



The steelhead of my dreams

BY G.I. WILSON
For the Keizertimes

We know there will be ice in the guides today. There are icy spots on the road, so we wait until 9 a.m. to head for the Nestucca River. It will be a safer drive, later in the day, after the sun has blunted the night time low of 19°. It is late January. The hatchery run is virtually over and too early for the native run. Gerry and I have been cooped up too long, unable to fish because of high water.

When we arrive at the river, our suspicions are confirmed. We are all alone. Standing puddles of water are covered with ice two inches thick. Limbs hanging into the river's current are coated with two to three inches of ice. We are well prepared with wool caps, gloves, and heavy coats.

After about an hour of driftfishing Gerry heads for the truck to thaw out by the heater and have some of my hot tea. To my surprise two men and a young boy pass by, stop for a visit, head through a stand of willows, and start



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brainfood

For Dad

1	2	3	4	5		6	7	8	9		10	11	12	13
14						15					16			
17					18						19			
20				21				22		23				
		24	25				26		27					
28	29						30	31	32			33		
34						35					36			
37				38	39						40	41	42	
			43								44			
45	46	47		48					49	50				
51			52				53	54						
55						56	57		58			59	60	61
62						63		64				65		
66						67					68			
69						70					71			

CREATORS NEWS SERVICE

By Charles Preston

ACROSS

- 1 Pope's triple crown
- 6 Regimen
- 10 Black Hills st.
- 14 Prevalent
- 15 Simians
- 16 Mother of Ares
- 17 Man with a scythe
- 19 Galatea's beloved
- 20 Basis of binary system
- 21 Caught
- 22 Bizarre quality
- 24 Dry red wine
- 27 Yearly income, in Pau
- 28 Planetary paradigm
- 30 ___ time
- 33 Chess champion, 1960
- 34 Act
- 35 Most reliable
- 37 Young TV sitcom
- 43 Being
- 44 Hodgepodge
- 45 Baden-Baden, e.g.
- 48 Greek commune
- 49 Woolly
- 51 *Divine Comedy* division
- 53 Blunt
- 55 Passage between buildings

58 Boxing decision, for short

- 59 Once part of Portuguese India
- 62 Incline
- 63 One's native country
- 66 Adams or Sedgwick
- 67 Lotion ingredient
- 68 Ms. Lauder
- 69 Fond
- 70 Elevate
- 71 Exacting

DOWN

- 1 Cluster
- 2 "___ Mommy Kissing Santa Claus"
- 3 Despot
- 4 Stadium yell
- 5 Malted beverage turned sour
- 6 Dull
- 7 Spire tip
- 8 Verne's captain
- 9 Accustomed
- 10 Ladd film
- 11 Respectable
- 12 Awn
- 13 Hesse city
- 18 Calhoun, of films
- 23 Impurity

25 Forgetfulness

- 26 Provoked
- 28 Switch position
- 29 Turmeric
- 31 Paris's home
- 32 Unfamiliar
- 35 Touch lightly
- 36 Type of steak
- 38 Provide with income
- 39 Map abbreviation
- 40 Lengthen
- 41 Brother's sib
- 42 Outer end of a spoon
- 45 Panicked
- 46 Marchers' milieu
- 47 Lifelessness
- 49 Vacation choice
- 50 Idolizes
- 52 Feeble light
- 54 Emphyrean
- 56 At a great distance
- 57 Eli's home
- 60 Humdinger
- 61 Capital of South Yemen
- 64 Done ___ turn
- 65 Mil. landing craft

crossword
answers pg A26

casting some 35-40 yards downriver.

I am nestled into a little gap in the willows just wide enough for one fisherman. I'm engrossed in the drift, feeling the tic, tic, of pencil lead bouncing along the rocky bottom. My thoughts are interrupted by that tap, tap, tap of a steelhead take. I set the hook and feel the immediate surge of a powerful fish ripping across the river. With a flap of a huge tail it heads downriver. I can hear my heart pounding. This is a huge fish. My reel seems to be smoking as wool fibers fly off my glove. My thumb heats up as I apply as much pressure to the spool as I dare. Twelve pound test is not going to stop this fish. I step out into the river as far as possible and submerge the tip of the rod for the "old rod in the water" technique. Some 30-40 yards downriver I hear a huge splash and the run stops.

One of the guys downriver yells "What a monster! Must be 25-30 pounds." My adrenaline level doubles, again! Here is probably the largest steelhead I have ever hooked, 30-40 yards downriver, beyond a patch of trees, and I am probably going to lose it without even a look. Keeping the rod tip under water, I slowly pull up stream and feel the fish give.

A guy yells, "He's headed your way - what a beauty!"

Inch by inch, foot by foot, I slowly gain line. Something feels different!

"He has gone behind a limb." One of the guys races up and grabs my net.

"I think I can push the line free," he yells.

"He's loose, headed your way!"

I slowly ease him upriver. After what seems like an eternity I can finally see him. A huge, chrome-bright fish, totally exhausted. The guys follow the fish up the bank. One of them wades out and slips the net under the monster. What a beauty! The largest steelhead I have ever seen in my 30+ years of steelheading. A magnificent native specimen! Adipose fin seems almost as large as the dorsal fin of lesser hatchery fish. Huge head and shoulders more like a chinook than a steelhead. Our admiration turns to safety for the big fish. I remove the hook from his jaw and the guy asks "May I release him?" He expertly cradles the fish, steps into that icy water and eases him back and forth. After a few minutes, we can see life and strength return as the powerful body twists, pulls free from his hands and swims away. In our haste we have forgotten measurements or pictures.

I stand there and shake from excitement. I had caught steelhead of 18 and 20 pounds before. This one was much larger.

As it turns out the guys that helped are from Oregon City. One of them has fished the Clackamas and Willamette for years, caught or helped land a number of fish in the 20-pound range. "This one is much larger."

Fortunately for me they are here, not only to make it possible for me to land the beauty but to verify to Gerry that I had truly landed "the steelhead of my dreams."

NEWS TIPS?

If it's happening in Keizer, or to someone from Keizer - WE WANT TO KNOW.

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