

*Trophy steelhead on British Columbia's Babine River*

# Autumn Magic

LANI WALLER

BRITISH COLUMBIA IS FAMOUS for its steelhead rivers. The Skeena, Sus-tut, Morice, Bulkley, Dean, Kispiox and Babine have achieved legendary status and ring like music in the ears of serious steelheaders all over the Pacific Northwest.

Part of the mystique seems to spring from the country these rivers run through, for Canadian anglers have developed their tradition in an environment few can forget. High glacial peaks, rugged forests of spruce and lodgepole pine and long winding river valleys bordered by cottonwood and aspen have become synonymous with British Columbia steelhead fishing.

Most of the attention has focused on the fall and early-winter season when larger sea-run rainbows normally are taken and the seasonal changes seem to match the spirit of moving schools of searching, restless steelhead.

In September, the first nighttime frosts transform the forests into a brilliant display of rich fall color. Daytime temperatures drop and sometimes the winds move so swiftly that the gravel bars along the rivers echo with the rattle of falling leaves.

The first real storms of the season soon follow, coating the mountain summits with a delicate layer of freshly fallen snow. The scenery is spectacular, providing a dramatic backdrop for some of the most exciting trout fishing in the world.

Each year, anglers from across the United States and Canada gather along a few special rivers here for the opportunity of a lifetime—a chance at a wild steelhead in excess of 25 pounds.

Most of these fishermen look to the Skeena system for such a fish, for this river, and especially some of its tributaries, have produced the largest sea-run trout.

No one really knows all the reasons why some of these fish reach their enormous size. Stories run as wild as the Canadian rivers themselves. We *do* know that the rivers producing the largest fish somehow foster a lifecycle that includes abnormally long residency periods in both fresh and salt water. Efforts at introducing these strains to other streams have failed, producing only ordinary-size steelhead.

The largest steelhead usually are males, normally five to 10 pounds heavier than their spawning partners. With their

powerful, broad tails, heavily muscled shoulders and thick flanks, they usually appear olive colored, with a wide slash of rainbow running down their sides. These fish stir the imagination for they can weigh in excess of 30 pounds.

Females are sleek and smoothly formed, with polished sides of solid silver, rose-colored gill plates and a delicately spotted light gray back. They are beautiful fish, although they rarely weigh much more than 20 pounds.

THE BABINE RIVER is one of the most famous of all Skeena tributaries. Most knowledgeable steelhead fishermen consider it one of the finest in the world, and it would come as no surprise if the next world record were taken here. The river begins its long, rough journey to the sea by slipping smoothly over the graveled lip of Babine-Nilkitkwa Lake. It is a large stream, even here.

Running rough and tumble through an almost impenetrable tangle of dark evergreen forest, it moves powerfully toward its connection with the Skeena, several dozen miles away.

Parts of the upper river seem angry and uncontrollable, as roostertails of heavy white water roar over the worn shoulders of immense boulders. Other sections jack-knife unexpectedly into difficult changes of direction, pushing hard against the guide boat gunwales. It is not an easy river to travel—a fitting location for the powerful steelhead that each year ascend to spawn.

Despite its reputation, this section of the river remains relatively secluded and unfished. Only two camps exist here, along miles of river, and the provincial government has wisely forbidden further development. There are no roads.

Most of the anglers who come are visitors from the outside world; even knowledgeable local anglers rarely run the upper river, for navigation is difficult—only for experienced boat men. Strong river currents also have a way of consuming large quantities of expensive fuel necessary for the long run back up to the lake after a day's fishing.

Anglers who do fish the Babine normally fly in to Smithers from Vancouver. It is approximately a two-hour, bone-rattling drive from Smithers to the lake. Both lodges pick up their

LANI WALLER is FFM's West Coast field editor.



AUTHOR'S PHOTOS





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*Traditional steelhead and salmon flies like the patterns, right, bring sure strikes from the Babine's big steelhead.*

