

Roll On, Columbia!

In a hidden corner of the Pacific Northwest, the mightiest river in the West is home to giant rainbow trout.

BY MICHAEL HAMILTON

You won't catch huge numbers of fish from this big river, but there's a good chance that those you do catch will be huge.

The Columbia River is nothing short of monstrous—a deep, broad, powerful river that flows for 1,200 miles and pours more water into the Pacific Ocean than any other river in the Western Hemisphere. It's not your average trout stream, by any stretch of the imagination. But where the Upper Columbia flows from Canada into the

remote northeastern corner of Washington State, a handful of fishing guides ply the river's fast-flowing current seams for huge rainbow trout. And I do mean huge: Averaging 3 pounds and 20 inches, with many over 26 inches, these wild fish fight like "three salt" steelhead—ripping line, bending rods, and making knees shake and arms ache. >>

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Big Water

Called “N’Chi a wana” by the indigenous people, the mighty Columbia is born at the northern end of Columbia Lake, in

British Columbia about 5 hours north of Spokane, Washington. The river rolls through the Columbia Valley—also known as the Rocky Mountain Trench—

and is fed along the way by many famed trout waters, including the Kootenai, the Deschutes, and the Snake. The volume of water carried by the Columbia’s annual runoff is second only to the Missouri-Mississippi River system, which explains why almost half of all hydroelectric generation in the United States comes from the Northwest.

Just above the town of Northport, Washington, the Columbia narrows and crosses the invisible border between Canada and the U.S. The only marker is a steel cable, buried deep in basalt cliffs on either side of the river and strung high above the swirling currents. On a reconnaissance mission to the area about a dozen years ago, longtime fly-fishing outfitter and guide Jack Mitchell was stunned to discover that large wild rainbow trout were flourishing in this part of

The rainbow fishery on the Upper Columbia was “discovered” just 12 years ago, and the wild trout see very few anglers over the course of a season.



JACK MITCHELL

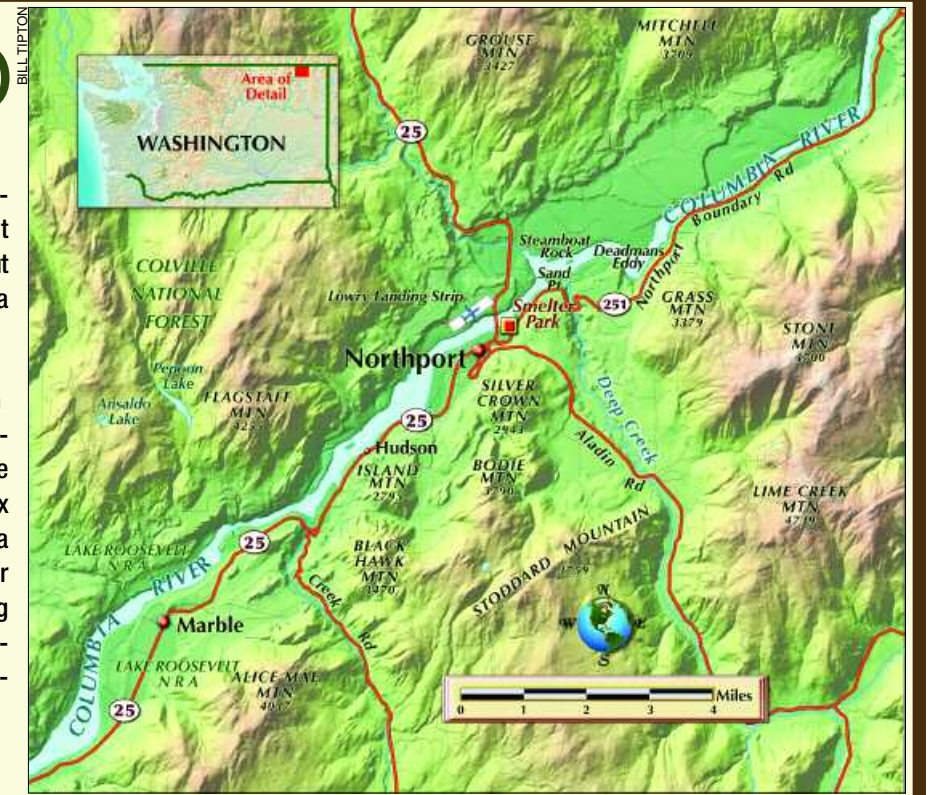
IF YOU GO

GETTING THERE

Northport is on Route 25 in the far north-eastern corner of Washington, about 6 1/2 hours from Seattle. Anglers from out of state can fly into Spokane and rent a car for the 2-hour trip north.

GUIDE SERVICE & LODGING

Outfitter/Guide Jack Mitchell’s operation is headquartered in a comfortable riverside chalet that sleeps up to six anglers. All meals are included, and a two-day minimum stay is required. For more information, contact The Evening Hatch Fly Shop in Ellensburg, Washington (1-866-482-4480; www.theevening-hatch.com).—M. H.



