

## **Zane Grey's Fishing Hole**

In the summer of 2017 Jeannette, my wife of 52 years, and I set up our RV in Billie Moore's driveway near Darrington, Washington. Billie is a wonderful friend we came to know at the Mountain View Baptist Church where we worshipped for three years while living in the Cascades of northern Washington. We had a magnificent view of White Horse Mountain across the Stillaguamish Valley. The road in front of Billie's house is called "Swede Heaven" because it's a beautiful valley filled with the descendants of Swedish woodcutters who migrated from North Carolina to cut trees in the Cascades.

I've been a fisherman all my life catching catfish and bass in the Midwest, trout in Colorado, tuna in San Diego, and Salmon in Puget Sound and the Skagit River in the Northwest. I'd heard stories about the elusive steelhead in some of the streams and rivers of California, Oregon, and Washington. And, the more I heard about them, the more intrigued I became. Apparently, the best runs of steelhead occur in the fall associated with the rains at the beginning of winter. Even more intriguing is the fact that the legal fishing season occurs in the middle of winter when the mountains and rivers are shrouded in rain and snow. What kind of fisherman goes out to fish in the worst weather possible?

And, yet, I confirmed that fact on our Sunday trips to church for three years. Almost every Sunday as Jeannette and I drove from Rockport to Darrington along the Sauk River, one of the main steelhead fisheries in the central Cascades, we would see from one to a dozen steelhead fishermen standing in the icy river, whipping their flies into the rain and snow.

When friends who had fished for steelhead told me, that if the eyelets on your fishing rod don't ice over, you won't catch any fish. I considered these fish stories designed to intimidate novice steelhead fishermen and couldn't possibly be true. However, after seeing the fishermen in the Sauk River and pictures of three to five-pound steelhead displayed in the local tackle shops, I became a believer.

During the summer Jeannette and I lived in the Stillaguamish Valley, I discovered that it was an historic steelhead fishery and was much more accessible,

because it's only a few feet wide and inches deep in places. This was my type of creek! And, then I discovered there was a month-long fishing season in July on the Stillaguamish for steelhead!

Since I was rapidly becoming less stable on my feet because of diabetes and realized this may be my last chance to try catching trout, and possibly a steelhead, before I had to hang up my flyrod for good, I bought a license, a bunch of flies, and headed for the river about a mile upstream from Billie's house. This was too good to be true. I could legally fish for steelhead in the summer when it was warm, and not freeze my butt off in the rain and snow.

I parked the car at the edge of the road, crawled through the weeds to the river bank, and carefully snuck up to the edge of the water. If you're a trout fisherman, you know you're much less likely to catch fish if they see or hear you coming. It's a lot like hunting deer. I tiptoed carefully to the river and realized I was going to have to wade carefully through the water to a pool I could see about seventy feet away.

Unfortunately, I only had a pair of old tennis shoes with me that were about as slick as a greased pig. Walking on mossy rocks in slick shoes was really asking for it, but my pulse was racing as I approached the pool ahead. I knew it had to hold colorful trout and giant steelhead. As I neared the pool and was almost close enough to make my first cast, one foot went out from under me and then the other!

I landed fully on my rump, my legs in the air, and pole, net, and bag of flies scattered to the four winds. My pants and shirt were completely soaked, and I lay there exhausted for a good five minutes. I had used most of my reserve energy getting through the weeds and rocks to this point and still wasn't close enough to get a fly in the water.

I realized I may be in trouble. It could take my wife a long time to locate me and send a rescue party before it got dark. So, I decided I'd rest a little longer sitting in the water and attempt to make my way back to my car and try another day. After a few minutes, I tried to get up on my feet. But, I couldn't get a foothold on the slippery rocks. I'd get one foot on a rock and the other one would slide out from under me. I'd put a knee on a sandy spot and my hand would slip off another rock. I'd never seen such a slippery river.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity, I collected all my fishing gear, crawled about twenty feet to a spot in the river where the bottom was sandy, and slowly stood up and walked dejectedly back to my car. I didn't even get one fly in the water! This wasn't the way I wanted my fishing career to end.

When I returned to the RV, Jeannette asked, "How was the fishing? Did you see any steelhead?"

I said, "Well, I had a little difficulty with getting to a good fishing hole. I've decided to try a spot farther down river that looks like there might be bigger fish."

So, next day, I tried again. But, this time I selected a spot on the river where there appeared to be easier access to the water. In fact, I noticed a large wooden sign erected near what looked like a good spot. I walked over to the sign to see what it said.

On the front of the sign was a map of the Stillaguamish River all the way from its headwaters, not too far upstream from where I had fallen in, to five miles downstream where Elk Creek from the mountains above flowed in. On the back of the sign was a narrative about Zane Grey first fishing for steelhead at this location in the early 1900's!

I had no idea that Zane Grey was even a fisherman, let alone having fished the Northwest for steelhead near where I had lived for the past ten years. I was astounded. Zane Grey was one of my favorite authors who wrote exciting stories about the West, cowboys, and, adventures that seemed a little too extreme to be true. In fact, he wrote in such an emotional style, I often suggested to Jeannette that he may be a woman writing under an assumed name.

Also, posted on the back of the road sign were pictures of the types of fish found in the river, suggested flies, and titles of a few of Zane Grey's books on fishing. Later, I read two of his books and found that he not only fished the Stillaguamish for steelhead in Washington, but also the Rouge River in Oregon. His fishing stories were as exciting as his western stories. And, it turns out he was a world-class fisherman, fishing all over the world, including around the island of Catalina twenty miles off the coast of California. Jeannette and I had visited his

home in the hills above Avalon on Catalina without suspecting he was such a renowned fisherman.

I felt privileged to be walking in the footsteps of Zane Grey, as I tripped and stumbled my way down to the edge of the Stillaguamish. The bend in the river where he fished is one of the prettiest places I'd ever fished in the evening. The view upriver was crowned with bluish mountains nearby and snowcaps in the distance. As I crossed the gravel bar to reach the river, the main current hugged the bank on the far side. This is where the big lunkers obviously hid. Over the surface of the water mosquitoes and nats flew silhouetted by the sinking sun. Myriads of minnows and small trout rose to catch the insects in the air. Occasionally, a small trout would leap completely out of the water feeding on the flies.

I sat on a large, flat boulder near the edge of the water, just watching the scene. It was almost enough just to observe, and not participate. But, after a while, the attraction of what might lie in the deep, green water on the far side of the river, compelled me to attempt a few halting flings of my fly into the current. I was rusty. It had been years since fishing such a location where I had enough room to let the line out and get my rhythm back.

About the time I was beginning to succeed in placing my fly where I aimed, I noticed another fisherman downstream executing perfect casts with at least fifty feet of line in the air. It was like watching, "A River Runs Through It," only for real. He was to my west, between me and the sun, partially in sun and partially in shade. His line would unfurl in a beautiful curl across the sun, into the shade, and back into the sun again. He would whip the line six or eight times before settling his fly into the perfect spot.

I stopped fishing and watched this display of line dancing over the interface between air and water in the setting sun. I almost cried, it was so beautiful.

After another fifteen minutes, the fisherman disappeared around the bend in the river, never knowing I was there. I slowly wound in my line, removed my fly, and decided this was how I wanted to remember "fishing."