



Umpqua Steelhead

by Major Lawrence Mott



Wherever the crowd goes — the crowd goes! Thus it is that the Eel—in Northern California—the Klamath, the Rogue, the Mackenzie, and other Oregon streams are heavily overstocked with anglers each summer, while a gorgeous river that, to my mind, has not an equal for charm of exquisite scenery; that has never been (and that *is* not) overfished; and one on which I had the finest sport with the great steelhead, in all my years of fishing experiences . . . thus it is that the North Umpqua goes, so-to-speak, a'begging!

The mob always HAS gone to the other rivers! Hence it always goes to them! It deliberately shuttles to and fro, at terrific speed, over the magnificent Highway Bridge at Winchester, that crosses the North Umpqua some 5 miles from the bustling little city of Roseburg, county seat of Douglas—with barely a passing glance at the stream!

In '28 I had the great pleasure of spending several weeks on the far-famed Rogue. And most excellent sport did I

have! But . . . I did not fish it during those that I call the "mob" and "dub" months—July and August—and for the reason that one is constantly unwrapping some *other* angler's line from one's neck—cutting someone *else's* fly from the seat of one's breeches, and so forth, during those months. No—I had my sport on the very roguish Rogue in late October and well in to November, when the nights were tinged with frost and the mountains' foliage was a bewildering kaleidoscopic mass of brilliant colors, and—when there *were no anglers!*

Oh, yes! Steelhead not only take a fly avidly as late as that, but even later, still!

July, August and September are the months—*par excellence*—for the upper waters of the North Umpqua. It is not a "late river"—like the Rogue.

Let me, in the first place, assure my readers that the North Umpqua is the **ONLY** unspoiled river that is left on the whole of the American Pacific slope! That this statement may—at first glance—seem a bit broad and untrammelled, I admit. But it is a true one—nae'the'less!

As I have previously mentioned, all the other streams are too thickly "populated" during the summer months to enable one to fish with any degree of comfort and satisfaction. A certain famous authority of the Rogue, and one who is domiciled at Grant's Pass, wrote to me while I was on the Upper Umpqua. . . . "Stay where you are. The sport that you are having beats ours all hollow. Few fish this year and an angler on every rock!"

The Upper Umpqua is decidedly hard to get at. There is no denying this. And by "hard" I mean that the way in to the back country, from Roseburg, is—for the greater part of it—a Forest Service dirt road—with an almost incredible number of sharp turns and twistings—and steep gradients. A "road," in short, that requires the driver's constant alertness and care. It is, however, entirely practical. A small number of cars penetrated to its end—at Steamboat Landing—last summer, when I was there. Their drivers heaved sighs of relief on arriving—but

they had made it, which was the important thing!

Another deterrent to the "mob" influx is the fact that nothing—save a few minor groceries at a wee place called Glide—may be purchased, after Roseburg is left astern. There are but two "resorts" over the entire 60 miles. Camping grounds, and very fine ones, are maintained by the Forest Service, but these are—as yet—few and far between. Hence it may be said that the angler who strikes in for the Upper North Umpqua must be self-contained in his car—as to all equipment and supplies.

Having drawn a rather sketchy picture of the reasons why the lovely river is not generally known, I turn to the more pleasing side—the side that will delight the REAL angler! The man who does not mind being a bit physically uncomfortable and thrown on his own resources—more or less—!

Mile after mile of enchanting pools, riffles and deep runs is a description of the river—in a few words. Rising from Diamond Lake, it literally hurls its tortuous and—in places—wickedly wild way to the sea. Only once has it been achieved from near the Lake, to salt water, in a specially-built bateau-like craft. But the men that accomplished the feat vowed . . . "never again!" It was a most beautiful trip—scenically—for I know of no river that has even a tithe of the abounding and ever-changing charms of forest and stream and mountains' pictures. But it was *hard work!* Most of the rapids cannot be "run," and their little craft had to be "lined" over them. I have done a great deal of this sort of thing on Labrador rivers that had never had a canoe on their surfaces, and I know that a day of "lining" will take the starch entirely out of the huskiest of muscles.

And Nature has further protected her North Umpqua from the "mob" by thrusting her forest, in most places, right down to the water's edge, making it imperative that an angler who would do well, be thoroughly versed in two things: 1. The ability to wade deep in the swift current. And—2.—The ability to cast a long line.

