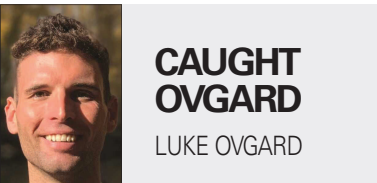


Nearing his 20,000th fish, an angler ponders the past

CHILOQUIN — As of today, I’ve caught 19,491 fish. I started at age 14, so I’ve now spent more time tracking my fish than not. Let me assure you, it’s just as tedious as you’re imagining, but there’s an undeniable part of me that loves the numbers and the achievements they represent.

I’ve shared a lot of my achievements with you over the years, including Fish No. 5,000 and Fish No. 8,000. Longtime readers will remember No. 5,000, the rainbow trout that threw a hook into my thumb while I wore a garbage bag like a poncho to keep the rain off in 2014. I was fishing with my dad and my brother, Jake, who made no shortage of jokes about my “swag bag” poncho. No? Maybe No. 8,000, then. It was the blue rockfish I caught while fishing with the iconic older couple, Bill and Phyllis Steinhauer, on a charter boat in Brookings back in 2016. There are still more than a dozen worthwhile milestones I never shared, but I’m getting around to that. With 20,000 just on the horizon, I realized I’d never even told you the story of Fish No. 10,000, which was by far my most iconic milestone yet. Brace yourself because it’s a great story but also because the weather was so cold, “bracing” was a necessity.

Reluctance
Who goes fishing in late January in the Oregon Outback? Crazy people,



CAUGHT OVGARD
LUKE OVGARD

“Who goes fishing in late January in the Oregon Outback? Crazy people, that’s who.”

that’s who. When the bulk of area fishing shuts down on Halloween, some outdoorsmen and women resign themselves to lesser outdoor pursuits like skiing, snowboarding or duck hunting, but a dedicated few of us are too stubborn to participate in winter activities. Instead, folks like me look for the handful of winter fisheries still open and ice-free (or mostly ice-free) and opt to participate in summer activities like fishing even when nature says “I wouldn’t …” by spewing ice over the boat ramp, dumping snow on the shoreline and imbuing the air with more bite than a can of Barq’s.

Despite my stoic front, I’m not big on the cold. After 30 years of suffering through our winter climate, I’m no longer impressed by snow or ice. It’s just a nuisance I live with. Nonetheless, my solo protest of the elements is not steadfast, and when I can no longer take being trapped inside, I take to the water. I probably would’ve stayed home that Sunday morning to watch football, but it was the week before the Super Bowl, and the AFC and

you’re fishing the ice cracking will make weird harmonic sounds. If the ice is 4 inches thick everyone will tell you that it is safe. I like it a little thicker.



Luke Ovgard/Contributed Photo

Sometimes, things work out. Luke Ovgard’s 10,000th fish came three years ago and also happened to be his personal best brown trout at the time.

NFC Championship Games weren’t scheduled until that evening. I was sitting at 9,998 fish, so I figured I’d go out and try for 10K. The incredibly low water and thick ice allowed me to fish a remote stretch of Agency Lake normally accessible only by boat. Was it smart crossing the ice? I didn’t die, so you tell me. On my very first cast, I had a half-hearted hit. I could relate. It was barely 25 degrees under the noon sun, and it wasn’t warming up any time soon. I worked the hole again and again with my Rapala until I hooked up. The native redband was beautiful, if small, and the cold water made for a vigorous fight. It soaked my sleeve with its tail as I released it, and I was only a little bitter — the cold in the air much more so. Despite my early success, the bite was slow. I spent two or three frigid hours before I

started wondering if I should call it a day. I was at 9,999 fish, and my hands were so cold that I was reeling not with three fingers but with a pitifully misshapen closed fist. Realizing I wouldn’t last at my current rate of heat loss, I hunkered down in the lakeside weeds to hide from the wind. I shoved my hands into my pants, causing a shudder to shoot through my loins and causing (some details withheld), but my hands slowly warmed. After 10 minutes, I’d sacrificed the potential for children, but my fingers were marginally functional, so I decided to get back to it. I really wanted that last fish. Given the water clarity and bright sun, I figured my odds were low. Still, I jerked the Rapala erratically, almost with a vengeance. I was momentarily distracted when a coyote ran out on the frozen lake maybe 100 yards away. The ice was patchy

and though it had been thick atop the very shallow water where I’d crossed, it wasn’t so out in the deeper channel where most of the ice had broken up and given me an area to cast. I watched intently as the coyote broke through the ice, struggled, and climbed back on top. It broke through again before climbing. I kept fishing distractedly as I watched the drama play out for 15 seconds. Break through, climb out. I was rooting for the hapless beast, and when it finally made it back to the shore, I was grateful I hadn’t witnessed its horrific death. At some point, I’d forgotten to reel. My lure had sunk to the lakebed due to my inattentiveness, so I made a few rapid motions to lift it off the bottom and free it from any potential snags. I repeated this herky-jerky motion for the last 10 feet. As I went to lift my lure out of the water, a golden missile launched out of the depths and crushed my lure. The fight was brief, and I netted the massive brown almost immediately. I was in disbelief. Non-native fishes are susceptible to a parasite found in Agency and Upper Klamath Lakes.

Though non-natives could survive in the rivers, the native species were peerless in the standing water. Besides, a brown trout hadn’t been caught below the river mouths in decades — at least, not officially. Yet there it was: a 24-and-one-half inch slab of caramel. Not only was it my first Agency Lake brown, but it was also my largest brown at the time, weighing in at almost 5 pounds. I took a slightly unreasonable number of photos as the fish lay partially submerged in the net, snapped a hero shot and let it swim free. I was so ecstatic that I failed to notice the large slab of ice that had broken free and drifted into the channel until it hit my line. Uh oh. If I didn’t want to be marooned, I needed to go back. Fortunately, my ice path was still solid, and I made the arduous journey back to the car unscathed and beaming from ear to ear, a smile frozen on my face.

Order performance fishing apparel or read more at caughtovgard.com; Follow on Instagram and Fishbrain @ [lukeovgard](https://www.instagram.com/lukeovgard); Contact luke.ougard@gmail.com



FISHING

Continued from Page 1B
If you’ve never ice fished it will freak you out at first. As

But when it gets too thick, it is hard to drill through. I feel like I am hardly getting started and we are way out of room. Good luck and be safe.

Carry a rope in case someone breaks through the ice. Wear thermal base layers like XGO in case you get wet. Carry a tent heater to keep warm.

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CROSSWORD PUZZLER

ACROSS

1 Hurl
5 Chitchats
9 Softball toss
12 “Forget it!” (hyph.)
13 Jean Auel heroine
14 Musical note
15 — Zaharias of golf
16 Frond
17 Sock filler
18 AWOL chaser
20 Posse leader
22 Hesitates
26 Sault — Marie
27 Regret deeply
28 Big galoot
30 Basin occupant
34 Actress — Falco
36 British title
38 Court statement
39 Dingbat
41 Place to sleep
43 Poet’s eye

44 Ca++ or Na+
46 Panoramas
48 Pipeline
52 Chem lab meas.
53 Before, in combos
54 Gripe
56 Wyatt the lawman
60 Whiz
61 Linen color
62 Survey chart
63 Bummed out
64 Cheek dampener
65 Words of advice

DOWN

1 Novice newshawk
2 Gleeeful shout
3 Fill-in
4 Short essay
5 “My — Sal”
6 Skippers’ OKs

Answer to Previous Puzzle

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