

SECRET ♦ SEASON

LANI WALLER

THERE IS A TIME on the Skeena system when the cottonwood and aspen are bare; a time when the warmth of summer is gone and the river's edge is empty except for a few tattered remains of salmon and a thin morning mantle of white ice hidden in cold shadows and dark recesses along the rocky shoreline.

A pale northern sun hangs low on the horizon and seems to crawl slowly across the sky only slightly above the frozen mountain tops and dark forests still wet with September rain. Darkness on the river comes early.

Higher along the ridge lines fresh snow illuminates the fresh tracks of many animals; my favorites are always the prints of wolves, and more than once I've dreamed of looking up to see a pair of yellow eyes follow my fishing as I wander along the trail to a certain pool.

It is a magical time in a land of magic. Peaceful, wild, and beautiful beyond belief, it is full of promise. But be careful, it gets under your skin and crawls straight into your heart.

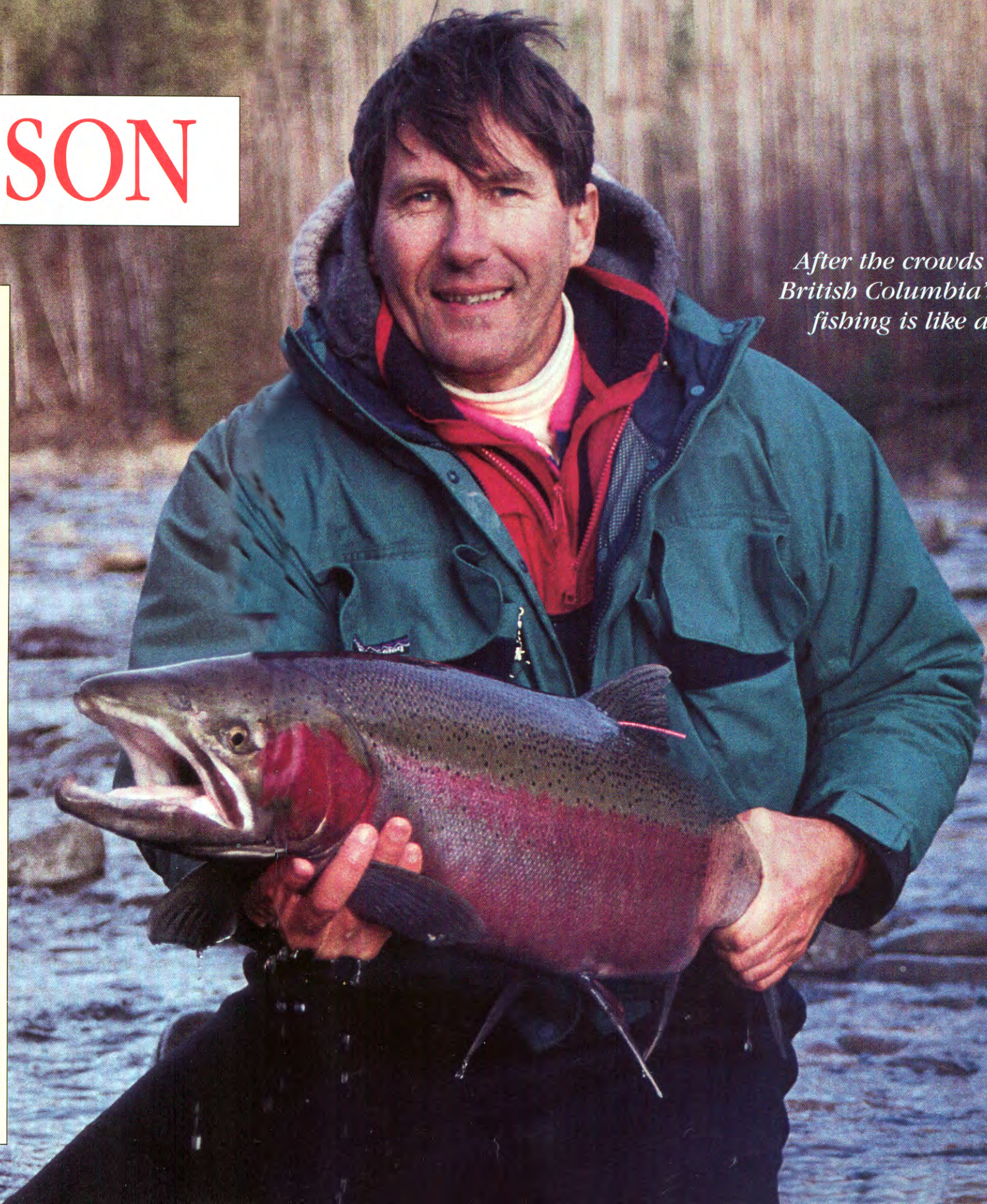
The rivers themselves are still powerful, exciting, and alive, yet they are more manageable than during any other time of the season; they are almost always low and clear. Even on the Skeena itself the lie of a steelhead is now more apparent, and the fly moves through each run with a sense of control and anticipation not always obtainable earlier in the year.

