



Joshua Bessex/The Daily Astorian

Fishing guide Drake Radditz, left, and Tim Trainor, right, fish while standing in a shallow part of the North Fork Nehalem River.

LET IT FISH

A good day on the North Fork Nehalem

I cast upstream of the waterfall — as instructed — and watch my bait float down through the braided green water of the North Fork Nehalem River.



TIM TRAINOR
Comment

Guide Drake Radditz had spent the previous night curing the steelhead eggs now gobbled onto the hook, treating them with salt and borax and food coloring so they hold together and look appetizing to a fish.

At the tail end of the drift, there it is: the silver flash of an underwater steelhead, the bend of the rod, the tenuous connection to a strong and wild thing. Fish on.

Angling coastal Oregon rivers is always unpredictable and weather

dependent. But conditions were prime in early January on the North Fork Nehalem. The river had dropped noticeably since Christmas, leaving fish stacked up mid-river in deep holes. On the day of our scheduled float, the temperature had reached 40 degrees by first light and the fog was lifting. It was a perfect day to cast a line.

The best place to fish for winter steelhead on the North Fork is the canyon section downstream from the hatchery. It is also the most scenic. Waterfalls tumble and thunder off both sides of the canyon, bald eagles glide overhead, tufted ducks and common mergansers float nervously downstream.



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The results of a productive day of fishing.

On other trips, Radditz has seen plenty of elk and once a bobcat. The river flows elegantly over bedrock, and the lack of a graveled bottom is rare for a watershed in the region. From the raft, it is hard to believe that a state highway is no more than a short climb and walk away.

The usual guided day float begins at the ODFW fish hatchery and ventures over three dangerous rapids — known colloquially as Jack, Queen and King — and finishes at a tidally affected, brackish takeout roughly eight river miles downstream. Through the canyon, bank access is difficult and the serious rapids keep away all but the most experienced river runners.

We fell into a day of shockingly simple catching. That was mostly because of

Radditz's knowledge of the river, his varied equipment and his recommendation of where and how to fish. It required good casting and constant line mending, but when the bait swung naturally in front of a steelhead, there was a strike more often than not. On casts that were less than perfect, Radditz would often whisper "Let it fish," which meant not to panic and abandon hope, but to let the bait float downstream and see what happened. Sometimes that worked, too.

I was well aware that it is rarely that easy.

Steelhead are not hungry in January in the Nehalem. They eat eggs of their own species because those may have been fertilized by a competitor. Removing them from the ecosystem means less competition for their



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Tim Trainor holds up one of his catches.

own offspring, should they be lucky enough to spawn successfully.

Anglers have similar concerns, though thankfully we don't resort to cannibalism.

But escaping from the crowds and cutting down on competition is a way to increase the odds of success. The North Fork Nehalem is

