

Sandy the best for steelhead

Hatcheries, fish ladders keep runs alive on Sandy River

by SCOTT NEWTON
Staff writer

The best steelhead fishing in the Columbia River basin is on the Sandy River.

In 1984, according to the latest figures available from the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, over 14,000 steelhead were caught in the Sandy River, a portion of which is within the Columbia Gorge National Scenic Area.

That was the largest number of steelhead taken from any river in Oregon.

The large, silver anadromous trout are considered a prize catch by sports fishermen because of their fight and contribution to the dinner table.

"It's the best fishing river near a

'The native fish runs are going to get a lot stronger, I hope, in the coming years.'

**— Jeff Uebel
fish biologist**

major metropolitan area in the world, and that's no jive," said Herb Forbes of Alder Creek, volunteer coordinator of a program to enhance fish habitat in the Mount Hood corridor.

Randy Hutchinson, who teaches an environmental science class at Sandy High School, caught an eight-pound steelhead in early January. On the same day, another man caught a 30-pound chinook salmon.

"That's what's so neat about the Sandy," Hutchinson said. "There's always fish to be caught in that river."

The river is home to summer and winter steelhead, and spring and fall chinook, also called coho or "silver salmon."

Jeff Uebel, district fisheries biologist for the Zigzag Ranger District, said there are two reasons for the large number of anadromous fish in the river. One is the Sandy Fish Hatchery. A large number of the fish in the Sandy River are of hatchery origin.

The other reason is the improvement a few years ago of Portland General Electric Co.'s fish ladder at the Marmot Dam on the upper portion of the river.

Beyond those factors, local fishermen and the U.S. Forest Service have made commitments that already may be paying dividends.

Forbes is a lifelong area resident who has been the "temporary" president of the Mount Hood Independent Steelheaders for seven years.

He coordinates activities between local sportsmen and the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's STEP — Salmon-Trout Enhancement Program. In 1986, about 10 sites were improved by the Independent Steelheaders. And in small tributaries on Mount Hood where there have not been fish runs for years, property owners have been setting out hatch boxes.

The Department of Fish and Wildlife released about 240,000 winter steelhead and 60,000 summer steelhead smolts last year.

Volunteers from the Independent Steelheaders clip the winter steelhead, while personnel from the Department of Fish and Wildlife clip the summer steelhead.

Most experienced fishermen will release a native fish, but clipped steelhead usually end up on the dinner table.

At least 20 sites have been improved by local anglers, Forbes said, but the potential for work is still great.

"There's all kinds of work," Forbes said. "That's what I tell the guys, 'Don't give me work. Tell me what you're going to do.'"

Uebel finds his work as a biologist "very rewarding." The Forest Service has made a major commitment to the improvement of fish habitat in the past three years, he said. That includes work on Still Creek and the Salmon River, which are important

spawning grounds for anadromous fish. Both eventually flow into the Sandy River.

Anadromous fish, Uebel explained, are fish that grow to maturity in the ocean but return to fresh water to reproduce.

A flood in 1964 caused a great deal of damage to residential areas in the Mount Hood area. Following the flood, the Forest Service and landowners worked to clean out the rivers.

What they did not know at the time was that they were causing damage to vital fish habitat. By removing logs and other debris from the streams and rivers, they eliminated the gravel beds in which steelhead spawn. Fish from the ocean also use the still pools to rest on the way up to spawn.

The Forest Service originally spent money from timber sales for fish habitat enhancement. It has since allocated money from other sources, tripling its budget on fish habitat enhancement, Uebel said.

Streams within the Zigzag Ranger District are some of the most important for maintaining native fish runs, Uebel said. On Still Creek, efforts to clean out the creek bed almost ruined the native run, but the anadromous fish hung on. Because there is a 3- or 4-year life cycle, depending upon the fish, it is difficult to measure the results of the 3-year-old effort, but Uebel is optimistic.

"The native fish runs are going to get a lot stronger, I hope, in the coming years," he said.

In Lady Creek, where a diversion dam near Rhododendron ended anadromous fish runs for 50 years, a recent effort by local residents, the Forest Service and Sandy High School students may return the creek to productivity.

The Sandy High School students have incubated 15,000 steelhead eggs — about 1,500 of them in the classroom for students to observe.

The fish were released recently on Lady Creek by the students. Students participating in the project are part of an environmental science class that also studies Northwest trees and shrubs, pond biology, song birds, birds of prey and predators.

Hutchinson, Zel Gernhart and Sandy High School Principal Dennis Crow have designed and written the course material themselves.

For Hutchinson, a diehard fisherman, one goal of the class is to teach students about interdependence in nature.

Hutchinson occasionally takes students fishing. Contrary to popular belief, not all people who grow up in western Oregon have the opportunity to fish, he said.

And, by having students participate in the trout enhancement program, they gain a feeling of ownership about the fish runs, he said.

"It's like anything else. If you're involved in it, you gain a respect for it," Hutchinson said.

Despite the large number of fish in the Sandy River, it is not accurate to say it is the best place to go fishing in the state, said Don Swartz, staff biologist for the Department of Fish and Wildlife.

The year-round fish runs contribute to the high total numbers, but the department also considers an hours-per-fish count when rating rivers. While a fisherman may fish for 20 hours for a steelhead on the Sandy River, he or she might only fish half that long on the Deschutes River, Swartz said.

Ocean conditions, as well as upper-stream fish habitat, affect fish runs, he said. He is predicting that the 1985 numbers will show a record run of over 200,000 steelhead statewide. Records have been kept in one form or another since 1953.

While there are numerous good places to fish in Oregon, Swartz concedes that the Sandy River is "definitely the top stream in the Columbia River basin."



Randy Hutchinson gets ready to cast line into Sandy River in hopes of pulling in steelhead.

Photo by Scott Newton

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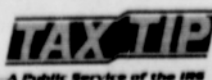
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