

IAN FERGUSSON (L), AND ABOVE, GATHERING INTEL.

Riverkeepers of the North Coast

BY BRETT TALLMAN

OVER THE PAST TWO DECADES, in Oregon, volunteers have been collecting a deep database of information on one river that supports what many consider the healthiest run of wild steelhead on the North Coast. The database includes fish counts, redd counts, and water temperatures from every year since 1993, as well as intermittent information on siltation, insect life, dissolved oxygen content, and more. The collected data is submitted to the Department of Fish & Wildlife, which makes it available to biologists, timber companies, and the general public. For anyone with a computer, an internet connection, and a willingness to slog through twenty years of information, the database creates an elaborate series of snapshots of one river and its wild steelhead.

Ian Fergusson is the leading man in the spawning surveys. I meet him for the first time in a gray, six-story transit center on the western edge of Portland's suburban sprawl. He joined the project in 1994, one year after it was started by Marty and Joyce Sherman, but familiarity has bred only joy in Fergusson. He bounces between me and 20 other volunteers, shaking hands and smiling behind a tidy beard and round, wire-rim glasses. Once everyone arrives, we consolidate into four four-wheel-drives and head west, meeting again an hour and a half later at an abandoned Coast Range logging camp.

To fishermen, this is a river of steep gradients and large fish. In just 20 miles it drops roughly 1,400 feet between the walls of a basalt canyon covered in loose soil, sword ferns, wildflowers, and Douglas firs.

The river rarely pauses and never wanders, but rather surges out of the mountains. As a result, it is quietly known for large, violent steelhead, some weighing 20 pounds or more.

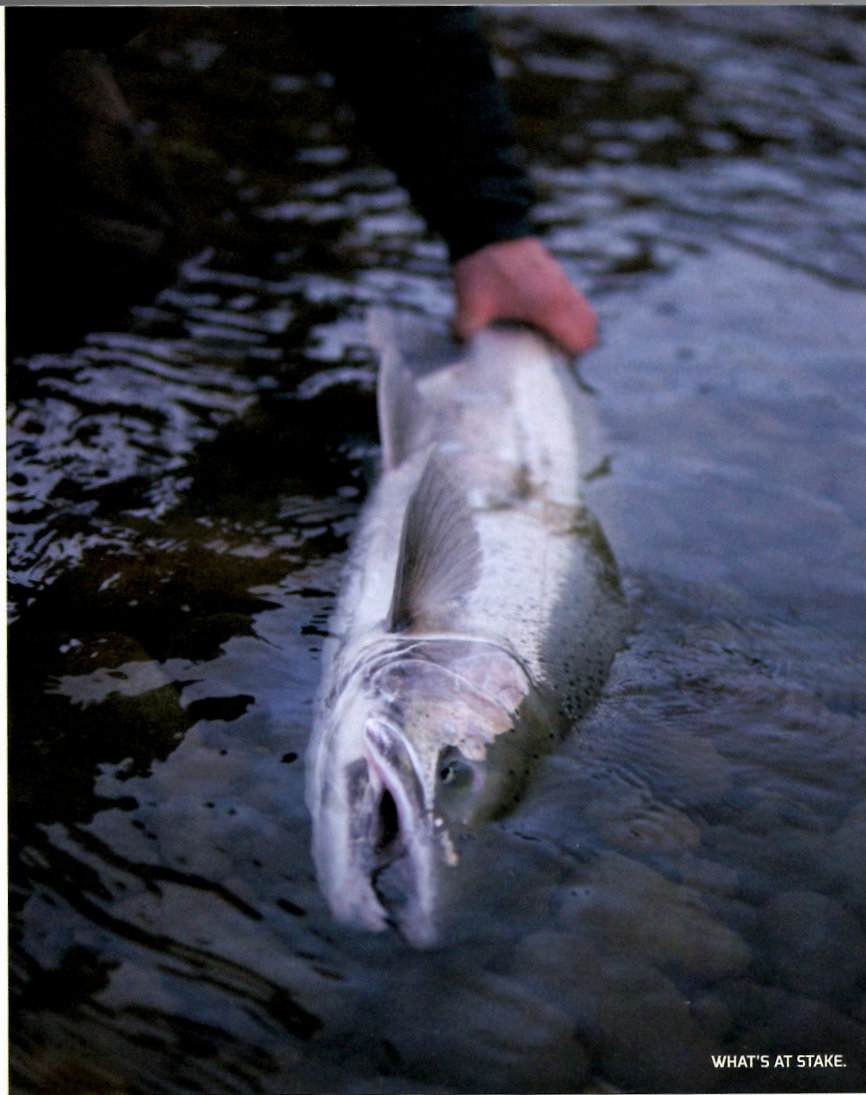
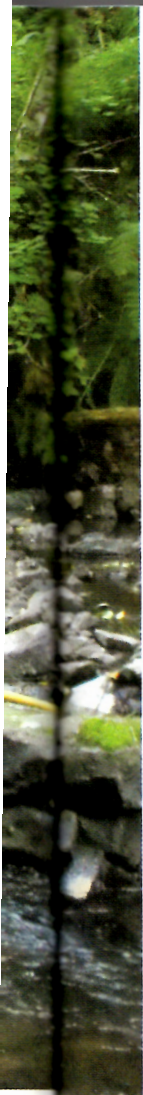
At the logging camp, Fergusson divides the volunteers into teams, assigns each team a section of river and sends us on our way. In the upper reaches of the river's North Fork, the leader of my group spots what appears to be a series of redds set close together. But upon closer inspection, he realizes he is looking at one redd as big as three. "The fish that made this..." he says, removing his hat and scratching his head as he trails off.

