

A Fishing Trip to the John Day River

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Many years ago, more than I would generally want to acknowledge, I was an avid fisherman. I predominantly fished the Columbia and Yakima Rivers near my home in Eastern Washington, mostly catching scrap fish. We occasionally did outings to the nearby "potholes" reservoirs or to the mountains, trips sometimes combined with backpacking. Those treks brought some fish beyond the scrap fish caught around home.

But my interests evolved. Although my brother Den (a.k.a. Dennis to most of the world) has maintained his passion for fishing throughout his life, mine drifted away toward backpacking and mountaineering, often with camps in high scenic places rather than down at lakes where fish are to be found. The last time I purchased a fishing license was in 1965 for a trip that Den and I did to Spade Lake in what is now the Alpine Lakes Wilderness of Washington.



Some of our catch of
Cutthroat Trout from Spade Lake in 1965.

I recently thought it might be worthwhile for me to again do some fishing. This would let me run into the mountains to some lakes and streams to fish. If one studies the trail systems, it looks to me like there are numerous lakes and streams that may offer reasonable fishing while not being heavily populated. This may be a good substitute for the more intense hikes that I have done and loved so for the past many years. The fishing is just good fun, especially if it can be done away from the crowds.

Den invited me to join him with his fishing partner, Norm, and Norm's son Scott for a trek to the John Day River of Central Oregon. They have been going there for the last 20 years, often with many trips per year. Summer trips with low, warm waters yield great Smallmouth Bass fishing. The higher, cooler water of spring and fall yield steelhead. The trip encompasses an easy hike, but is still a complicated endeavor. It started on a Friday afternoon. A boat was hauled to and launched into the

John Day River at the mouth where it enters the Columbia. The boat, a 17 footer that Den and Norm share, then took us to waterfalls and white water on the river, a point that cannot be traversed by boats of virtually any type. We left the boat anchored off shore and hiked for about a mile and a half to a long established camp spot that Den and Norm have used. The hike was easy, although with some mild exposure to cliffs above the gorge in the river, and included a crossing of the river. To cross the river, I put on a pair of old tennis shoes that I wore for the remainder of the trip. The hike was quite uncomfortable owing to temperatures around 95F.

We arrived at the fishing camp at perhaps 5 PM. The guys immediately broke out their gear and headed for the river and some of the holes that they have located and named over the years. I went along with Den and hit some of these places and immediately began to catch fish. I used spinning gear with Rooster Tail spinners. Scott also used spinning gear. However Den and Norm, the purists among us, used nothing but fly gear. Den took in two rods, one set up for wet fly fishing and the other for dry flys.



that I caught. This one was about one pound.

Here's a shot of me with perhaps the largest Bass



Here's a shot of me trying some fly fishing with Den's gear. I had no troubles casting (to Den's surprise I think) but never did manage to catch any on the dry fly. Den caught them like gangbusters. Guess I've lost the touch.



Den is

much better than me at both the casting and the catching.



A more panoramic shot showing Den fishing one of the holes.

The evening camping was a bit unusual for me. I had to move my gear in the middle of the night. It seems that I was very close to a colony of carpenter ants and they kept crawling over me. We also took a break in the middle of the night to look at the stars, for this was supposed to be the peak of the Perseides meteor shower. I saw a couple of bright ones, along with more smaller ones, not unlike our fishing experience. Mostly I slept through it all.

Our hike in on Friday had been very uncomfortable owing to the 95 degree temperatures. The hike out was much more pleasant. It was earlier in the day on Saturday and the temperature was a bit lower.



Here's a shot of Den on the hike out. We had stopped to get a photo of the river where it enters the region of cascades and falls. This photo is very chaotic. The river is only 10 or 20 feet wide at the white water and is 100 yards away from us, and 100 ft lower in elevation. Note also that the lower extremes of Den's shorts are wet, an indication of the depth at our river crossing a few minutes earlier. None of the crossings we did presented any problems, for the flow rate was low. Den tells me that the crossings are much more difficult in the fall and spring months when the river is flowing more heavily .



We are nearly out by now. Den carries the same sleeping bag and large air mattress (top) for all parts of the year.



Here we

are back in the boat, headed toward the dock.



Den had

an ice chest stashed in the boat with some Cokes in it. They were still moderately cold and really tasted good!

Many thanks Den and Norm for a super trip.