Would you like to have an hour or so, with me, on some pet water o'mine?

I am a firm believer in the early morning and late afternoon fishing—never going on the stream between 10 A.M. and 5 P.M. The all-day thrash-thrash-thrash of so many tyros gets them—day-in-and-out—practically nothing save, perhaps, some very small trout, and it succeeds—admirably—in disturbing the pools and making the larger fish restless and exceedingly wary.

So it is that you and I step from our tents soon after the Eastern skies have been delicately touched with the brushes

of the Master Artist, and are aglow with the delicate roseate, gray-purple and orange tints of another day. A quick break-out-fast of yesterday-caught steelhead—broiled—with a bit o'bacon across it; buttered toast and excellent coffee—and we are ready.

It is but a dozen strides to the pool-side, at the upper end of it. The mad dashing of the rapid above has slowed and deepened into a most heavenly run where I know, by happy experience, that the big steelheads inhabiting this river love to lie.

"What is it to be in the way of a fly, this morning? Subdued light because of a high fog that dams the downpouring of the sun's rays. S'ppose we try a Jock Scott, No. 6?"

What more all-satisfying feeling is there—*soul-satisfying*, is the better way of putting it—than to wade out in the stream, that seems to rub caressingly against your legs—early o' a lovely morn'—a morn' whose utter peace in the wilderness is as a breath of the Divinity!

And now with the 8 oz. rod gracefully sending out line as I take it from the reel—I begin to reach out for a particular eddy—a very particular eddy, indeed, behind a huge, sunken rock against which the stream has stormed in vain for years. And—if—I—can . . . put my—fly—just . . . over—*there* . . . AH! Did you see him? He came for it beautifully! I'll rest him a few minutes while I have a smoke . . . now then:—watch closely . . . when the fly draws 'round—*got him!*

As a piece of molten silver the great steelhead flings itself clear of the surface . . . "A 7-pounder, if he's an ounce!"

The pool is dotted with lone rocks, and if your fish crosses above one and passes to the far side of it—it's a toss up whether you can save him as the weight of water carries your line against the rock and grimly holds it there. There is one hope . . . if he will pop out NOW . . . I can lift the line clear! He jumps—beautifully—I had the tip as high as I could reach—the line cleared, thank the Lord . . . and off we go downstream—steelhead and I! Hurry up—if you are going to follow—for divvil a bit is he stopping—at all, at all! Down and down—until halfway down the stretch he checks in comparatively quiet water. Now we'll go after him—hard!

The steady punishment inflicted by the marvelous backbone of so slight a rod (for steelhead) is beginning to tell . . . he has jumped eight times—doubt if there is another left in him—but he has plenty of cunning as to the how of setting his body at such an angle with the current that a terrific strain is brought on the little, tapered leader . . . I'd best ease up a bit and let him slip down in to still more quiet waters . . . *what the*

deuce?—FOULED! Pressure only brings that "dead" reply along the line, that every angler knows, only too well. There is but one thing to do—as wading out is impossible—and I do it—slack away everything until the bight of the line is bowing with the stream.

Eureka! He's cleared it, himself!

(As a friendly tip to them that, perhaps, are unaware of it: six, perhaps seven times out of ten—especially with steelhead—where conditions are such that you cannot get out to clear, a sudden change in the angle of strain on the fish's mouth caused by the slacking of the line as I have described, will cause the fish to shift its position, the line clearing—as was the result in the present case.)

The steelhead swings wide across the river and gets into a partial eddy; . . . it will not do to let him rest in yon' comfortable spot, so I bring more pressure to bear. This annoys him into two more jumps, but there is not the "old pepper" in evidence. Loath as he is to come, I persuade him back in the current—always keeping below him, thus having the advantage of the river's strength with me. Gradually, then more rapidly, I "work" the fish back to my side of the stream. He catches a glimpse of me and surges away, but it is only a gesture and on the next leading-in I swing him broadside to me, quite finished. A carefully-timed gaff stroke and he is at our feet—barely a quiver left.

"What will he go?"

"My guess is six and a half—but the little scales say a full *seven!*" There he is—a thing of beauty and a joy forever!

