

Alaska Dispatch News

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Main Image:

[Tongass trunks](#) ^[1]

It's hard to be grumpy when your job requires you to wade through wild and remote rivers, but in the heart of my spring semester University of Alaska Southeast class on steelhead fly fishing I was more than a little frustrated by the fish of 10,000 casts. To be more specific, I was frustrated that it was taking me the requisite 10,000 casts while my students were nailing big steelhead on fewer than 100 chuck-and-ducks. The old adage of "they call it fishing, not catching" — one I admit to using frequently with clients and students — was no consolation.

As an avid steelheader, I'm particularly well-conditioned to accept that fishing is more important than catching, but two solid days of sight casting to scores of dime bright steelhead with a winter's worth of tying-table inventions yielded nary a hook-up for me. The majority of my students, none of whom had ever seen a steelhead prior to our weeklong trip, seemed to be hooking up every few minutes on their neophyte approximations of buggy steelhead flies. While I'd like to claim some credit for the students' success, when I couldn't back a semester's worth of instruction with action on the water, my nerves were frayed.

Go ahead and reserve your sympathy for more important concerns than my aging and increasingly fragile ego, but there are two important points worth making. The argument of the class, entitled "The Conservation of Sporting Literature," is the first thing that matters here, and it is this: Seen from one perspective, fly fishing is inherently about conservation; about caring for the unique places where we practice our craft; and, ultimately, about doing the right thing to make sure there are fish for future generations to catch.

The second important point about this class is that it couldn't happen anywhere else in the world but Southeast Alaska. Try to make a list of rivers if you can, but I don't think you'd come up with many places in the world where you could take a group of 10 people who only recently learned the difference between a sockeye and a steelhead, who may or may not have touched a fly rod in their lives, and reasonably expect that every one of them will catch a steelhead in a week of fishing. Most years the majority of the students finish with stories about having hooked multiple fish.

If you're a student of fishing stories, you know this is the point in the fishing yarn narrative structure where the author quickly ducks out the back door or, at best, leaves you with a cryptic reference to "Witch Creek." Sometimes, however, the commitment to future generations of fish requires we name names, or in this case, give you some easy-to-follow clues. The Southeast Alaska river in question is easily accessed via an Alaska Airlines 737 and a short drive, and it hosts the largest run of steelhead in the state. It also needs your help.

I'm not suggesting you hop on the next flight to this steelhead Nirvana, but whether your sleuthing skills or your travel agenda ever takes you here or to any river in Southeast Alaska, you should be

doing what you can to conserve these amazing places. We have a unique opportunity to have an impact right now, as the U.S. Forest Service is updating the Tongass Management Plan. The group of industry, Alaska Native and local representatives that served on the Tongass Advisory Committee unanimously recommended that the new plan should include additional conservation measures for high-value fish rivers. We are calling these high-value rivers the Tongass 77, and my students' steelhead Shangri-La is one of these 77 deemed of particular importance by scientists and stakeholders concerned about the future of anadromous fish.

While the Forest Service has proposed changes that put fish on more even footing with timber for the first time — greatly improving management of fish and wildlife habitat in our largest national forest — your comments will ensure this plan is enacted. You can learn more at americansalmonforest.org [2], and you can easily encourage the Forest Service to do the right thing by using the comment form at americansalmonforest.org/take-action.html [3]. The comment period is only open until Feb. 22, 2016, so the time to act is now.

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