

HALF- POUNDERS AND SUMMER- RUNS

A 3-day odyssey on the Middle Rogue for its famous half-pounders and hard-fighting adults. By TERRY W. SHEELY

JAMES ROBERT HOPNI SAMPSEL, MISSOULA-BORN, Deschutes-schooled, Rogue-refined, impressionist artist, fly rod disciple, river guide runs a gorgeous drift boat, a Dennis Neagle woody.

Sixteen feet bow to anchor, 48-inches across the floor, polished fiberglass, rocker-bottom, hand-varnished, satin rails, unmarred rock guards, scalloped oars, padded seats.

We shake hands in the dark of the parking lot at Morrison's Rogue River Lodge and I get the feeling that JRH Sampsel is not all boat. Lot of steelhead savvy in the handshake. Seven years on this river, he tells me. Never looked back.

Spey or single-hand, he asks? We'll be beaching the boat and wading, swinging wet flies, all three days. Convention says there are seven presentations here: dry fly swing, wet fly swing subsurface, wet fly swing deep, nymphs unweighted, nymphs weighted with indicators, deep drifting wets, hot-shotting weighted wets from the bow of the boat.

With James, for this low-water fish-in, there is one technique: wade, wets on the swing.

Single-hand, I answer. He can use the Spey. Should be a good three days.

My quest is the internationally rare



TERRY SHEELY PHOTO

Rogue River half-pounders, a trout-size micro-breed of fly-crushing runt steelhead that go to sea and return to natal river a year ahead of the pack. Truth out: I'm pretending that also lifting a barbless into a nasty ocean-raised 7- to 12-pound summersault of full-grown adult summer-run would be a bonus to the 10- to 20-inch half-pounders. Deep in my steelheading heart though, I know the pretense is hollow.

It's true, half-pounders are special. Only three rivers on the continent grow these spitfires: California's Klamath and Eel and the one curling around my wad-

ers—Oregon's Rogue River.

And they are why I'm here on the Lower Middle Rogue, at the end of September—to put a fly in front of bucket-list fish just two rivers away from unique. I'll grin and enjoy every hookup with the Rogue's juiced micro-steelhead, but it's a money bet that I won't ignore a grownup that wants to fight.

Both are likely, James says. They'll eat the same fly on the same presentation. And the timing is right.

September going into October overlaps the seasonal peak for summer-runs in the Lower Middle Rogue and marks the beginning of the best for half-pounders. Before Sept. 15, Morrison fly guides, and most others, concentrate on the fly-only (Sept. 1-Oct. 31) summer-run water in the upper river near Shady Grove. Late in September some re-locate to the Lower Middle Rogue to meet the incoming half-pounders, adult steelhead, and big fall Chinook, which I'll ignore this trip.

Half-pounders and grown ups will run strong from now straight into winter. "Always steelhead in this river, somewhere," James assures, "half pounders around through January."

For me, this week the "somewhere" promise must turn up in the 20-some miles of Rogue I'll flog on my triad of one-day floats covering three sections of the Lower Middle Rogue, each dramatically different from the others.

The top of the trip starts 2½ miles downriver from Grants Pass on the outside of a wide slow bend at Lathrop Landing county ramp. Last day takeout will be at the BLM Rand ramp across from the pocket water in tumultuous Chair Riffle—Last Cast stop. The stop delivers half-a-dozen half-pounders to finish the trip, all stout, deep, gorgeous fish. The middle float of the triad is Ferry Hole to Hog Creek, last ramp before the fall through Hellgate Canyon.

The Rogue, its breadth, flow, color, habitats, fly-fishing situations and conditions change at almost every bend, and when I leave there will still be a couple of hundred more miles to experience.

Stretches of river are 150 to 200 feet wide, some wider. In some spots I could domino cast three times and not reach bank-to-bank. The breadth, distance from

Artist and Rogue guide James Sampsel bows and releases a Rogue summer Steelhead, a living work of fly-fishing art.



TURBIN SHREYA PHOTO



A Rogue half-pounder, one of the rarest fish on the continent.

TERRY SHEELY PHOTO

shore to some of the best holding water, and tangle of bank side alder, willow, and snowberries are why James favors two-handed rods and Spey casting.