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the river, and that the fish eagerly ate flies. The water and the fish were so big that Mitchell dubbed the section of river “The Jurassic.”

“Imagine fly-fishing a river that runs from 50,000 to 200,000 CFS,” Mitchell said to me one morning, as he gunned the 60-horsepower outboard engine and swung the bow of his jet sled out into the surging current. Such a huge volume tests an angler’s ability to read water, make long casts, and get flies deep. But the rewards are some of the biggest rainbows to be found outside Alaska.

The weather in early June was mild the day I drove east from Seattle for my fourth trip to the Upper Columbia. Heading over Snoqualmie Pass along Interstate 90, my constant companion

When the caddisflies start hatching in June, the adults can fill the air, which can drive both the trout and the anglers a little crazy.

was a high-pressure system that had flowed in from the Canadian territories the night before; things were looking up. Six hours later, I met up with Mitchell, owner of the Evening Hatch Guide Service, headquartered in Ellensburg, Washington. For the past twelve years, Mitchell and his crew of seasoned guides have been exploring the northeastern corner of Washington State and guiding clients to big fish.

In a river of this size, Mitchell has carved out an extremely tiny area to fish—a scant 15 miles of river, running from the border to three miles below Northport. Guides ferry guests upriver in flat-bottomed sleds, full throttle against the rolling flows, choosing their course cautiously to avoid small misshapen islands of jagged basalt, which rise up dauntingly in the surging current. Menacing, swirling whirlpools, relentlessly sucked under by unforeseen

Upper Columbia Hatch Chart

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
MIDGES												
BAETIS												
CADDISFLIES												
GREEN DRAKES												
BROWN DRAKES												
CRANEFLIES												
TERRESTRIALS												
OCTOBER CADDIS												
SKWALA STONEFLIES												

forces, pose new obstacles around every turn of the river. It’s often a hair-raising run to the best fishing.

Here the upper Columbia moves to a rhythm like few other rivers, as water levels can rise and fall 10 feet in 24 hours. Low water exposes gravel bars that drop off into blue blackness, and reveal the biggest riffles you’ll ever see—half a mile across and just as long. Without warn-

ing, these features can then disappear overnight, though, when the Canadians decide to release water from their dams. “Go to bed with the boats tied to the dock in ten feet of water; wake up and they’re sitting high and dry. It’s the weirdest darn thing to see,” says Mitchell.

Through the Seasons

Because weather, water temperatures,



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and river levels are constantly changing, the fishery changes drastically over the season. Mitchell starts fishing the river in February, and the weather through early March is usually gray, cold, and wet. Think snow and you'll get it. However, you will also get first crack at nail-ing'bows up to ten pounds.

The best flies for the early season are

by the low numbers—ten Upper Columbia rainbows weigh as much as twice as many fish from most other rivers in the Lower 48. Don't break out the floatant and feathers just yet: this is still streamer and big-nymph time. Meanwhile, dry fly fishing waits in the wings ready to take center stage.

"Better cover your mouth and nose



big, heavy, and ugly, so pack a variety of Black Conehead Muddler Minnows and olive and brown Conehead Bunny Leeches in sizes 2 and 4. Fished on a slow swing through deep tailouts, these big morsels often draw violent strikes. If throwing big streamers isn't your thing, nymphing with a tandem rig of big patterns—size 4 or 6 brown Pat's Rubber legs with a size 6 Prince trailer, for instance—will also produce.

In April and May, Mother Nature begins to thaw a bit, and so does the fishing. As in many rivers across the West, as water temperatures edge into the 40's, the fish get more active and start moving more eagerly to the fly. I've had ten-fish days in April under sun-drenched blue skies. But don't be fooled

The river contains some of the biggest riffles you'll ever see—half a mile across and just as long—which offer great nymphing water.

with your hand or use a bandana," Mitchell told me on a clear June morning. We had just backed his jet sled out into the slow moving current in front of the dock. Already swarms of caddisflies, illuminated by shafts of the morning sun, were dancing along the riverbank. Within seconds of getting the sled up to 20 knots, I was being pummeled by adult caddisflies slamming into my sunglasses and bouncing off my hat. A blizzard hatch on such a huge river was an amazing sight.

After running full throttle for 10 minutes, Mitchell slowed the boat above

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a long riffle and cut the engine. The jet sleds have been outfitted with oarlocks and oars, allowing the guides to cut their outboards above a juicy-looking drift and float downriver, keeping the boat steady while the anglers cast. With Jack on the oars, I started casting a size 12 Green Butt Elk Hair Caddis close to the bank where the water flowed over large basalt boulders. I could see fish rising to caddisflies in the pool down below, and my pulse began to quicken.