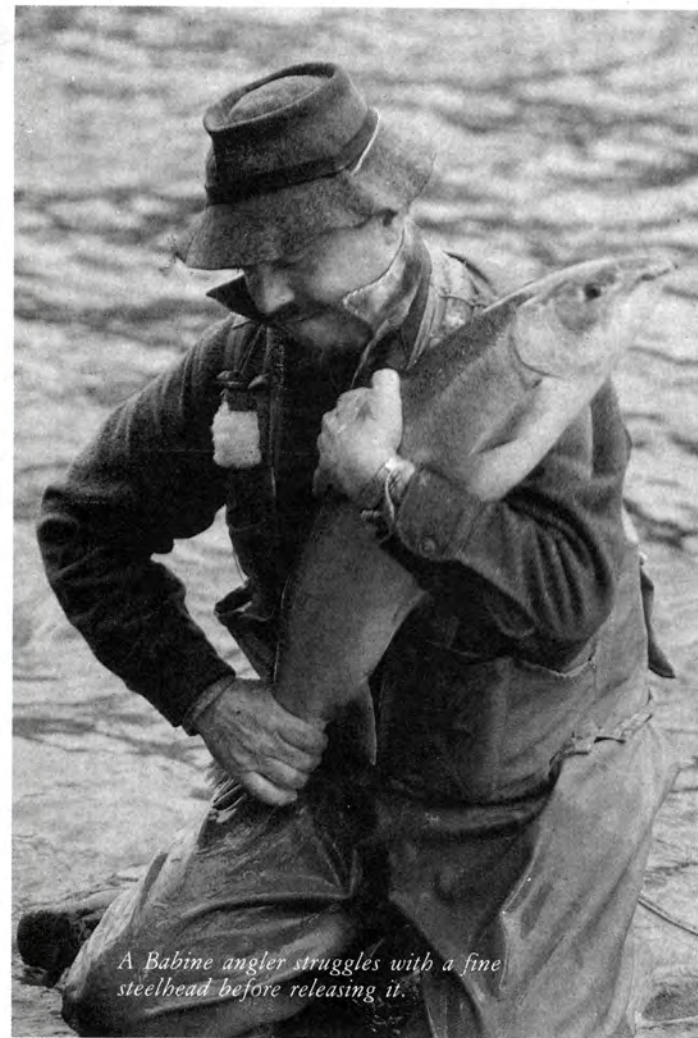


clients in town, then transport them to waiting jet boats for the ride downstream.

Fly fishing on this section of the river was pioneered by a ruddy-complexioned Washington angler named Bob Wickwire, over 20 years ago. Soft-spoken and quiet, Wickwire has steelhead fishing in his blood, for I've heard his war hoop rise above the river's roar more than once when someone raised a good fish to the fly.

Bob chose the present location of the camp he owned and operated for all those years simply by "getting in my boat and running down river from the lake until I found the perfect piece of fly water for really large fish."

"Well, here it is," he grinned, sweeping his arm out and downstream from where we stood. In front of me lay a stretch of river almost 400 yards long. The heaviest part of the current moved strongly against the far bank, while several large boulders blocked the head of the run, creating a secondary inside channel looked about that was almost 50 feet wide. This secondary channel looked about three to five feet deep and



*A Babine angler struggles with a fine steelhead before releasing it.*

ran the entire length of the pool. The run could hold good fish for its entire length and looked too good to be true.

Bob looked at me, smiled once more and said, "This one is called the Home Run." Something in his voice that day told me the name meant more than mere location.

Oddly enough, just one year later almost to the day, and only a few yards from where we stood talking, Eugene O'Gorman of Newark, Calif. quietly removed his fly from the jaw of an unusually large male. The fish measured 42 inches long and had a girth measurement of a full 29 inches—a possible new world record on the fly.

Gene later told me he knew the fish might have broken the record, but "I just didn't have the heart to kill it."

This is the potential that Bob Wickwire and his wife, Gerry, recognized over 20 years ago. In the seasons that followed, they established a tradition of wilderness steelhead fishing in the broadest sense of the term. Bob watched the resource closely for a long time, fishing steadily and gaining a world of knowledge in the process. His influence weighed heavily on the pro-

vincial government, which eventually initiated restrictions designed to protect the invaluable run of wild fish.

As a result the camp soon gained an excellent reputation among trophy-oriented anglers willing to release their catch. Three years ago Bob and Gerry sold the camp to two Montana anglers, Vern Horton and Kenneth High. Today their camp is firmly established as one of the premier wilderness steelhead lodges in the world.

The upper Babine is an interesting river to fish. It's a rough-and-tumble stream and normally cares little for delicate presentations. It carries a considerable volume of water, most of which boils and churns over an angular and awkward bottom of solid stone and heavy gravel. Wading strategies become a conscious part of effective fishing.

Strategies and tackle are discussed constantly by visiting anglers, usually at the end of the day and within the comfort of the main lodge, but the delivery of the fly is by far the most important variable. Each angler solves the problem in his own way, but success befalls those who understand fly speed, and depth. Fishermen who consistently raise fish have learned to control and vary the drift and swing of their patterns—no matter which line they use. Properly done, it's much like traditional wet-fly fishing for ordinary pocket-water freestone trout. The old-time wet-fly fishermen with their braided silk lines and varnished bamboo rods understood this kind of fishing and would have done well on the Babine.

Guests at the camp stay in several rustic log cabins perched on the side of the river. At the end of each day's fishing they hang their rods and reels on a series of wooden pegs driven deeply into the smooth lodgepole siding of the cabin walls.

### Tackle and Timing

THE TACKLE on the wall is heavy, often expensive and invariably well maintained. Nine- to nine-and-a-half-foot rods are standard. Graphite's stubborn strength and cat-like response does this kind of fishing like no other material can.

Reels are large. Many have smooth, powerful brake systems, or at least exposed-rim spools. Each will carry a full load of 150 yards of tightly packed 20- to 30-pound braided-Dacron backing—laid carefully in place. Some of these are secured to the rods by a strong overlay of tightly wrapped tape, locking the reel feet firmly in place.