Fishing from a boat, single-hand casting is not a problem. Wading though, as we are, single-hand rods have limitations. I went single-hand all three days and had to pass up very little water thanks mostly to vicious roll casts, single-hand spey casts, and likely James' judicious selection of our fishing water. Some places, though, required wading beyond my comfort zone.

Even in the seasonal low water of late September the Rogue's 215-miles of current from Boundary Springs near Crater Lake to the ocean at Gold Beach is deceptively strong and a factor in presentation.

When I cast perpendicular or slightly upstream, even with aggressive upstream mends, the downstream current bows the floating line before the sink tip scratches bottom. The fly, on these futile miscues, is probably the last thing to swing past targeted steelhead.

Quarter the cast, I remind myself, out and 80-degrees downstream. Drop the tip while the floating line pulls straight, the sink tip descends with the leader and fly skimming the rocks ahead of the rest.

Our base at Morrison's, 16 miles downriver from Grants Pass is conveniently centered above the wild lower-river canyon and just below the belly tightening narrows at Hellgate Canyon. We're roughly 42 miles downriver from the holy-water at Gold Hill and Shady

Cove. We're bunked in Tuck Away 3, a spacious private cabin distant from the lodge bustle perched in the alders above the gurgle of Taylor Creek.

Blacktailed deer and wild turkeys hang in the yard.

For 70 years Morrison's has been here on the edge of the Taylor Creek salmon hole. "Rustic Four-Star" is how the owners describe the lodge, an organic green and brown complex of up-dated rooms and cabins, trailered boats, doting staff, chefs who tweak succulents into four-course surf and turf. Fishermen relive fish and fishing on the elevated porch, evening ambers clinking over ice, a Zane Grey hand-tied fly framed in the background.

The art is a reminder that a lot of Zane Grey history lives here yet. This was Grey's home steelhead river—until he discovered the Umpqua's upper North Fork. Years ago, his son Loren told me that Grey left the Rogue for the added challenge of the stout and plunging North Fork, and not because the Rogue was lacking in steelhead.

Andrew Pratt, GM of lodge operations, had assured me he could set up whatever I want, however I want it. One to four day guided packages, indulgent multi-day lodge-to-lodge floats into the canyon wilderness, combo float-fish-campouts, rafts, drift boat, bank, shuttles, salmon, half-pounders, steelhead, conventional, fly.

Dream it and he'll put it together.

My dream homes in on these three sections of the Lower Middle Rogue with Guide James Sampsel, saving

for another summer the fly-only Holy Water and adrenaline poppin' wild Rogue Canyon. There's too much good Rogue water for one fish trip. Zane Grey's river deserves to be savored, its current pushing hard against my waders, edging across slippery stones, otters and mink, egrets and ospreys, feeling the river, smelling it, unraveling its steelhead in the front seat of the Woody silently riding a current line, storied water dripping from feathered oars.

In shadowy half-light, boat in tow, James, Natalie and I head southeast from Morrison's, past roosting turkeys and feeding blacktails to daylight at Ferry Hole launch River Mile 89.9.

I'm surprised to find the Lathrop drift is often open, high-banked, the water some times slow and lake flat. Residential lawns edge the river, along with posted RV parks and seasonal docks. Water skiers and play boats blow over steelhead holding ledges and rock pockets of cottonwood shaded fly water. Despite the water toys, steelhead are here, James assures me, pointing out past triumphs, stopping to fish the best wadeable spots, pounding the mouth of the Applegate River. But the esoteric of steelheading that I came for, the character and smell of the Rogue are missing in this near-town section.

It's better downstream on the Ferry to Hog Creek float. Timbered hills rise from the river bank, and instead of manicured lawns there are gravel bars and thickets.

Rural Oregon flanks the Ferry float, narrows it slightly, gathers current and provides a glimpse of the Rogue's storied personality. Jumpoff Joe, Pickett Creek and other tributaries slide in, building eddies, runs, ledges, boulder beds and other pronounced steelhead options. Between Ferry and Hog we find a lot of good stops with promising steelhead water.

Habitat changes and changing river dynamics are as near as the next bend. Deep and flat here, tight and fast there, churning through black boulder beds, agate-flecked gravel bars, glassy pools.

