

Hungry trout, solitude on the Middle Deschutes

By MARK MORICAL
The (Bend) Bulletin

CROOKED RIVER RANCH — The salmonfly hatch on the Lower Deschutes is on, and anglers from throughout Oregon and even across the Northwest are flocking to Mecca Flat near Warm Springs for a chance at landing wild rainbow trout.

The banks there are crowded in May and June, but elsewhere on the river anglers can find a salmonfly hatch with more solitude and closer to most of Central Oregon's population.

The Middle Deschutes, from Bend to Lake Billy Chinook, has a salmonfly hatch of its own, which means the 60-mile trip from Bend to Warm Springs is not necessary to find trout that feed hungrily on big flies.

"Well, this time of year we've got a pretty strong salmonfly hatch down in there," Dave Merrick, manager at Fly & Field Outfitters in Bend, says of the Middle Deschutes. "It usually kind of runs its course before things happen on the lower river. However, with the hatch happening early on the lower river now, those two (hatches) tend to coincide now. There's salmonflies from Benham Falls all the way to the mouth of the river right now."

While access can be challenging in the many steep canyon areas of the Middle Deschutes, anglers can take advantage of several well-known and easy-to-find access points.

Those include Sawyer Park in northwest Bend, Tumalo State Park, Cline Falls State Park near Redmond, and Lower Bridge Road near Terrebonne. Crooked River Ranch is also a popular area to fish on the Middle Deschutes, though access there can be difficult.

With such a variety of waters to fish in Central Oregon, places



In May 11 photo, a group of anglers fish a section of the Middle Deschutes River together near Crooked River Ranch.

like the Middle Deschutes often get overlooked. According to Merrick, now is the time to head to the Deschutes River just north of Bend.

"It's usually best right now," Merrick says. "When our water temperatures get warm in mid-July, it tends to get a little bit tougher. As soon as the water flows drop (April 15 each year), it kind of makes the access and getting around on the river a whole lot easier, and the fishing a whole lot better."

Spring and summer flows dip to 100 cubic feet per second or less on the Middle Deschutes when water from the river is diverted to canals for irrigation in mid-April.

Most of the fish in the river are rainbow trout, but angling opportunities also exist for brown

trout and whitefish. While the average fish is about 6 to 12 inches long, some brown trout can grow to 18 or 20 inches in the Middle Deschutes.

I made the 30-mile trip to Crooked River Ranch armed with a few salmonfly patterns and ready for a steep descent into the rugged canyon. After a rocky, dusty hike, I reached the river and noticed many 3-inch-long, gray-and-orange salmonflies clinging to the bushes and grasses near the bank of the gently flowing Deschutes.

Salmonfly nymphs spend three to four years in the river, according to www.west-fly-fishing.com.

When the water temperature warms in the spring, the nymphs migrate along the river bottom to shore. Eventually they crawl out of the river onto rocks, trees or

plants, where they metamorphose into adult flies and grow a set of wings. The bugs often land on the surface of the water to lay their eggs.

Hungry native redband trout feed on the salmonflies, which usually appear in mid-May on the Deschutes River north of Maupin and move upstream all the way to Round Butte Dam through mid-June. Historically, the salmonfly hatch would reach its peak near Mecca Flat about Memorial Day weekend or later. But in the past few years, the hatch has come a week or two earlier. Now, the hatch on the Lower Deschutes overlaps with the earlier hatch on the Middle Deschutes.

The ongoing project at Round Butte Dam to reintroduce salmon

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Manager, Fly & Field Outfitters

and steelhead into the Upper Deschutes Basin has warmed water in the Lower Deschutes enough to hasten the hatch, according to fish biologists for Portland General Electric.

The salmonfly hatch on the Middle Deschutes does not produce as many bugs as the hatch on the Lower Deschutes, but anglers can still find loads of success on the river from Bend to Lake Billy Chinook.