The steelhead are there, too. There are always some there at this time, no matter what else has happened, lying patiently in place and as always, ready, waiting, and watching. Even the misguided death of half of their numbers in the summer nets has not yet killed them all.

Most of the anglers, however, are gone. Even the trout-fishing guides and outfitters from Montana,

By the first of November, the secret season has begun. Early morning fishing becomes less important, and the steelhead, which can weigh over 30 pounds, lie closer to shore. The author holds a late-season steelhead. Lani Waller photo.

After the crowds have left, British Columbia's steelhead fishing is like a dream.



WET•FLY

P A T T E R N S

OVER THE PAST FOUR YEARS OR SO I have begun to use more flies that have a long silhouette combined with materials and a design that creates a swimming action. Only when the fish have been pressured do I go to small insectlike dressings or sober-colored traditional hair- and feather-wing flies.

Some favorites include the Black Matuka, Black Woolly Bugger, Purple Woolly Bugger, leeches, and a Boss fly with a long marabou tail. I believe this type of dressing makes a stronger appeal to a steelhead's strike impulse, because it may trigger a feeding, or remembered feeding, response and any territorial reaction that may be present in a fish.



A box of the author's wet flies for steelhead.

the "big-fish bucket," and when it suddenly stops out there and the line throbs and surges in the guides, anything can happen. By contrast, warm-water September bucks lie down low in this pool, near the boulders and pockets just above the very end of the run.

It is important to remember, however, that each steelhead really is an individual, with different strength, vitality, and tolerance for changes in conditions.

Not all of them move in unison when the conditions change, no matter what the time of year. So even in late November you can find many steelhead in traditional summer lies—if it is an aggressive fish willing to remain there.

This kind of steelhead is a great candidate for a dry fly. One of the secrets of the Skeena-system rivers has been the discovery that these fish will rise for a waking or skating dry fly when the water temperatures get down into the mid- to high 30s, even when the snow is on the ground and the arctic chill blows across the northern landscapes of early winter. The question is: how many? The answer: enough to provide exciting fishing for someone who believes they will do it.

It is also important to keep in mind that all the run is in. By late

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During the late-season the sun's low angle, the frequent cloud cover, and the absence of fishermen combine to allow the fish an extra measure of cover, so they often lie in thinner, slower water. And sometimes they abandon the quicker currents to form schools, or pods, that you can cover with wets or dries.

Wyoming, and Colorado who come here in September to dry out and get in a few licks of their own after a summer of pushing and pulling clients around have left—evidently abandoning the rivers to less rational souls, or perhaps going back home to get the last of the wood in and spend a few days on their own streams, poking around for ordinary trout.

I once thought of this late-season steelhead fever as the last refuge of the truly demented—the end of the road that leads to a final desperate hit before it's all over for another year, and perhaps it is. It can be cold and miserable, and sometimes the phrase "summer-run steelhead" seems out of place.