"We'll find 'em here," James says, "Right now this river is fishing better for steelhead and salmon than any river on the West Coast."

Same guide talk I heard last night at Morrison's, in the lounge snacking on coconut shrimp with sweet cherry aioli, watching wild Merriam turkeys waddle toward the home pool, listening to fishermen talk up the day. Lot of half pounders in the river, half dozen mature steelhead, box of kings. Most are gear fishermen

A quick photo, an honorarium, and then a respectable release.



TERRY SHELLEY PHOTO

after Chinook and steelhead, some fly, some conventional, some guided, some not.

James is a fly guide — “a passionate” fly guy, he adds. And he loves steelhead—half pounders or 12 pounders, they all have steelhead genes.

We float from one wade-fishery to the next. Never casting from the gorgeous boat, always from the bank, always on the swing. Hard core respect. Not every Rogue guide does it this way. But James does and I appreciate it.

He holds out a box crowded with wets, Skunks, Purple Perils, Hilton’s, assorted butts, bunnies, buggers and gaudy big streamers. The classics are mixed with home-ties and experiments. James is not hung up on pattern perfection or hatch matches—for half-pounders or summer steelhead. Most of his home-grown evolved from classics; a herl here, spot of color there, maybe added wing.

Patterns, he says, are not as important

as performance.

“Steelhead are curious creatures,” James reasons, “and if a fly is presented properly, they’ll hit no matter what it looks like. It’s a trip,” he adds, “how many patterns they will eat. It’s all about what you are feeling and what speaks to you when you open your fly box. It’s all about fly speed, presentation and confidence. Guys are welcome to bring their own.”

Water clarity, high sun and overlap of half-pounders and grownups tells me to pick small, subtle, unweighted, and buggy.

I select an experiment, a 1 ½-inch green-winged something that Kait Bailey tied. It looks fishy and turns over nicely for the 9 ½-foot 6-weight R.B. Meiser. The Scandinavian line helps, floating with sink-tip, short poly leader, and 18 inches of fluorocarbon to the green thing.

I ask James for the name, and he shrugs. No name. Within an hour I’ll be

calling it the “GCD”, the Green Coffee Damn it and for reason.

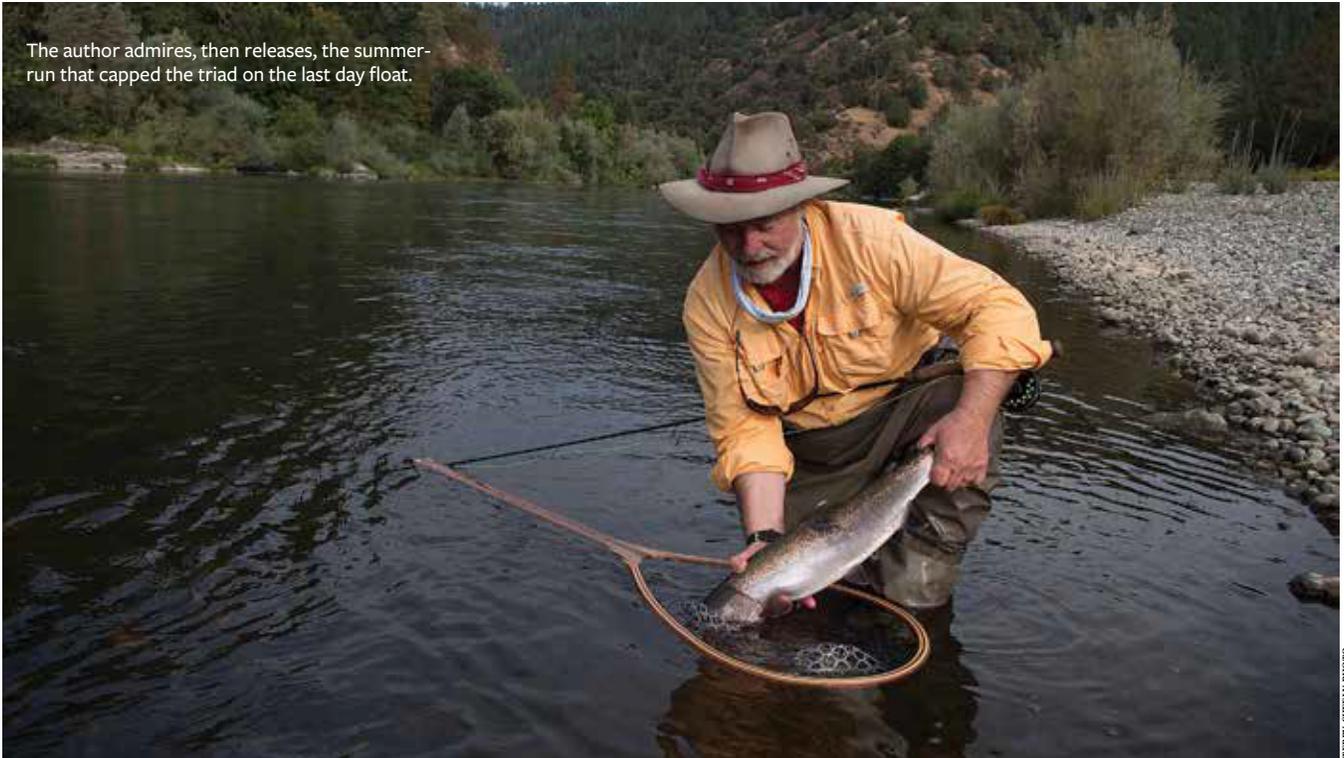
Sliding studded boots over slick, smooth rocks, leaning into the river’s muscle, working a drift two steps at a time. Cast near, swing, hang; cast middle swing, hang; cast far, swing, hang. Shuffle two steps down current do it again.

