

Dave Graybill

The Fishin' Magician

Nickel Ads

The ice has thinned and most anglers are keeping to the shore or in boats to do their fishing now in Eastern Washington. There are lakes at higher elevation that can safely satisfy the need to drill holes through thick ice to fish for perch and trout. I on the other hand just can't resist the urge to chase steelhead on the upper Columbia River.

Last Sunday I traveled to Pateros, and was disappointed to see no anglers on the docks and just one boat fishing the Rocks for steelhead. The day was fairly warm without a breath of wind. It looked like a great day to hang out on the docks here in hopes of hooking a passing steelhead. It made me worry a bit about how I would do at Bridgeport. You see, I had friends all the way from Moses Lake on their way up to meet me. Brian Neilson and James Lebow, have had me out on Moses Lake and Potholes Reservoir for walleye, and had been bugging me to take them steelhead fishing. Neither of them had fished this area of the Columbia River and I wanted to show them some of my favorite spots below Chief Joseph Dam.

We left the Marina Park in Bridgeport and ran up river to the point that has produced many steelhead for me over the years. It just may be my favorite little run on the whole river. I just hoped that it would treat me well on this day. You know how it goes. When you really want to show someone a good time fishing, the fish ignore you.



We were in Lebow's boat and while I pointed and gestured directions he set up the boat for a drift. The current was booming and rather than use the bobber and jig rods I had set up for us all, I decided that we would pull Mag Lip Flatfish 3.5 plugs through here. It took us a little bit of jockeying around in the strong current to settle into a good back trolling speed and our first drift produced nothing. We took a closer line on the next pass and although we fished it just right, the heart of the hole didn't give up a fish. I chose to extend our drift to the very bottom end and I am glad we did. Right about where I would have said "pull 'em in" the outside rod took two banging bounces and bent straight down stream. Neilson grabbed the rod and it was game on. Neilson is an old hand at battling steelhead on plugs. He could tell this was a dandy. The fish took a whole lot of line on the first run, and he had

little success in getting any of it back. We drifted down stream as he gained line, and then lost it back to the fish. Even when got it close to the boat it took forever to contain it in the net. It was a beautiful wild fish that Neilson estimated at 15 pounds. We slipped the hook from its jaw and it flashed away. When I looked up we had almost drifted down to the launch on the opposite shore. We had been playing this whopper for almost a quarter mile! We tried one more pass here and then I had Lebow point us down river. I wanted to show them the Blow Hole.

When we arrived I found the outflow from the Colville Hatchery on the bluff above had the Blow Hole gurgling strongly. We had good current, too, so conditions were what I consider ideal. Lebow did a masterful job of setting up the boat so we could cast our bobbars and jigs right into the froth. We all made great casts to this famous spot for steelhead, but nothing touched our baited jigs. We gave the Blow Hole a terrific beating and then headed down the bank. This bank below the Blow Hole is a great stretch to find steelhead in the Bridgeport area, but apparently the fish were elsewhere on this particular day. Two long drifts without seeing a single bump on our bobbars and we gave it up. I wanted to give the first hole another try.

While LeBow and I were casting our bobbars and jigs Neilson picked through his selection of Mag Lip 3.5s and converted one to

barbless. He put a size 1 siwash on the belly and a size on the tail, pointing up, "just like it says on the package," he said. Okay, since he went through all the trouble I let him run it out on the inside rod, while I put the "proven" plug on the outside rod. Wouldn't you know it; we hadn't gone fifty feet when the rod with his plug on it folded over! I wrestled it out of the holder and handed it to LeBow. At one point he thought the fish was stuck on a rock, but it turned out it had rolled over on the line and was sideways in the current. It managed to roll out of the line and we got it to the boat. It was a nice hatchery fish, too. He really wanted a fish to take home for dinner, and he got it. It was his first Columbia River steelhead and with that, we headed for the take out and headed for home. Steelhead fishing isn't hot on the upper Columbia, but if you are willing to put in the time it can pay off.

I have been invited up to take a tour of the new Colville Tribal Salmon Hatchery. I am really excited to get an update on the state of the art facility, and to meet with Fish and Wildlife Director Randal Friedlander, hatchery manage Patrick Phillips and others. I will let you know about their progress and what this means to the future of salmon fishing on the upper Columbia. I just may throw a rod in the truck and spend a little time fishing at Rufus Woods before I go home!

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