"It's not as prolific and not as numerous; however, it can still be a real productive hatch," Merrick says. "It's always been a place that doesn't see as much pressure because it doesn't have a lot of easy access. You've got to be willing to walk and to hike down into the canyon in a lot of places to access it. With the limited points of access, that's one of the things that limits the number of people who get down in there."

After tying a salmonfly pattern matching the bugs around me to my line, I cast out from the bank and waited. I spotted only one other fisherman, far downstream. I worked my way upstream and by noon I had landed two decent-sized rainbows. I missed two others that went for the fly, but all in all, it was a fine day on the Middle Deschutes.

I might have found more success at Mecca Flat, but I had more river to myself.

BLOOMIN' BLUES



Photo courtesy Bruce Barnes

Crepis occidentalis

Western hawksbeard comes into full bloom

By BRUCE BARNES
For the East Oregonian

Name: Western hawksbeard

Scientific name: *Crepis occidentalis*

This plant is found from British Columbia to Saskatchewan, and south to California to New Mexico and Nebraska, in foothills and plains. It generally prefers semi-arid locations.

There are about 20 species of the genus *Crepis* in western North America. The genus name comes from the Greek "krepis," which means boot or sandal. The term krepis was first used nearly 2,000 years ago by the Roman philosopher, governor, and naturalist Pliny the Elder as a name for a plant. That plant may have no relationship to the current genus *Crepis*. *Occidentalis* is Latin for western. The common name "hawksbeard" for the genus is a bit puzzling, as it is hard to imagine the name being descriptive of the plants in any way.

Western hawksbeard is usually under a foot high, though it can be twice that tall in ideal conditions. The leaves at the base of the plant are quite large, up to a foot long, with long irregular lance-shaped lobes along the edges. The leaves on the stems are much smaller though similar in shape and with similar lobes along the edges. The stems are freely branching, with cylindrical flowering heads at the branch tips. Being in the sunflower family, each head contains several bright yellow strap-shaped petals, and each petal is attached at the base to a single simple but complete flower. The sap of the plant is milky.

Plants in the *Crepis* genus have been used for a variety of medicinal uses, often for eye problems or sores. However, the only reference to uses specifically for *Crepis occidentalis* was rather vague.

Where to find: Dry open areas with sagebrush, lower to middle elevations such as the valley around Baker City. It blooms from now into July, depending on elevation.

Bicycle Polo takes off in Ashland

By MARK FREEMAN
(Medford) Mail Tribune

ASHLAND — Two opponents get tangled in the corner when the purpose of their confrontation, an orange ball, squirts toward Eric Michener, who's quickly off to the races.

With short, powerful pedal strokes, Michener glides his bicycle down the tennis court while pushing the ball along with his mallet, circling behind the goalie before eyeing a teammate coming into play.

With a hard whack of his plastic mallet, the ball, about the size of a tennis ball, flies toward his racing teammate but ends up striking the goalie's tire and caroming into the net.

"I try that shot all the time, knocking it off the tire from behind, but that was supposed to be a pass," Michener laughs. "Hey, a goal's a goal."

But a bigger goal of Michener is to have others discover how fun it is to swap hooves for tires to partake in the growing sport of bicycle polo, a hard-court version of the Sport of Kings but on wheels.

The growing niche sport has taken hold in Ashland, where the group Rogue Valley Bike Polo is showing any and all who will watch what transpires when you blend beater bikes, mallets, a ball and a couple of goals.

For bike nerds like Jonathon McKinnon, it represents the perfect blend of sporting aggression and kicking around with the guys.

"Being aggressive and at the same time being playful," McKinnon says. "It's having fun being adults but playing with your friends like kids."

Play starts after the tennis net comes down at 6 p.m. every Monday on Court 5 in Ashland's Hunter Park. The club has more than a dozen members and a half-dozen or so show up rain or shine year round. They all wear helmets, and some wear an assortment of knee and elbow pads.