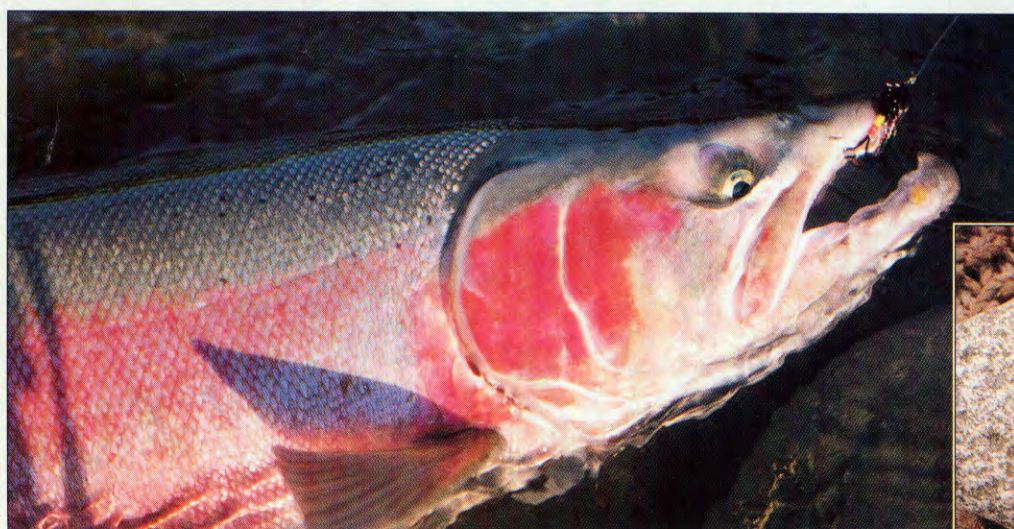
I've met some steelheaders up there who are as consistently crazy as I am about this and who always show up each year: Bob Clay, who guides and loves the Kispiox; Bob York, who just loves steelhead no matter where they are found; and a few others as well, mostly

going their own way, happy about rivers empty of fishermen. I am never surprised when I bump into Jim and Kitty Vincent, Yvon Chouinard, Bob Keller, David Dixon, Bob Hooten, or a scattering of others who look just a little too tired and muddy to be anything else but fanatics.

They are all steelhead ghosts who move like kindred spirits among a handful of the finest steelhead rivers in the world. Intoxicated with mountains and rivers, they are trout fishermen gone wrong, and they understand the risks and rewards of gambling for immense rainbows that can weigh over 30 pounds—with no guarantees. Most of them are in the fishing industry in some way and come here for their personal fishing.

Everyone else is gone.

No one really knows when the secret season begins. Usually by the third week of October, and certainly by the first of November, it's suddenly there, and the players have arrived.



Skating steelhead dry flies such as Waller Wakers (below) works well enough during the secret season to provide exciting fishing. The takes can be intoxicating.



Shorter, colder days with low sunlight and cold water begin to focus the fishing strategies and point the way, changing some things and mixing others around. Smart anglers, however, remember that these northern rivers and northern steelhead are a little different from their southern cousins. Hard and fast rules from the south don't always apply.

Early-morning angling becomes less important now. Low sunlight and dropping river temperatures make the steelhead less active than usual in the mornings. Almost all of the local guides and anglers now stay in bed until late morning and consider the second half of the day to be the real fishing time. The big-time early-morning bust to get out on the water is gone, especially since the rivers are almost devoid of anglers.

Dry-fly fishing especially can usually wait a little longer, and when the water temperatures are in the mid- to high 30s, I fish more enthusiastically with the floaters for the second half of the day than I do the first half, unless the skies are clear and full of sunshine.

The low angle of the sun also means less illumination of clear, late-season water. As a result, some fish lie close to shore even in clear water, especially since there is little fishing pressure to move them around. I learned this one from Bob Clay five years or so ago on the Kispiox, where we consistently spotted fish in water less than four feet deep and fairly close to shore.