Why is it that whenever you look away the darned fish takes? “Set!” shouted Mitchell, waking me from my reverie. I set the hook and came up empty, just in time to see a huge rainbow roll over my fly. I threw right back in and wham! Another purple-and-black spotted monster sucked in the fly and took off like an acrobat. Six jumps and three runs into my backing later, Jack netted a magnificent hen. The beauty and power of these fish are hard to describe, but you can feel the tight muscles of the fish when you hold them in the water during the release.

[Gearing Up]

Tackle

You never know what you’ll encounter on the Upper Columbia, so it pays to be prepared. Mitchell suggests that anglers bring three medium-fast or fast-action rods—a 3- or 4-weight, a 5- or 6-weight, and a 6- or 7-weight. All reels should have 100 yards of backing, and the reel for the heavier rod should be loaded with a multi-tip line that features various speeds of sinking heads. Another spool loaded with a Teeny fast-sinking head is also a good idea. Upper Columbia rainbows are rarely leader-shy, so plan on using 2X tippets. Mitchell provides all flies for his clients.

Clothing

The weather can be quite variable, so prepare for both heavy rain and blinding sun. Wet wading is common in the heat of the summer months, so a good pair of wading sandals will be more comfortable than heavy boots. In summertime, a large-brimmed hat and polarized sunglasses are vital. For winter and fall, think cold-weather gear and fingerless gloves.—M. H.

After the caddisfly storms in June subside, green drakes emerge in small platoons, which drive the fish whacko. “When the emergence comes it’s sometimes hard to tell your bug from the naturals,” says Mitchell. “I tell clients to fish the splash and hold on.” If you’ve had the good fortune to encounter a major green drake hatch on other Western rivers, you can imagine what it’s like on water the size of the Upper Columbia. The fish explode out of the river in pursuit of the huge mayflies, creating heart-pounding action. Windless cloudless days offer the best fishing, but the hatches themselves can be fickle and unpredictable. To find trout looking for these huge bugs, use a size 8 or 10 Green Drake Cripple as a searching pattern.

August and September on the Columbia can be very fickle. Daytime temperatures in the Colville National Forest can soar into the low 100’s, and the fish retreat to deep pools. Early dawn and just before dark present the best opportunities to hook up in the riffles and along current seams. Hoppers and big dries will draw strikes, and the biggest challenge can be seeing the bug in limited light.

October is my favorite time to fish the river. October Caddis (*Dicosmoecus*) take flight, providing consistent dry-fly fishing. Plus, flows are usually low, exposing new pockets and pools. But the real show belongs to Mother Nature. Along the banks and hillsides, Cottonwoods and thin stands of Aspen turn golden. Red tinged Tamaracks stand out against the green forests of Douglas fir. The morning air is crisp, and the afternoon temperatures are mild. Aside from the great fishing, the natural beauty of the area is food for the soul.

Hard Duty

Fishing on the Upper Columbia is not for the beginning angler. Although you shouldn’t expect huge numbers of trout, every day you will have a solid shot at catching a 10-pound rainbow. Pump the stomach of one of these fish, and you’ll see why these fish grow so large: Mysis shrimp, the secret ingredient for huge tailwater trout throughout the West. In addition, Skwala nymphs and caddisflies

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provide plenty of protein to help these trout grow quickly.

Many of the larger fish are Gerrard rainbows, a wild strain that originated in British Columbia's Kootenay Lake and is known to grow to huge proportions. Unlike other rainbows, whose diet consists of invertebrates, crustaceans, insects, and eggs of other fish, Gerrard trout feed mainly on other small fish. Such a protein-rich diet explains their rapid growth and eagerness to eat streamers.

There are also resident steelhead, native cutthroats, and cuttbows in the river. A 2006 survey sponsored by B.C. Hydro found that rainbow populations near the Canadian–Washington border are increasing in both size and numbers, which is great news. The study also found that the rainbows in these waters exhibited their most rapid growth during the first three years of life, data that seem supported by the average size of the trout—19 to 22 inches. The combination of a rich aquatic diet combined with water temperatures that range from 40 to 65 degrees year round, provides great trout habitat throughout the season.

The Rest of The Story

Most of the news that anglers hear about the Columbia River is bad. Human actions have altered the rivers in many ways—almost always for the worse. Constructing dams and levees, raising and lowering river levels, diverting water to irrigate, dumping mine tailings and industry toxins, and allowing livestock river access have all contributed to the demise of the river's native fish. It will take decades, if not generations, to reverse the trends of the last century.

However, we should applaud the work of B.C. Hydro and the Washington State Department of Fisheries to help maintain the upper stretch of the river and to confront frequent challenges that could kill the river's aquatic life. This is a far-flung fishery. It's new by most any measure. It's difficult to get to, and challenging to fish. But it's worth every damn moment. 

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