Out of the boat, I’m no longer on the river, I’m part of it like any boulder or broken log intruding into the Rogue’s downhill rush.

“When you feel a tug. Wait. Wait. Wait some more,” James instructs. “Drink some coffee. Wait. Watch the line run off the spool. Let the fish turn downstream. When you think you’ve waited long enough, wait some more. Then just raise the rod, don’t set the hook. Lift into it—after the fish turns. After. Okay?”

Okay, I answer, but confess it’s probably a lie. I’m wired for hair-trigger steelhead sets. It’s unconscious. Involuntary. Predictable. But I’ll try.

The author admires, then releases, the summer-run that capped the triad on the last day float.



TERRY SHELLEY PHOTO

A little downstream from the Ferry Boat Ramp September fog and wood-burner smoke hangs in the cottonwoods, spears of first light destroy the shadows. Mergansers and a hen mallard whistle past. An osprey watches. The 6-weight feels cool and friendly. The nameless homegrown green fly looks good in the water. James thinks it'll produce. Upwards of 12,000 summer-runs come through here; the green thing should produce at least one.

And that one comes at Flannigan's Slough.

The cast unrolls and drops the green thing at the edge of a seam. Line straightens, sinks and the fly swings. The take is soft, a sullen stop unlike the rapid rap of the half-pounder I'd caught earlier. The brain repeats James' mantra—wait, wait, wait some more, drink some coffee, wait, but the brain is no match for decades of reactive muscular reflex.

The rod tip whips high, big strip of line clears slack, sets the hook. Same as always! The steelhead quivers, lunges, porpoises upstream, splatters and is gone. Gone! "Didn't drink your coffee, did you," James says. "That was a really big steelhead. Next time wait, let him turn downstream, drink your coffee, watch the line flow off the reel, wait some more. Then lift the rod. Don't set, lift. Let the

current do it. Practice on the half-pounders. Works the same."

The Green Coffee Damnit fly is born from my failings.

Tough steelheading day, clear water, high bright sun, but on the swing we manage a fish or so at most wades, and I wonder out loud what it's like to fish this stretch on a rising freshet with gray overcast. Good, James answers, really good. "Concentrate on water 2- to 6-feet deep with a walking speed current."

Long open gravel bars are the river's make-good for the high sun, and graciously presents back-cast space. Low water pinches the targeted holding areas. And we hook scrappy half-pounders, maybe tickle a mystery grown-up or two, pluck agates out of the gravel and wade too far into a roller-coaster sluice of whitewater river muscle.