There is also frequent cloud cover during this time of the year. So even less light reaches the stream, providing an extra measure of cover for resting fish.

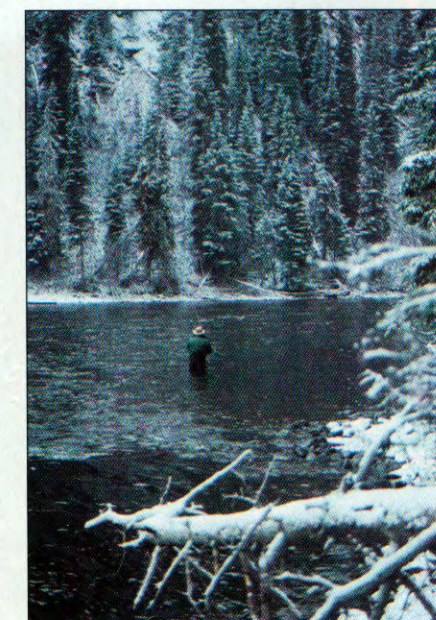
There are other things to know, however. Late-season, cold water temperatures begin to move less-aggressive steelhead into slower lies, places where they do not have to work so hard to rest. It's as simple as that; and as complicated, for not all steelhead are created equal, and responses are individually determined. This is where it begins to get interesting; it's a challenge to find out where the fish are.

Some steelhead begin to move toward the center of major pools, abandoning quicker currents. I have also noted a tendency for them to begin to school, or at least to form pods, or groups, in situations like this, giving up solitary lies in shallow faster water and moving to large pools with much less interest.

Large bucks—fish of 20 pounds or better—seem to have the least tolerance for remaining in faster lies, so I look for them in softer currents and creases.

On my home river, the Babine, this tendency is so obvious you can predict with certainty the kind of water that produces most of the large trophy males. On one pool in particular, the tailout only produces smaller, more-aggressive females or nothing at all. By simply moving upstream 50 feet you can send your fly through

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October the rivers have almost all the fish they are going to get. Some late fish still move into the main Skeena, but for the most part, almost the full population is in all of the Skeena tributaries, so it is best to concentrate your efforts there. Late arrivals on all the tributaries are common enough, however, to provide some chrome-bright fish, and it is not unusual to take newly arrived bright fish on any of the main Skeena tributaries.

One of the most important advantages of the secret season is the reduced chance of rain. Trophy steelheading is always risky business, but the northern Skeena weather patterns can be cruel and unpredictable, bringing rain and unfishable conditions almost any time from early September to mid-October. By the third week in October colder weather begins to set in and precipitation often comes in the form of snow, which does not hurt the angling.

The physical appearance of late fish is different but not radically. For example, there seems to be some weight loss among males, especially if they appear to be early arrivals that usually show darker coloration. Common length-to-girth ratios such as 38" x 20" or 40" x 21" often change, with girths becoming slimmer. Even these fish, however, remain strong and vital. The fish do not spawn until the following spring, and nature has given them the resiliency needed to remain healthy and powerful through the winter.

Now let's take a look at some specific strategies that help late-season anglers, beginning with wet-fly tactics and then moving into dry-fly techniques.

Fly Speed and Lines

It's a COMMONLY ACCEPTED practice on any river to slow the speed of the fly when the water temperatures begin to reach the low end of their range. Therefore, most steelheaders favor a conservative approach and lean toward those presentations that make it easiest for each fish to see and then intercept a drifting fly.

I prefer to fish in either one or two zones in the water column: right on the top or as close to the bottom as I can get. When I want to maximize my strikes, I fish just off the bottom, hopefully making it easy for even tentative steelhead to take the fly.

It has been my experience that while many steelhead will move to a fly from considerable distances, either horizontally or vertically, others will not, but they will take a fly that moves very near their position. The best example of this phenomenon I have seen comes from the times I have fished with Jim Teeny of Gresham, Oregon, who spots a steel-

head and then places the fly so close to the fish it looks as though the fish merely inhales the fly.

