

RAISING THE GHOST



PHOTOS COURTESY OF TEAM FLY BOYS

Jesse Atkins, of Bozeman, hoists a steelhead caught on a tributary of the Skeena River in British Columbia.

Bozeman anglers capture footage of mythical steelhead rising to dry flies deep in British Columbia backcountry

By BEN PIERCE

Chronicle OutThere Editor

It was a legend, a myth only hinted at by anglers plying the backcountry rivers of British Columbia.

At first it was just a rumor. And then the rumor became a whisper. And then the whisper became reality.

In mid-September 2007, a group of Bozeman anglers dubbed Team Fly Boys set out to chase a ghost — to track down wild steelhead rising to dead-drift dry flies on a remote tributary of the Skeena River.

Amazingly the fish cooperated, and the team captured all the trials, trepidation — and yes, the take — for a feature film entitled “Raising the Ghost.”

“I still watch the movie today and shake my head and laugh to myself,” said Paul Tarantino, 38, who landed the first steelhead hooked on a dry fly during the trip. “I had heard about it and the unbelievable days up there when the runs were really big, but that’s just a story. And then when it happens to you, you just can’t believe it.”

Tarantino, along with anglers Bob Carroll, Nick Watson and Jesse Atkins landed more than a dozen steelhead — a sea-run strain of rainbow trout — taken on dry flies during a two-day stretch at the end of a seven-day trip that tested their resolve.

Known as the “gray ghost,” Steelhead are notoriously difficult fish to catch. Reared in the rivers of their birth, the fish migrate downstream to the Pacific Ocean where they bulk up on the bounty of the sea before returning to their home waters to spawn.

Most often steelhead are caught with subsurface flies on a long, swinging cast. To catch them on dry flies is so rare that it presses the bounds of reality.

(More on **Ghost**, page D2)

Mist rises above a wall tent used as a base camp by Team Fly Boys on a tributary of the Skeena River in British Columbia.



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"It took a serious leap of faith to take off all my sinking line and all my gear and actually throw a dry fly upstream," Atkins said on Monday. "It is unheard of to make that leap, especially after days of not catching fish. And to think I am going to lower my odds somehow ... it was hard to make that switch."

While the prospect of catching steelhead on a dead-drift dry fly is more the stuff of dreams than reality, Atkins said there is a logical explanation as to why the fish on this tributary of the Skeena River are compelled to rise.

"As smolt in this river for two years, they are feeding on local food and that includes insects," he said. "This hatch, the green drake, it is a really special hatch. Everyone that knows the green drake knows that if you can get in on this hatch you are going to see some despicable fish behavior, total disregard and this desperate grab for this amazing bug."

"These fish were feeding based on a memory of that. It is the same reason they slam the stuff they slam when people are traditionally fishing for them. It usually reminds them of something in the ocean, but we got lucky enough to remind them of something before that that was in that river."

In hindsight, the team realized they had seen rising steelhead throughout the trip, but had disregarded many because the rise forms appeared to be from much smaller fish.

"Coming from Montana, it looked like a whitefish slapping the surface," Watson said. "They are rising from memory, so they are rising like small fish," Atkins added. "So they are kind of clumsy at it, it doesn't look right."

With Team Fly Boys production crew members Josh Brandner, Kalen Higton and Ryan Stumpe rolling video 18 hours a day on three separate cameras, the action sequences in "Raising the Ghost" set a new standard for steelhead films.

The resulting footage - the delicate dead-drift float of a



Ryan Stumpe of the Team Fly Boys production crew wades alongside a heavily-weighted raft during the filming of "Raising the Ghost."

PHOTO COURTESY OF TEAM FLY BOYS

dry fly shattered by the electric take of a wild steelhead - captures the determined effort and emotion that defined the trip.

In addition to the film's strong documentary feel, Team Fly Boys interviewed legendary steelhead anglers - from Russell Chatham to Bob Clay - in an effort to convey the importance of conservation for a species in precipitous decline. "To make a film about steelhead and not talk about the issues, you are either totally self indulgent or you don't know what is going on," Tarantino said. "For me steelhead are the most highly regarded, most unbelievable freshwater game fish on the planet."

Tarantino would know. He began fishing for steelhead before he ever cast a fly line to a trout. Born and raised in Carmel, Calif., Tarantino caught his first steelhead from the waters of the Carmel River. "When I grew up fishing as

a kid, my dad would drop me off to fish the river on his way to work and my mom would pick me up and take me to school," Tarantino recalled. "I caught 25 steelhead that year ... and now they are just gone."

"The Carmel River where I grew up fishing, it went for eight straight years where it never flowed into the ocean. The steelhead that were left couldn't come back."

Tarantino said the Carmel River was sapped of its flows by golf courses. He emphasized that varied environmental and industrial factors play a significant role in the decline of steelhead populations up and down the Pacific Coast.

"California is like the classic study of how to screw up rivers - lack of water, logging, agriculture, irrigation - they have done it all to these rivers. There are only a couple rivers left that have runs (of steelhead) and they are 90 percent hatchery fish."

To help unify efforts to protect steelhead fisheries, Team Fly Boys has joined with Trout Unlimited, California Trout, Oregon Trout, the Native Fish Society, the Wild Steelhead Coalition, the Federation of Fly Fishers and the Steelhead Society of British Columbia to spread the message of conservation.

"Raising the Ghost" will have a Bozeman premiere on Nov. 5 as part of a Save Wild Steelhead Event held at the Emerson Cultural Center.

To view a trailer of "Raising the Ghost," visit www.youtube.com/watch?v=MTHYtAzO3M0. To learn more about Team Fly Boys efforts to protect steelhead, or to purchase a copy of "Raising the Ghost," call 599-2987.

PHOTO OF THE WEEK



YELLOWSTONE VISTA

This week's photograph comes from Nonna Mikat of Bozeman who took this picture over the Fourth of July weekend in Yellowstone National Park.

SUBMISSIONS

Send your outdoor photos to OutThere@dailychronicle.com or drop them off at the Chronicle front desk. Each week the Chronicle will select an image from the submissions and publish it in Thursday's OutThere section. Please include your name, address and phone number along with a brief description of the image including the location and names of those pictured.

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