Though many years have passed into the discard since I began to shoot and fish, I never cease to respectfully marvel at the handiwork of the Master Craftsman. And I know of no fish whose sheer loveliness of delicate hues and shadings surpass those of the famous Steelhead. The name comes from the copp'rous tints along the sides of the head—metallic and beautiful. Dark-blue black, shading into a pearl gray and merging into snow white on the belly, he lies on the dark-green of the ferns—a magnificent thing!

S'ppose that we drop downstream and try the head of that deep riffle, over there—just where the water gathers speed for the next rapid . . . a beautiful spot, indeed! But to cover it properly takes a right long cast, and deep wading.

The rocks of the North Umpqua are particularly slippery, and almost all of the rounded variety. Hobs are worse than nothing. The only kind of a wading shoe that will do the work of keeping one upright are those with *heavy felt* soles. To further assist in maintaining my equilibrium I designed a combination gaff and wading staff, something like those that I have used on Scotch and Labrador

river. The staff is shod in light steel, for a matter of 2 feet, with blunt point. This equipment I have found to be an invaluable adjunct for the tough wading of the fast-water streams of Oregon and Washington. When not in use there is an eye on the shaft that drops easily over a hook that is on a light strap carried across the shoulders. A push shoves it across one's back, when casting, and out of the way.

S'ppose you fish this run?

It is so bright now that I suggest a Black Dose, or a Brown Fairy, No. 8. And we'll go up to that point. You must wade out along the ledge, but don't bear down stream as there is a drop-off that is over your head, on the lower side. You will have to go to your waist as it is a long cast to THE . . . spot. See where the current sweeps in reverse—forming the main eddy? Try to put your fly just at its edge . . . that's it! Just a bit higher—if you can? . . . Fine! . . . Nothing doing? He wanted it! Sowie! . . . let him go, man—let him go! 'Scuse my yelling orders—but you have never tackled one of these fish in this kind of water and they can make a monkey out of angler in 1-2-3 order, if you don't know 'em! Hold your rod up! Daggone it—if he should jump, with your tip pointed at him in that way—something would break, or the fly tear out! That's better! Yon's a grand fish, my son! . . . SOME jump! He'll do better than 7 lbs. . . . watch him . . . watch him—snub him hard if he makes for that dead water—it's full of snags . . . B'gosh, he beat you to it! . . . Fouled? Darn! Keep a taut line—I'll wade out and see if I can clear . . .”

Brrrrrr! Tho' 'tis August, the crystal waters of the North Umpqua are always COLD! I never wear waders, as they are too infernally hot, clumsy and decidedly dangerous. I gingerly pick my way over the moss-slippery rocks . . . the surface of the back water is almost calm. . . . I follow the line down with my eyes and can see the steelhead . . . the line has almost a half-turn 'round the end of a log . . . the fly seems secure in the upper jaw—nothing for it but to dip under, as I cannot reach, standing up.

“Stand by—I'm going down!” The water gurgles in my ears as it closes over my head—Lordy, it's cold! I move slowly so as not to startle the big fish into a frantic lunge that might result in a tear-out. I can see almost as plainly as in the air—carefully I reach out—the fish is hugely enlarged and looks like a silver torpedo—I clear the line—bob up—“Heave away!”

But a shaft o' light is on its way down stream—reel screaming joyously—and you make the best time possible after—while I wring my shirt—my eyes following you—that makes the eighth jump! A grand fighter! Glorious is the sunlight! The play of lights and shadows along the

stream-side is exquisite. A westerly breeze daintily caresses your face, and gracefully sways the tall grasses to and fro. A dab of blue-and-white flashes by—scolding harshly. The kingfisher wonders who-in-Heck is poaching on his domain! (There should be a bounty on these marauders, as they are the greatest destroyers of game fish fry, extant!) A pine grouse “Ooomp's” from somewhere in the thickets, and the riveters-blows of a woodpecker come sharply . . . truly—great and wonderful Hands have fashioned these things—for Man's benefit and enjoyment!

“Got him stopped?”



I sit me down on a big rock—to thoroughly enjoy your pleasure—and perhaps I may mention, as a sort of philosophical aside, that I derive far more enjoyment in watching a friend's fun-having than I do in handling the rod, myself.

“Nay—nay! He's not ready to come ashore—yet!”