I use the same line systems later in the year as during any other time: a wet-tip line with interchangeable densities of tips so that I can change the tips to match the specific requirements of each drift I choose to cover. I use a Scientific Anglers/3M Steelhead Taper with a 13-foot wet tip (#4 or #5 density). Shooting-tapers are still useful, but the trend is away from them and toward wet tips.

When I am covering the water with a downstream swing, I prefer to play it on the conservative side and slow down my fishing. I make multiple presentations to likely looking water before I move on. This is in contrast to coverage when the water is warm, when I may only make one presentation before moving a step or two downstream.

Waking and Skating Patterns

FOR THE PAST SIX YEARS I have been experimenting with dry flies in the late season primarily on three rivers: the Babine, the Bulkley, and the Kispiox—fishing the last two with Kispiox guide Bob Clay after his clients have gone. We discovered that dry-fly fishing can remain excellent even when late-season water temperatures drop into the mid- to high 30s. I now use double-taper or long-belly-taper floating lines for this dry-fly fishing, because these lines have superior mending capabilities.

Many of these northern rivers run colder throughout the year, a fact of nature perhaps explained by their latitude or glacial influence. Whatever the reason, the Skeena fish have evolved to the point where traditionally defined "low" temperatures are not as critical as they are on warmer rivers farther south.

Depending on the stability of the water temperature, the river's clarity, and any changes in barometric pressure, Bob and I each expect to raise from one to five fish a day on waking patterns if we fish carefully and cover the water well.

I have noticed, however, a tendency for the late-season dry-fly fishing to go "cold" if there is a sudden and dramatic drop in water temperature, even if the temperature goes no lower than is normal for that time of year. In other words, if the water drops four to six degrees in two days, stabilizing at 38 degrees, I have seen the dry fly "bite" go off and stay off indefinitely. It seems the fish are shocked by the sudden plunge.

On the other hand, a slow and gradual decrease in water temperature that eventually reaches the same level seems tolerable to the fish, and they continue to respond to floating flies. It's not so much a question of how cold the water

has become but how fast it reached that temperature.

For this late-season dry-fly fishing I slow things down and fish in "softer" water than I do earlier in the year. Even slack water with very little discernible current can hold late-season steelhead, and on several occasions I have raised, hooked, and landed steelhead in water so slow I had to retrieve and pull the dry fly across the surface to make it skate, or wake.

I also make multiple presentations to the suspected lie, and if I know the water should hold fish, I change patterns before moving on. Earlier in the year I go through each piece of water with only one searching pattern. If that fails to raise a fish, I move on rather than change flies.

Since the strike response of late-season steelhead may be more "fragile" or more tentative, I change to a smaller fly sooner at this time of year if I raise a fish that refuses to return. I also slow down the lateral swing of the dragging fly, and I "hang" the fly in the specific seam I believe is holding the fish. I also animate the drift more by making the fly twitch and flutter as it comes over the target.

If the weather is really cold and the water temperature low, I usually fish the dry during the warmest part of the day. Even glacially influenced rivers that seem stabilized at low temperatures often exhibit a one- to two-degree increase in temperature from about 9 A.M. to 4 P.M. Under this situation I often fish more typical lies in the afternoon and slack-water lies in the morning.

The Lessons of 1991

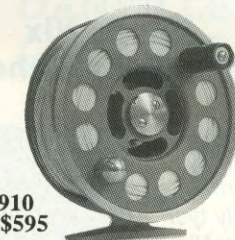
AS MANY READERS KNOW, the Skeena-system rivers fished more poorly last year than they have in many for several reasons—natural and manmade. This situation has had a serious impact on several fronts, and both Americans and Canadians are watching closely.

Last year a record run of pink salmon flooded the offshore areas surrounding the Skeena district, so Canadian authorities extended the commercial fishing industry into time frames that intercepted early-running steelhead on all the Skeena tributaries. There were very few fish in any of the rivers until about September 20, as these late-arriving steelhead had avoided the nets.

