

# FISHING DEEP

with LANI WALLER

AN INTERVIEW  
& PHOTO ESSAY  
by JEFF BRIGHT

*Steelhead fly fishing is a fickle mistress. Clichéd, but true. Anyone assuming the mantle of expert does so at the risk of opening themselves to rigorous scrutiny. A theory that stands solid one day puddles to a shaky notion the next. It's a specialized practice more fit for philosophers and zen wanderers than absolutists. There's nothing neat or tidy about it — and, most likely, that's why some of us are so thoroughly under the spell. If you're looking for it, there can be plenty to think about in the seemingly simple pursuit of catching a fish with a fly, particularly when that fish happens to be a transient creature like a sea-run trout.*

*One person who has been saddled with the “expert” label is Lani Waller. For sure, in his long career, Lani has caught a lot of steelhead and has accrued a wealth of practical knowledge on how to catch them. But his greatest value may just now be emerging. With steelhead runs on the wane throughout the Northwest, his perspectives on how we relate to the natural world could be precisely what we need to hear at this critical juncture.*





This year, in early April, I had the good fortune to host a group of five avid fly anglers for a week's fishing in British Columbia's lower Skeena Valley. Good fortune because all were like-minded steelheaders and entertaining personalities, and one in the group happened to be Lani. Fresh from the completion and release of his new book, *A Steelheader's Way*, and away from his duties booking the prized slots at Silver Hilton Lodge on the Babine River, Lani joined the party to relax with friends, unwind, and hunt steelhead in the Skeena's often overlooked spring season.

For me, the trip presented itself as a perfect opportunity to profile an individual whose contributions to the sport have been, and still are, far-reaching and have had a unique and lasting effect on my own development as a steelhead fly fisher and conservationist. Prior to the week, in anticipation of our time together, I asked Lani if he would answer a series of open-ended questions formulated to serve as a springboard for examining the headier themes he touched on in *Steelheader's Way*. Lani graciously consented. His thought-provoking answers, along with these photos from our two days on the water, tell a story of an angler who has opened himself wide to the mysteries of steelhead and pursuing them with a fly rod — and, through his fishing, has opened himself even wider to the mysteries of life.

#### THE INTERVIEW: DREDGING FOR THE BIG ONES

**Bright:** Recently you've had a book published titled *A Steelheader's Way*. In it you dispense valuable advice to help fly fishers catch steelhead, but you also offer a broader perspective and intriguing insights. The "way" you describe is a path with practical checkpoints as well as philosophical and even spiritual markers. What is it you hope to commu-



nicate with *A Steelheader's Way*? What would you like readers to glean from reading it? What compelled or motivated you to write it?

**Waller:** *A Steelheader's Way* was designed to address many different levels or layers of issues — from the most obvious facts of equipment and tactics, to deeper philosophical issues, realities and concerns. I believe these levels are all intertwined in a matrix, and that the most complete description of this kind of fishing is one in which the matrix and its essential parts are defined and illuminated. In other words, a perspective which (1) identifies and recognizes the many elements (equipment, strategy, connection with the natural world, etc.); (2) illuminates the relationships they have with one another; and (3) illustrates their importance for the best and most complete kind of success.

So I wanted to at least mention the existence of these levels and in the process move the reader from a one dimensional definition of success (how many steelhead must I catch, how big must they be in order for me to be good angler?) to a level which includes an appreciation for their beauty, and that of the world in which they live, to appreciate their right to survive in an unspoiled, natural condition and for the reader to see the possibilities of using fishing for them as a way to remind ourselves that their world and ours, are exactly the same... that we too belong to this

natural world and that we need it as much as they do.

So this was a central theme: I believe there is a great strength and wisdom in the natural world, one which has taken millions of years to develop. Problems have been solved, options and solutions to risk have been created, ones which gave us a great advantage over other species. And over time, mistakes have been simply eliminated. We came from this wisdom, this place, this same process — the same water, the same mud, atmosphere and ooze of life; and that we are dependent upon the health and vitality of this world in order to survive. To ignore this, or to withdraw from it, or to synthesize it, flies in the face of the wisdom of our evolution and in the end only weakens us. How can we survive in an unhealthy world, one in which we now create by our civilized, artificial remedies and substitutions — ones which we now know are destructive and toxic?

I also wanted to tell readers that I believe much of life will always be a wonderful and an un-solvable mystery...and that any pain, or discomfort found in such a mystery may be at least temporarily alleviated by simply being there in the middle of a river, and all its mystery and embracing its expression and process...even if we cannot completely define it or them. So, when you hook a wild steelhead, I believe you have connected with that mystery and that this connection makes you stronger because you have, for the moment at least, returned to that from which you were created and first emerged, ten million years ago. This theme surfaced most directly in Chapter 11, “Of Trophies and Heads.” A few readers have taken exception to this chapter, believing it to be “anti-religious” or inappropriately “evolutionist only.”

I disagree. And in my opinion, this chapter and other material in the book includes the fact that our world and fishing environment really are supernatural, and that this understanding should be a part of our angling for steelhead. This includes a universal God — however he, she, or it, may be defined. As Norman McLean said at the end of his novella *A River Runs Through It*, “In the end all things are one and a river runs through it.” I agree, and see this as one essential, quite spiritual part of the matrix I mentioned above...perhaps the most important one of all.

And of course, I couldn't resist, I wanted to tell the whole world about all the other good and decent stuff — the rods I love the most, the line, the flies, the leaders and waders, the people I've met along the way, and how I like to heave it all out there, all of it...and now and then wind one of them all the way in until I have them at my feet. Makes you feel good.

