

I LIKE GREEN BUTTS  
AND I CANNOT LIE.

## The Collection

101 green-butt skunks, 101 stories BY BRETT TALLMAN

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, on a hot August day, I met two friends at the mouth of Oregon's Deschutes River. We knew enough to know that we were early for the peak of the run, but—having time then and not later—we shrugged and went for it. In the late afternoon, we crossed the Deschutes where it joins the Columbia, made camp, and, that evening, hiked upstream together, each of us looking for the right run and peeling off toward the river when we found it.

Below a bend and above a rapid, I found mine. Leading to it was a small, but reassuringly worn trail. Everything about that spot—the speed of the water, the quality of light, the evidence that other fishermen had seen the same thing—looked so right that, for the first time, I tied on a fly of my own making and still believed I was going to catch a steelhead.

I was wrong. Twenty yards above the rapids, I hooked one. But it jumped once, then ran straight at me before turning toward the far shore and slipping the hook, leaving me nothing to reel in but a shabby green-butt skunk. The white wing was gone, and one end of the mylar rib had pulled out. On the trail above, a fisherman had stopped to watch. I thought he'd say something, but he just shrugged and kept walking toward camp.

I left the river that night with no fish and two certainties: First, a shrug, though bewildering at the time, is the best possible reaction to a lost fish. Second, as long as particular flies don't seem to matter that much to steelhead, I might as well go with the one that feels right.

Stories like mine are fairly common, in part because the green-butt skunk is a proven classic. I want there to be a reason for this. I want logic or voodoo or chartreuse in refracted light. But I suspect it's just because a lot of people fish it. Still, even if it's only the numbers that make the fly great, I figured there must be many fishing stories involving the green-butt skunk.

Turns out there are. In 2006, two flyfishers named Joel La Follette and Steve Bukeda started collecting these stories in a unique way: by

gathering green-butt skunks from notable steelhead flyfishers around the world. The project began as a way to honor famed North Umpqua angler and photographer Dan Callaghan, who added the first chartreuse butts to the old skunk pattern already canonized by West Coast steelheaders. Callaghan had died that spring of heart disease. Not long after, Bukeda died too, leaving the project to La Follette alone. Nearly four years later, Fritz Gerds plated and framed the 101 green-butt skunks, taking nearly six months just to set the flies. The collection was auctioned off in October 2010, and all of the \$6,400 it raised was donated to the North Umpqua Foundation.

But the mounted flies didn't disappear into a private collection, as some thought they might. The winning bid was pooled together by a group of fishermen who wanted to see them displayed in public places. The collection was returned to La Follette with that stipulation, and that summer, it went on display at the Steamboat Inn lodge and restaurant along the North Umpqua. It has since made its way back to La Follette's Royal Treatment fly shop, in the Portland suburb of West Linn.

La Follette says he'd like to see it moved around more, so it can continue to honor the legacy of a special man and a special river.

Each fly in the display says something about its tyer's approach as a fisherman, but also about the tradition of tying a green-butt skunk. As the gatekeeper for the collection, La Follette knows many of the stories behind each fly. Which is how I learned that Lani Waller's fly is "like a comfortable flannel shirt," and that Waller probably is, too. It's how I know that Alec Jackson's fly is the first and last green-butt skunk he ever dressed.

Probably the simplest fly in the collection is La Follette's favorite. "That fly has a lot of miles on it," he says, "and I'm sure it's caught fish. I drove up this gravel road above the North Umpqua and finally reached a log cabin where this old guy came out and asked me a little roughly what I wanted." La Follette explained the project to him, the old guy smoothed out, and, after a handshake La Follette says he will always remember, the legendary Frank Moore pulled a green-butt skunk directly from his fly box. 🐟

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