All of the Skeena-system guides, outfitters, and lodges know how good the late-season angling can be. In 1991 it provided what little quality angling there was—for the few anglers around. Despite unseasonable late rains and then a record arctic cold snap, late October and early November had at least some chances for success if you could tough

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out the cold and high dirty water. It was grim work. Only dedicated anglers and guides stuck it out to the end.

Some of the anglers and guides gathered at Jim and Kathy Ismond's lodge on the Bulkley River on October 26 for a last week of fishing, to talk about the future of this remarkable resource, and I imagine to ease the sting of a poor season by talking of better days to come.

1991 had been a tough year for other reasons; Dean River guides Daryl Hodson and Tony Hill had both been killed on the river in tragic accidents no one wanted to believe.

Besides Jim and Kathy Ismond there were Gordon Wadley and Bob Clay from the Kispiox; Dennis Farnsworth from the Sus-Tut; and John Mintz from his fly shop in Smithers. In addition, we had heard from Jim Britton and Ray Makiwichuk on the Mörice, and Keith Douglas on the Bulkley. The Wickwire family from Silver Hilton Lodge on the Babine sent messages to all of us, and Bob Hull called from Hodson's lodge on the Dean.

One night at dinner I looked around Kathy's table and realized that an entire generation of Skeena guides and outfitters were either present or had sent their support.

Out of the fishing, the hardships, and the talking last year came a remarkable camaraderie, and something more—something to match the rivers and the wild steelhead we managed to find; something to fight back against all the trouble, all the dams, pollution, overzealous clear-cutting of forests, and the overharvesting of steelhead in nets.

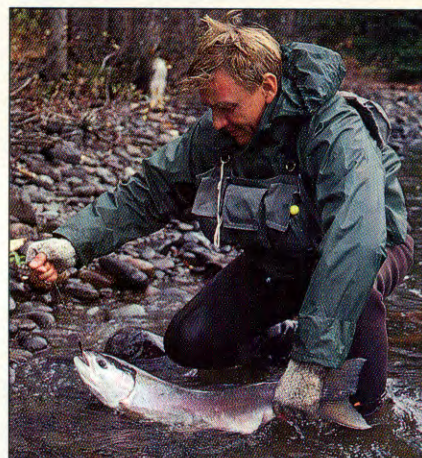
Everyone involved with this remarkable sport-fishing resource has come together in a campaign to help protect and save the Skeena steelhead, especially the early-run fish of late August and early September, which have been tragically harmed by the commercial nets set in June and July off the mouth of the Skeena.

These people know the steelhead rivers of northern Canada are at a crossroads. The best steelheading any of us will ever see is there, no matter what the season. Canadians like Jim and Kathy Ismond are doing all they can to save it. Even in the snow and ice and rain of last year I could see it in their faces. As a result, the Steelhead Society of British Columbia, along with Trout Unlimited, has taken specific steps to help. If you would like to help win this struggle, please contact the Wild Steelhead Campaign, 1175 Main Street, P.O. Box 550, Smithers, British Columbia, Canada V0J 2N0.

If you would like information on the lodges, guides, and outfitters mentioned in this article, write to North By

Northwest Tourism, 3940 Alfred Avenue, P.O. Box 103, Smithers, British Columbia, Canada V0J 2N0. You should have a guide to help you locate the fish, which move around a lot, but one is not required.

The loss of early-run fish due to netting, and then the terrible water conditions and weather patterns of the late season ruined the entire season for many anglers who journeyed to the region. We can never learn to control the seasons in a river's life, but I hope



Cold weather, rain, and snow are common during the late-season on the Skeena system rivers, but the wet- and dry-fly fishing can be excellent.

we can learn to control ourselves before we lose most of our wilderness and the many animals who live in it.

Lee Wulff once said something that I will never forget. It sums up not only so much about his favored Atlantic salmon but Pacific steelhead as well, and I have often thought of it as an insight into the reasons so many of us are drawn to the sport: "A fly is a dream, sent down by the angler into a world he can never fully understand. It carries his hope and his heart with it."