A rock too high, a step too short, a current too strong and I'm coming up, gasping and scrambling toward the bank—waders full, 8-bill camera soaked. Strip, drain the waders, wring out the fleece, go straight to the boat and pick up the wading staff. From here downriver the staff becomes a critical, common-sense part of my Rogue River uniform. This river has muscle and slime in the most unsuspected places.

Our lowest stretch of the Lower Mid-

dle Rogue saved the best for last.

At dawn we drop the Woody in at Morrison's home pool, ignore the rolling Chinook, float around the first bend, and drop the hook in a noisy scramble of boulders, ledges, fast water, runs and pockets. Step out and start catching half-pounders before the sun hits the water. Hookups aren't fast, but they come and it's pocket picking, run gunning, tailout swinging at its finest.

The day float and the triad will end at BLM's Rand Recreation Area, four miles above Grave Creek where the paved Galice Road jumps the Rogue turns north into the Siskiyou, morphs into Whisky Creek Road and skirts the outside of the Wild Rogue Wilderness. From Grave Creek to the Coast is a winding mountain road romp. Three more takeouts are below Rand and just above where the Rogue goes wild and roadless into 33 infamous miles of whitewater bounce and canyon-wall challenge. Fifty-eight percent, 124 miles, of this complex river is Congressionally designated wild-and-scenic. Same can be said for about half the steelhead.

This is the stretch that earns a place in my steelheading soul.

This is the Rogue I came for, steep-walled, green, twisting and gorgeous falling water. Monstrous clear pools,

some like Carpenter Island swaying with green swags of moss and dark water that could float my hat. Classic Zane Grey story-water, mountain sides that rise off the river bank, quiet, coolness, bear tracks on the beach, open gravel bars, shallow ledges, five otters sliding past before the mink shows. Red-barked ponderosas pines tower uphill. The thick, earthy scent I've been looking for is here, the smell of a wild river and wilder fish.

What they lack in size, half-pounders and Rogue summer-runs make up in meanness, muscle and attitude. On the first adrenal-powered burst a 15-inch half-pounder is easily mistaken for an adult. But there's no mistaking adults.

It was a classic, drink-your coffee, wait-wait-wait take at Old Man Pool, and I finally get it right.

Quarter cast near, swing, hang, wait; quarter-cast middle, swing, hang, wait; quarter-cast far, swing, hang, wait. Two steps downstream and do it again. Near the bottom of the sweeping pool a monstrous boulder barely creases the slick surface. Lesser boulders to the side. The summer-run must have been belly down in the hydraulic pocket above the rock.

The take is soft, deliberate almost exactly like the half-pounder that ate a few minutes before. No reflexive strike. No involuntary whack. This time I do it right—the James' way. I do nothing.

Wait, wait, wait some more. The floating line moves downstream. The steelhead has lifted from the gravel, mouthed the intrusive fly, took it and is now turning downstream back to its lie. Cautiously I lift the rod tip into resistance, feel the fish a split second before it feels me. The first run explodes through the surface and ends in an all-out rip across the pool.

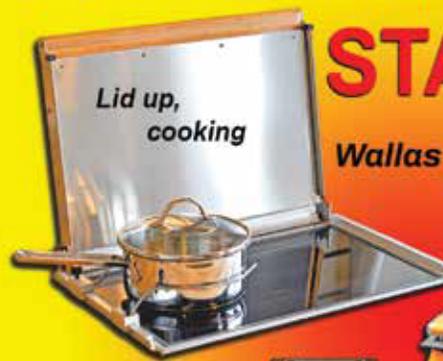
My shout is loud enough to spook every white egret within a quarter mile, and it brings James crashing to the bank.

Line flies off the reel, backing flies off, the steelhead jumps again. And again. A complete summersault this time. He's on the reel and it feels so good.

I can hear James wahoing scrambling to the boat for the live-net, chucks his rod, runs to the fight. And it's a good fight. I've had harder, wilder, bigger, but this fish is special. Everything was right, the technique, the setting, the pool, the fight, the river.

The steelhead comes into the net and behaves, an eye fixed on me as the hook slides out. Photos, high-fives, all the necessary stuff and then a good Rogue release. Perfect. **ssj**

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