck, who was obviously standing by my side, convinced the fish to surge toward the surface, where he rolled and thrashed just shy of the far bank.

He was huge.

Now huge is a relative term, most any steelhead being huge when compared to your average brown or rainbow, but it was immediately apparent that this particular fish was exceptionally large, even for a steelhead; a fish of such epic, heroic proportions that it seemed I'd wandered into a Greek Tragedy, the kind where the hero dies a slow death of many cuts and the audience toasts his valor while lamenting the fact that he never really had a chance.

Did I have a chance? I didn't know. But I'll tell you this. If it was a fight, they would have stopped it. I've never had a fish take me into my backing more than twice. This fish did it six different times. He beat my hands raw as I tried in vain to palm the reel, and then, when I grabbed the spool in desperation, he tore it out of my grip, smoking up and down the river, shooting out monstrous wakes like a torpedo. Such raw power. Unbelievable. I've never experienced anything like it, not even with the king salmon I've hooked over the years.

If Troy, who'd heard me yelling and come zooming down the bank, hadn't gotten below the buck and kept him from crashing down out of the tailout and heading for the ocean, I'd have been toast; burnt, black and smoking on the edges. As it was,

I kept that 8-weight Loomis GLX bent so hard that I was sure it was going to stick little graphite daggers in my face when it finally blew up. Which it had to – no rod could handle that strain.

But it did – thanks, G Loomis – and sweet Luck kept singing in my ear, and when Troy finally grabbed that oar-sized tail eight or nine minutes after the first blistering run, the Christians had overcome the lions and my whole world was completely focused on a magnificent, stunning fish – a gift I didn't deserve, a gift from the Creator.

Which isn't quite the end of my story.

It turned out that Billy ended up losing his behemoth when it ran him out to the very end of his backing – at that point, it was either break him off intentionally or forfeit the entire line – but he hooked another steelhead almost immediately, a fifteen-pound hen that he landed on the far side of the river after a knockdown brawl. And believe it or not, I stuck a second fish, a pretty little hen who jumped a half-dozen times before she eventually came to hand.

Best of all, Troy, who hadn't hooked up since the first day of our trip, connected with an incredibly strong buck, a gorgeous, fresh-from-the-ocean fish that just went wild and beat him to a pulp. Troy's a great angler, though, and after ten minutes I finally managed to return his earlier favor, tailing the very last fish of the trip as the sun sank below the mountains to the west. It was epic, an amazing finish to a perfect day. And as we were walking back to the truck, the crisp British Columbia air filling our lungs with the rich fragrance of that ancient boreal forest, one particular scent was conspicuously absent.

There wasn't a hint, not even a hint, of skunk. 

*Editor's Note:* To book your own steelhead trip to Kumdis River Lodge, call 800-668-7544 or e-mail: [info@langara.com](mailto:info@langara.com).