Lee and Joan Wulff fished for steelhead along the Skeena, too, and I have often thought of Canadian steelheading as dreaming in a special way: The brilliance and serpentine twisting of the northern lights along the river at night, the invisible eyes of wolves, and the sudden throb and pull on your line from a creature so magnificent it must not be eliminated in either the name of greed or innocence—all of these things are ours in trust. The dream of the Skeena is real, and I hope it stays with us forever.

LANI WALLER OWNS Lani Waller's International Angler, a full-service fly-fishing travel agency. He lives in Novato, California.

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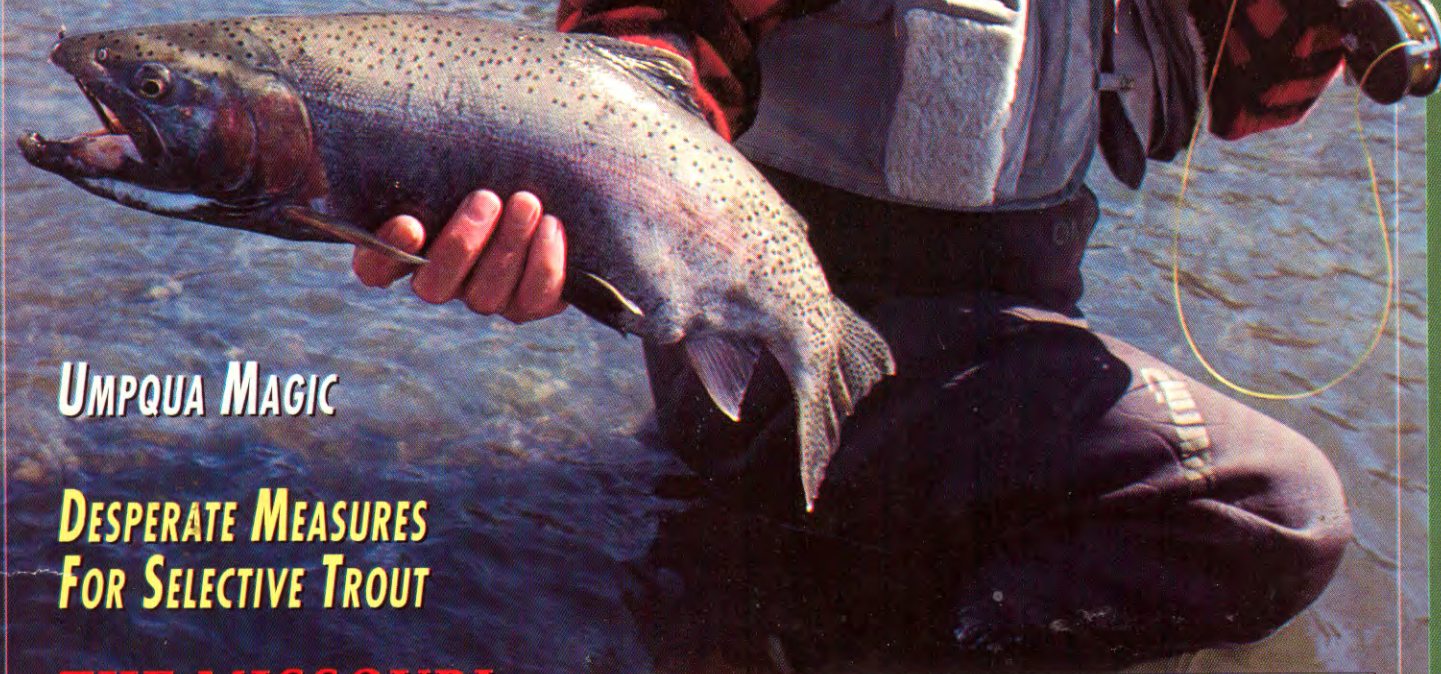
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