All of this is more than mere affectation, for the sight of a well-hooked 25-pound steelhead raising hell somewhere in the middle of the river quickly puts it in perspective.

Timing your visit is important. Most anglers choose their week a year in advance as the best times are normally reserved early. This is a favorite topic of conversation among veterans here, who always hope to hit optimum conditions. Weekly catch statistics are kept season by season by both Bob and his son, Judd, who also knows the river well.

It's like roulette, however, for conditions can change from season to season. The fish are always present, so anglers are really betting on weather.

*Continued on page 66*



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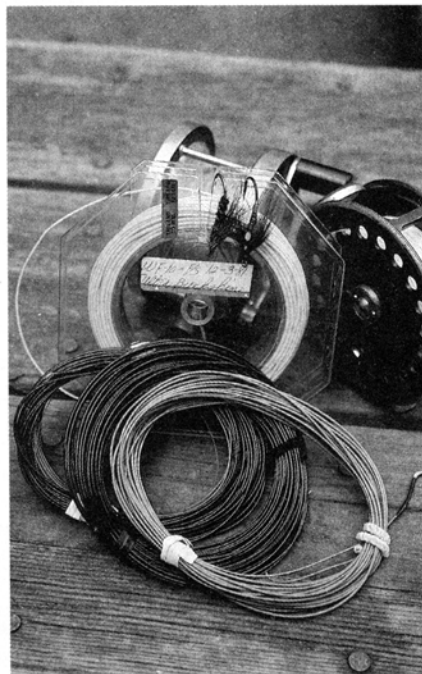
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Babine . . .  
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*Executing proper fly drift is critical and often requires specialty lines.*

Optimum conditions are cool, overcast days with cold nights that minimize glacial run-off from the potentially trouble-some Nilkitkwa tributary. Rain is another problem, although the river seems surprisingly resistant to rain-fall. It takes a good storm to cloud the stream, and fortunately it clears quickly, unlike its sister river, the Kispiox.

In any event, cloudy water is difficult, if not impossible, for the fish simply go off the bite. It's especially disastrous for fly fishermen, but even lure fishermen take a real beating.

Most veterans choose the second half of September, or the first half of October.

Despite the risks, the river is superb, almost always surrendering a fair share of steelhead to anglers willing to fish with patience and enthusiasm. These rainbow will average an honest 14 pounds.

There are probably fewer than a half dozen steelhead rivers that can match the Babine, no matter where you look. Fishing it is a composite of all the ingredients most serious steelhead fishermen look for: a rich palette of spectacular fall scenery, large wild fish in an unspoiled, comfortable wilderness setting and the camaraderie and understanding common among trophy-oriented anglers willing to release their catch. The hours are long, and the fisherman's day usually ends around six o'clock, with a boat ride back to camp, hop-scotching pools, perhaps stopping to fish one last run before heading in, or for a visit with one of the other anglers. It's a time to compare notes and talk of the day's luck. Opinions are usually washed down by a shot of good Canadian whiskey followed by a cold drink of river water.

Sometime after dinner things settle down.

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After some discussion, pools and partners are chosen for the next morning's fishing.

By then it is after 10 o'clock. As each fisherman closes the main lodge door behind him, he turns and glances carefully at the thin thermometer hanging outside, pinned tightly to a log by a bent and rusty nail. If things are right, his breath shows clearly in the cold night air. The mercury should hover in the high 40s to mid-30s—the final piece of information of the day.

By 11 o'clock almost all the fishermen's lights are off. Sometimes someone stays up late checking his tackle by the warm, yellow glow of a coal-oil lantern. Shadows dance on the bark of the trees just beyond the window panes, but most of the illumination is quickly absorbed by the darkness outside. A few flies may be traded, and the remaining lights quietly go out.

Inside the cabins, wood-burning stoves pop and crackle for awhile, before burning completely away. By midnight the camp is quiet with only the sound of the river rolling steadily by the cabin doors.



**A New Day**

THE DAY STARTS early, just at dawn. After breakfast, paired anglers pick up their lunches and Thermos bottles of steaming hot coffee or tea, and depart for the first run of the day. No one talks about it much, but they all wonder if the day's fishing will produce a 25- to 30-pound steelhead. Sometimes it does, for many of the stories that pass along the river are true.

Occasionally, late in the fall afternoons a special magic moves along the entire river-world in ways easily seen, but difficult to describe, and I like to pause in my fishing to watch, and listen.

Long, shallow runs of riffled white water seem animated, and alive. Fresh bear tracks pace nervously along lonely stretches of smooth sandy beaches, while the rapids' roar hangs heavily in the cold mountain air. Sometimes an eagle explodes from the dark, almost black edges of the forest, gliding restlessly across a smoky September sky.

Just for a moment the eye and ear measure it all. Then fishing begins again in earnest, for the days grow short and it won't be long before winter sets in.

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