The fish that dug that massive redd was a member of one of the last purely wild races of steelhead in Oregon. Though the state tried to plant its own smolts there in the 1950s, the hatchery fish were eradicated by a parasite called *Ceratomyxa shasta*. Over time, native fish were selected for their immunity to *C. shasta*, but because the parasite isn't found in other North Coast rivers, fish bred from coastal stocks like the Siletz and Alsea have no resistance to it.

"Because the river is so remote the state didn't try again," Fergusson says, "and that left wild fish to do what they've always done."

Higher up we spot a mating pair. Every few minutes the hen rolls, flashing her silver flank as she scours the riverbed with the flat of her tail. We watch for half an hour and in that time the big buck with red gill plates never strays from her side.

The river's wild steelhead continued to return in healthy numbers



WHAT'S AT STAKE.

until the 1990s when the surrounding forest, replanted after major fires in 1933 and 1945, reached harvestable size and logging resumed. Shortly after a technical paper identified it as the only river on the North Coast with a healthy run of wild steelhead, a major storm caused several landslides in clear-cut areas. The slides scoured five of the river's tributaries and devastated the spawning habitat. In 2007, another storm caused similar problems and likely dammed the river's mainstem with debris. When the dam broke, a wall of water rushed down the canyon, channelizing long stretches of the mainstem's spawning habitat and destroying a bridge at the river's mouth. Fergusson knows the river hasn't completely recovered from these events, but he doesn't seem worried.

"Natural systems are pretty complex and self-adjusting," he says. "Redd numbers rise and fall in roughly 10-year cycles, and, in spite of everything, the peaks have been consistent."

Late that afternoon, the survey teams reconvene at the logging camp to share what they've found. We are tired and wet, but numbers are higher than they've been in several years and Fergusson is smiling. In one stretch, volunteers recorded the second highest redd count since 1993.

"But," Fergusson adds, "rivers always need champions. Wild fish need voices. They'll keep coming back if we let them."

Fergusson admits that the project has consumed his life. He has given countless hours to it, but, he says, it's what he was meant to do. Now he needs to find people to keep it going.

Though Fergusson organizes the spawning surveys independently, several fish- and river-advocacy groups have taken an interest in the project. For the last day of surveys, 16 "River Stewards" from the Native Fish Society trekked across the Pacific Northwest and met Fergusson at the logging camp. The routine was largely the same, but the visitors returned home with the information needed to start monitoring programs on their own home rivers. 🐟

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