

They're not crazy, they're Steel

It's about nine in the morning, a gray foggy January day. The temperature is around 40 degrees with a damp, chill breeze that makes it closer to 30. It snowed two days ago and a little of it still remains. The river is clear, swift and remarkably low for the time of year.

It's nine in the morning and I'm standing by a small fire on a snowy bank of the Willamette River trying to stay warm and wake up and they've already been here for three hours.

They are the steelheaders, an extremely dedicated and robust group of fisherman fervently caught up in the

challenge of catching one of the most elusive and sought after big game fish; the winter steelhead.

Many people regard fishing as a summertime passion, a good way to spend a crisp clear morning or a warm lazy evening. Not many people would ever want to wake up at four in the morning on a dark, cold, wet winter day, ready to be on the river bank at 5 a.m., setting up poles, line riggins, and baits by flashlight or lantern, ready to cast out at the first light of dawn around 5:30 a.m. or six.

Not many people would be willing or able to wait pa-

tiently throughout an entire day--whatever the weather--watching poles, listening for the strike bell on a pole, un-snagging lines, re-rigging lines and baits, waiting for the chance of catching one fish, or if they were to be very lucky, to make the daily limit of two fish.

It is no wonder that few people could ever subject themselves to the rigors and expense of steelhead fishing several days a week for about four months. Those who do seem to find it a most worthwhile and rewarding experience; but not without its price.

The difficulty or the

challenge of catching a steelhead is legendary among fisherman. There are many rumors about the intelligence of steelhead and their uncanny ability to throw hooks or take bait without the fisherman feeling it.

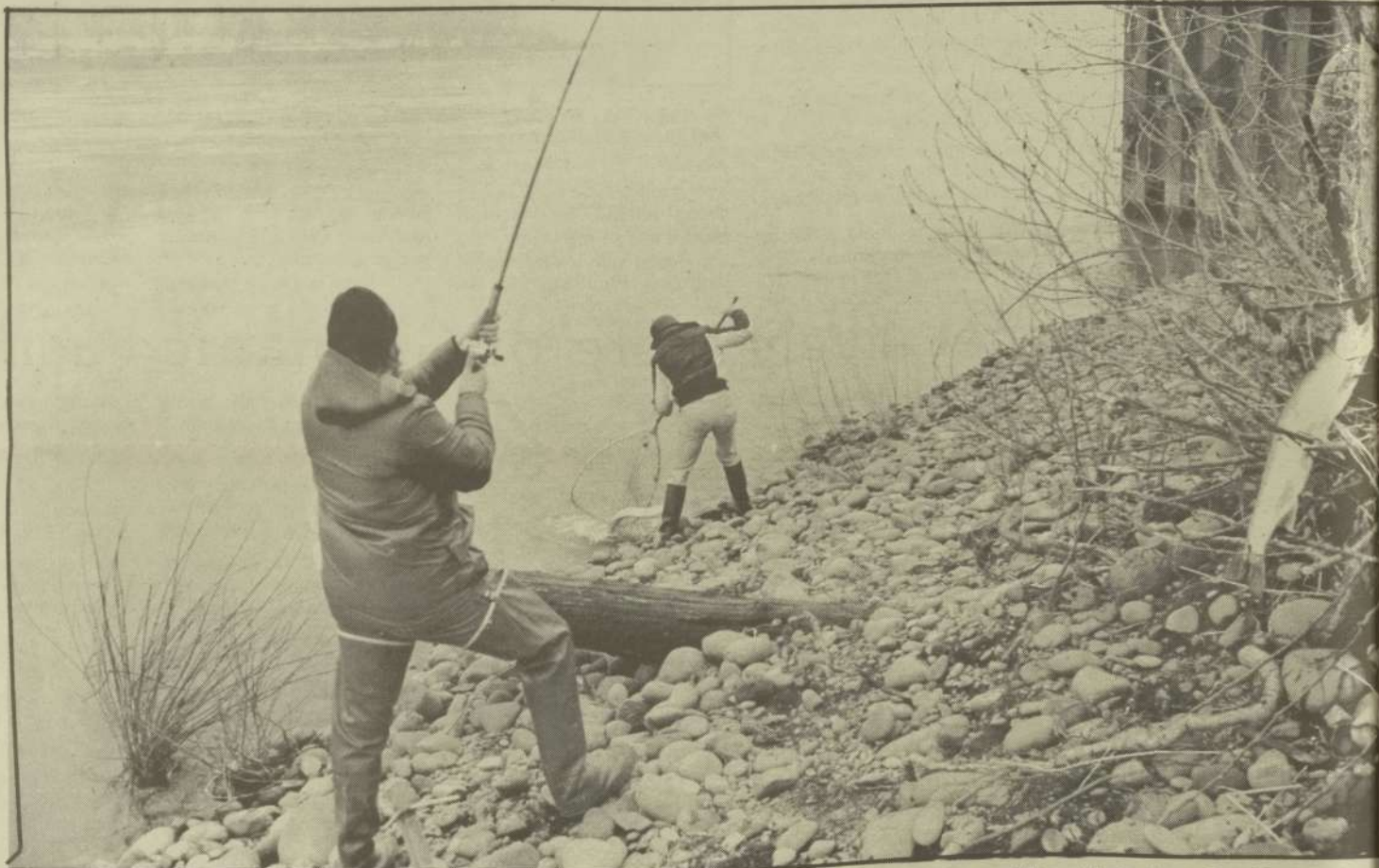
John Romack relates, "The way they're so elusive at times, you'd swear they know what's going on. That's why fisherman are so nit-picky about walking near the river bank where they're fishing. They figure the fish are watching."

Steelhead are especially well-known as ferocious

fighters, with a knack for giving fisherman guided tours up and down the river when hooked.

"You hook a steelhead, light tackle and he'll take you for one helluva ride," quipped Joe Endicott. "I don't know any fish that fights harder longer, it's a real struggle. You can't let up on them, if you give him an inch he'll take a mile...real fast."

However, it is not just physical fortitude of steelhead that make them such a difficult catch. There is also the problem of the natural element, namely winter in Oregon. The steelhead fisherman and the mailman have a lot in com-



LUCKY LIMIT. With one on the tree, Steve Fagan bags his second steelhead in five hours, with net help from Ron Brown.

"Fishing's about medium to slow now. Caught a couple last summer, figured I'd come on down and give it a try. I spent my whole Christmas vacation down here and I caught fish on the first day and the last day. That was spending all day, morning to night. Two fish in 11 days."--Frank Miller



SOCIAL HOUR. Frank Miller, Avery Smith, and Bill Wynn talk shop while waiting. Clackamas Community College

