

## CAUGHT IN A STEEL TRAP:

Catch one trophy like this and you'll be hooked forever! BY DAN HARDY SR.

I'd always thought that I would have to go somewhere in British Columbia on the Skeena River system in order to catch a 30- plus- pound steelhead trout. As it turned out, the place I needed to be at was right in my backyard, literally.

The day started out with four of us hiking a trail we were unfamiliar with. After going four miles in the wrong direction (I knew it was the wrong direction because we came upon an Alaska Department of Fish and Game sign that informed us that we had missed the cutoff trail four miles back) When I read the sign, I immediately informed the others that I was going to sit down and rest about 45 minutes and then head back the way I had just come, and when I found the correct trail on the way back, I was only going to follow that path for about 10 or 15 minutes. If I didn't see or hear water by then, I was giving up and going back to camp. Well, two of the guys said to me, "Were this far, we might as well go all the way to the lake (which was another two miles away)."

"I'll see you guys back at camp," I said.

One guy (Steve Thompson) stayed with me, so we rested and then headed back down the trail. After what seemed like days, we finally came to the spot that I had suggested turning down earlier (I had been outvoted three to one). We had walked down the cut-back trail maybe 100 yards or so, when we heard for the first time that morning, the sound of flowing water. Steve and I looked at each other and gave high-fives. Soon we reached a clearing in the old growth forest and, lo and behold, we could see the stream.

After walking eight miles round-trip (in 5-millimeter neoprene), we didn't care whether we caught fish or not. We were just happy to see running water. And man, was that water beautiful- a crystal clear, bubbling and babbling Alaska stream with not another soul around.

We climbed down out of the forest, down to the gravel bar in front of us. On the gravel bar, in plain sight, was a fly box someone had obviously forgotten. We opened the fly box and after I saw the flies that it contained, I said to Steve "This is a sign from God." We continued walking down the gravel bar, and then I spotted something that made my heart skip a beat. Just downstream from us, lying in gin-clear water, were hundreds of steelhead. The water was literally black with them. I grabbed Steve's arm and said to him, "You go ahead and make the first cast. I'm going to sit back and puff a cigar for a second."

That's all it took, a second, before he was into his first fish. Needless to say, I accidentally inhaled some smoke, as I hastily disposed of the cigar. To say the fishing was incredible would totally be inadequate. We had doubles on as soon as I made my first cast! After numerous fish hooked, landed, and released. Steve decided to walk down river and fish some different water.

He had only been gone about 15 minutes when I hooked what I thought was bottom, not sure though, I immediately set the hook hard... the water exploded at the end of my line, sending steelhead scattering everywhere. The fish took off upriver, heading for a partially submerged tree stump in the middle of the river. Using a dynamic-draw technique, I drew the fish away from that obstruction, only to have it turn and race downriver.

Man, that was one hot fish! It tried to go into a logjam downstream, but once again using the dynamic-draw, I was able to persuade it to try a different route of escape. This fish had used all the tricks in it's arsenal, and I still had it on. Now all I had to do was find a suitable place in which to land the fish. I spotted a gravel bar about 75 yards downstream. It had a little water running over it, so I knew I could slide the fish on that without hurting it. I started working the fish down toward that spot. Up to this point, I had not seen the fish yet. I just knew from the bend in my eight-weight GLX flyrod, and the way the water was being ripped up by his runs, that it was probably a buck, and a very large one at that. As I walked towards the gravel bar that I planned on landing the fish on, I started to yell for Steve to come right away, because I knew the next few minutes were going to be critical. I had to land the fish, take some quick measurements, snap a few photos, and get him back into the water for revival.

As I gently slid the fish towards the bar, I finally got to see what I had been fighting for the last ten- twelve minutes. I said to myself, "Praise be to God! This fish was of Jurassic proportions. I had caught king salmon smaller than this.

All my yelling finally brought Steve running back upriver, to see what all the commotion was about (he thought I had seen a bear). I told him that I was swimming a very big fish, and asked if he could come take some measurements and snap a few pictures. He knew it had to be something very special

because normally I'm not so demonstrative when fighting fish. Once he saw the fish, I don't know who was trembling more, him or me. I reached down and grabbed his tail with one hand, while supporting his body with the other ( thank goodness for big hands). We measured the fish, 44.5 by 23 inches, and also took a few pictures.

You can tell by the dumb look on my face that I was in shock, I still am. As I released the fish back to his home waters, there were so many thoughts racing through my mind (did we handle the fish gently enough?...are the pictures going to turn out)? I was having a little trouble focusing on what I should do next. One thought that never entered my mind though, was to kill that fish.

Well, after I had suitably regained my composure, I found the nearest log to sit on, and re-lit the cigar I had hastily stuffed in my pouch earlier. I didn't need or want to fish at that moment. I just needed to reassure myself that all of this had happened, and that it wasn't just a dream. I kept thinking, "I sure hope those pictures turn out."

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