Up stream—and across it—he goes. Zzzzz—Zzzzzz—from the line as the strong current saws at it—the fish turns suddenly—“Get goin' on that reel, my son!”

Frantically you reel . . . the steelhead swings in almost to your feet—a gorgeous picture! No way in which to lead him ashore for beaching as there are too many reefs and snags . . . so a gaff stroke writes *finis* to that thrill-ful fight.

“Like steelheadin'—do you?”

My readers . . . make reply in your own words. 7¾ lbs. is your first fish.

But the next event on the morning's bill of entertainment is, by all odds, the main go!

While you are having a rest I take the rod and change the fly to a No. 6 Durham Ranger—a Scotch fly that I have found

most useful on both the Rogue and the Umpqua—and there is a particularly alluring bit of water just below us and right in the middle of the run. 'Tis only a few feet across—a semi-quiet resting place for up-coming fish, caused by two big rocks—but I have oft' found big fish lying in it, and always fly-eager. A bit o' a trick to work it, as unless your fly sweeps across it—fast—it does not seem to be of any interest to the fish. I wade out to the proper position—make a false cast or two—and drop the fly where I want it. Nothing happens on the first try—nor on the second. I lengthen out a few feet o' line . . . the Durham Ranger

fairly skitters across the foot of the “hole” . . . I did not see him take it—but the vicious lunge nearly pulled me from my precarious balance—and the steelhead was off, down river . . . Lord! look at that fish go! . . . all the casting line is gone and much of the linen back line . . . still he tears on—I doing my best to follow. . . . I made a mis-step in the hurry—WHOOSH! Down I go—full length, but I hang on to the rod! By the time that I have picked myself up the fish is all of 100 yards below me—and in quiet, deep water. How I managed to get down there without the line fouling is an epic! My antics and cavortings must have been funny, as my almost 200 *avoir-dupois* leaped agilely (?) across the deep places, teetered on rocks—and so forth! But I got there, and my fish was still with me! For a bit he was prone to sulk and I knew that I had a big 'un. Then he jumped! I studied my battle ground carefully, noting the vantage points. For some ten minutes we nip-and-tucked it to and fro—rounds being about equal. The big fish was some 40 feet from me, on the edge of the white water. He jumped again—and I saw the fly leave its mouth

while in the air! You all know that "nasty" feeling . . . and it always seems to happen with the "biggest" fish of the day—too!

BUT . . . the discarded fly had no more than hit the water when there was a terrific splash and I was hung to another fish! It jumped—*pronto*—and it was as large as the one that I had just lost! The complete reversal of my feelings caused a mental confusion, for a moment. Before I could pull myself together my fresh antagonist was out of the pool and headed for the 120-mile distant sea—at a nothing-flat rate. Pickin' up my feet . . . off I staggered—after him—on a stern chase once more. Snubbing hard, I checked him at the top of the next falls, as there was *no* hope of staying con-

nected with a fish in that place—a mass of sharp ledges and out-cropping boulders.

Sullenly—grudgingly he came back. Then he suddenly flung himself into "high" and deliberately forged up against the rapid—back to the precise spot where he had taken the fly. It is rare, indeed, that a fish will thus run up stream, for obvious reasons. So it was a decided novelty for me to have to clamber over rocks in that direction.

But the strain of the effort told heavily on the fish. Two more slithering jumps—a tentative swing down stream, from which I checked him—and the beaching.

A LOVELY steelhead of 9½ lbs.!

Gad, man—did you ever see anything so wholly beautiful? Now then—take a

quick look, as the little fly in the tough part of the upper jaw has done no harm and this chap goes back to his freedom . . . there you are, old timer! Good luck and thanks for a splendid tussle!

The great fish moves sluggishly in the quiet at the bank side—as tho' wondering just what had happened. Then, guided by his marvellous instinct, he moves toward the quick water—a flash—and he is gone under the foam!

GREAT . . . was it not?

This article first appeared in July, 1930, in Forest and Stream. This was, in fact, the final issue of that magazine. Its mailing list was taken over by Field and Stream, the current editor of which was kind enough to give us reprint permission.



Major Lawrence Mott, one of the great early anglers of the North Umpqua River, is shown here with a large Chinook salmon from the same river. Picture courtesy of Jim Van Loan, the Steamboat Inn, Oregon.