Newbies are welcome, whether they have a beater bike of their own to trick out for polo or they use a loaner that club member Eric Michener keeps at his Rogue Bicycle shop in Ashland.

That's how Emily Cureton came to play. She was jogging through the park last month when the regulars called over to her because they were short one player.

"I thought they were cat-calling me," Cureton says.

She quickly took to the fast pace and randomness of it — to the point where bike polo beat out a women's running group for her Monday workout.

"It's something new and exciting," Cureton says. "It's kind of terrifying with a bunch of dudes coming at you on bikes real fast. But they slow down when I play. It would be good to get more beginners."

While exciting, it's hardly new.

Bike polo traces its roots to the United Kingdom in the late 1800s, when men played in large teams and on vast green lawns like the equestrian version. It was even an unofficial



Denise Baratta/Medford MailTribune via AP

In this May 16 photo, Nicholas Lidtke, left, reacts as Emily Cureton, center, collides with John Mattingly, right, bending Mattingly's rear tire and sending him off his bicycle, during a bicycle polo match in Ashland.

"We're trying to show people we're an actual sport. We're not just a bunch of rag-tag kids."

— Eric Michener, bike polo club member

featured sport at the 1908 Olympics in London, but its popularity quickly waned and it all but disappeared.

Then some members of Seattle's bicycle messenger fleet were bored one day in 1999 and started knocking a ball around alleys, parking lots and even rooftops. It latched on quickly within the bike culture, spreading in larger cities to a point where it is now represented by North American Hardcourt, which has standardized the equipment and rules.

Games are three-on-three and played with street hockey nets anywhere from open lots and parking garages to tennis courts. Teams are chosen randomly by one person blindly picking the players' mallets. The first to five goals wins.

The bikes are stout and tall, with a single handbrake for the player's off hand. Gears are a single low speed to emphasize darting quickness over top speed. Wheels have spoke protectors so they can block shots more effectively while playing goalie.

"That's my favorite shot of all-time, hitting it through someone's spokes," says Michener, a four-year vet who joined Jefferson Bike Polo two years after it was formed.

One player typically will guard the goal while it's two-on-two on the open court. The play suggests hockey more than polo, with players carrying the puck forward with their mallets, passing back and forth before winding up for shots.

Individual games last anywhere from 15 to 30 minutes before they reshuffle the mallets and play again. Games here last as late as 11 p.m., when Hunter Park's lights wink out for the night.

Wrecks are part of the game, like when Cureton and John Mattingly collided, bending one of the wheels on Mattingly's bike. He literally tossed it aside for a loaner so play could

resume, then smashed the tire on the ground until it spun again in the bike frame.

"That'll work," he says.

Michener once put a mileage counter on his bike and tallied a half-mile of riding in fits and darts in one game. The game, however, can take cyclists much farther.

Nicholas Lidtke was living off the grid on 300 acres in Minnesota when he came to Ashland to attend the United Bicycle Institute in October 2014.

"Someone said, 'Go play bike polo,'" Lidtke says. "I did and never left."

At first he dismantled his electric bike because juiced wheels are illegal. Then he bought a beater bike at Michener's shop and rarely misses a Monday.

"Come back every week, you get better and better," he says. "I wouldn't consider myself that good, but pretty decent."

Likewise, so is Rogue Valley Bike Polo.

For the first five years, club members played at various tennis courts, taking down the nets and playing until they got run off the courts. Then Michener lobbied the Ashland Parks and Recreation Department for space and found a friendly ear. The club has been legit for a year now, with Court 5 at Hunter Park set aside for them each Monday — and no more cops.

"Now it's like 'over the counter,'" Michener says.

The club plans to host a tournament this summer, drawing teams from throughout the Pacific Northwest to showcase the splendor of their growing sport.

"We're trying to show people we're an actual sport," Michener says. "We're not just a bunch of rag-tag kids, but that's part of the truth."