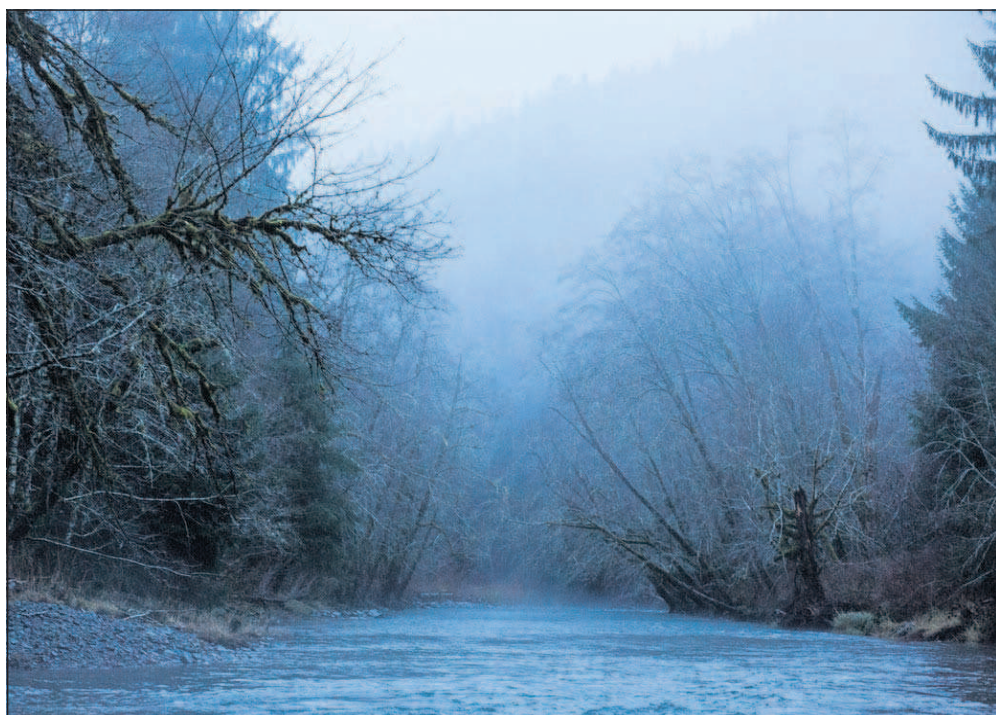
harder to get to by car than more well-known North Coast rivers, its best holes are difficult to access by foot and hard to fish from shore, and rafting it can be dangerous and sometimes deadly.

If you make it to this spectacular stretch of water, you will be rewarded — whether the bite is on or not.



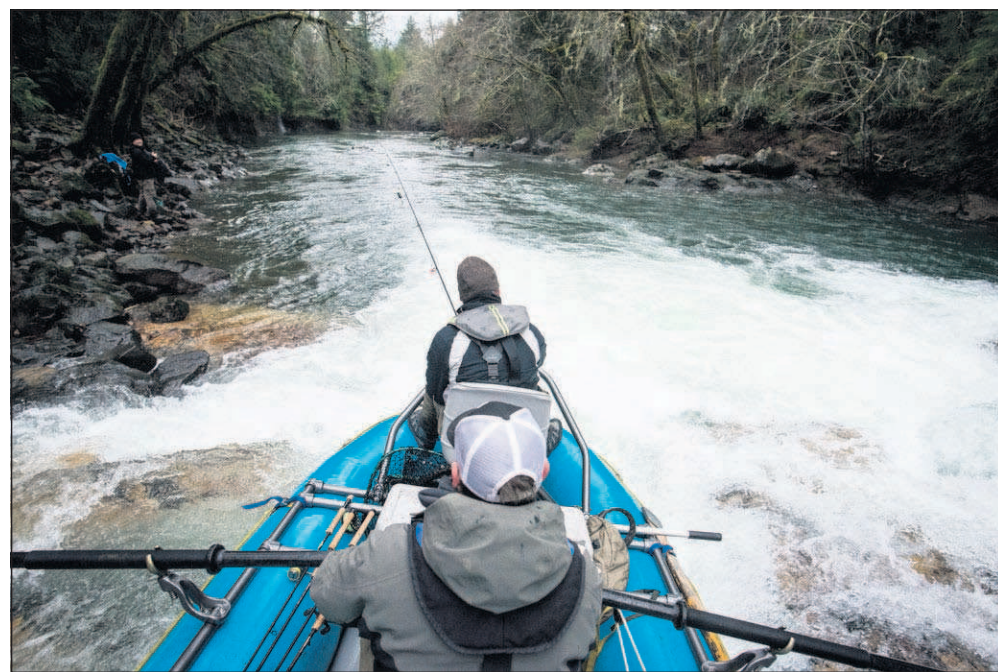
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Drake Radditz baits a hook with cured steelhead eggs.



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Fog is seen through the trees at daybreak along North Fork Nehalem River.



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Guide Drake Radditz navigates the raft through one of the rapids along the North Fork Nehalem River. The rapids can be dangerous, and sometimes deadly, and should only be navigated by experienced rafters.

Have your own adventure story you'd like to tell, or photos of your trophy hunt or fish? Email editor Tim Trainor at ttrainor@eastoregonian.com, or call him at 541-966-0835.