In the end, I was compelled to write titled *A Steelheader's Way* to tell at least some of the entire story — something I had not seen enough of in any previous works.

**Bright:** You've devoted a lifetime — nearly losing your life — to steelhead fly fishing. This kind of commitment would seem to go far beyond recreational pursuit. What is it you're looking for? What's driving you? Have you found it? If, not do you think you can?

**Waller:** My commitment does go beyond recreational pursuit, although “just having fun” has always been a fundamental and necessary part of my fishing. It is more than that however, and even as a boy I was looking for several things. Most of these revolved around finding my place in the world...a place where I felt at home, where I felt connected and strengthened, a place where I could embrace the world, a place where I could make a difference and stand up for the things I believed in. I tried all kinds of things, in all kinds of locations and environments.

For a long time I never thought of fishing as the answer to these questions, or as a “real” solution for the existential problems we all face — ones I believe to be a universal human circumstance — but as I learned more about who I was, and what the world was, I found a lot of myself in a river, and in fishing. To my amazement, the personal places I uncovered could not be



satisfied in any other way. Once I realized that, the mold was set and fishing moved toward the center of my life and my processes.

As the years passed my drive to connect, to strengthen myself as a man and angler came to embrace other, and sometimes less noble inspirations. To be truthful, my ambitions came to include the fact that I wanted to become a famous angler, that I desired this kind of recognition. I became driven, competitive and I worked hard to obtain a public image which included the description of “expert.” This was not always easy to accept, for I realized such things can ruin a man — or woman — and I’ve seen that in others’ attempts to become “heroic,” or “famous,” “rich” or “powerful.” (You name it.)

I soon came to learn, from observing the failures of others who sought these kinds of things, that there was a real and significant difference between knowledge and wisdom. Labels and titles including that of “expert” all have their dangers. I dealt with this by refusing to go too far with that kind of thing, and by embracing the best values of fishing — the compassion there, the tolerance, the appreciation for the natural world, the fact that all of us are indeed in the same boat, or standing in the same river, on the same journey, whether we know it or not...and that the journey is a very short one indeed.

When I added this to my process and private ambitions as an angler, I found the best possible antidote for the human ego, and my drive to succeed became tempered with a quiet understanding of what really matters. The plane crash in 1992, in which I narrowly escaped death, was instrumental in this epiphany.

So I have found most of what I have always been looking for. Whatever else remains unanswered, has been accepted as the unavoidable limitations of just another guy out there trying to do his best, and trying to understand what all of this means. In a way, we are all fishing, aren’t we?

**Bright:** This past year has been a turbulent one in the world of steelhead angling. First, British Columbia began a process to regulate angling use on the Skeena, citing claims that several marquee rivers are too crowded during peak season. The process has generated a firestorm of protest, particularly from non-resident, non-guided anglers. Second, two very large, record-class wild steelhead were caught by fly anglers, one on the Skeena system and one on Washington’s Olympic Peninsula. Both catches were documented with numerous photos on the internet and in both cases controversy followed. One fish was harvested and the other released after more than thirty photos were taken of the angler and fish, most with the fish out of the water, prompting speculation that that fish may have eventually perished. Without a doubt, steelhead anglers are passionate about their fish and their fishing. Can the sport of steelhead fishing, even with catch-and-release regulations, exist with the preservation or conservation of steelhead? Are we guilty of loving steelhead to death?

**Waller:** I believe that sport fishing for wild steelhead can be compatible with the conservation and preservation of our runs — if properly managed by seasonal and geographical restrictions, distribution of angling pressure, and in some cases reduction in fishing pressure, no-kill regulations, no fishing on spawning tributaries, and certain gear restrictions (no bait fishing), habitat rescue and re-habilitation, etc.

Most of my arguments are based on the fact that it is the loss of spawning habitat on their rivers due to dams, and hydroelectric projects, and certain commercial fishing practices that are doing the most damage. Watershed pollution is also a major part of the problem, and we may yet find out that our oceans are also in trouble.

California, Oregon and Washington watersheds are all in serious trouble. Today, these vast river systems only have 25% of the spawning populations they had only a few decades ago. That means obviously, that we have lost 75% of our wild stocks. In less than eighty years.

The problems are obvious, but solutions are politically and economically complicated, and emotionally charged because our individual value systems, sentiments and vested interests are often in conflict with one another. As you have noted, British Columbia is in a serious dialogue and analysis at this time, and the





province is a good example of what happens when you try to resolve the conflicting view points and priorities, and at times, it seems almost universal: our best definitions of effective resource planning and environmental remedies are usually those which favor our position as they simultaneously require that all others be somehow compromised and diminished. So we all have to help and we will all have to give something up — unless populations and demand for products and services begin to seriously decrease.

And that brings me to what I consider the heart of the matter: we now find ourselves in circumstances which demand change and a re-structuring of our past priorities, vested interests and values; by that I mean the kind of industrial capitalism which has evolved in today's world, is not sustainable environmentally, (as well as politically and financially), and that some viewpoints, policies, vested interests and practices must be changed if we and our wild runs of steelhead and all the rest of our natural inheritance are to survive in any meaningful sense of the word. And this is the key to the future. We must place the health of our environment at the top of the list; if we fail to do this, not only will we lose our wild steelhead — and all that is wild and unspoiled — we will lose that which is truly civilized, and which represents the best accomplishments of our intellects and our long journey toward wisdom and understanding.

And the two photos you mentioned? I have more forgiveness for the young angler who took too many photos of his fish and held it out of the water for too long, showing off his first steelhead, than I do for the “old timer” who had been fishing for most of his adult life. That's because I remember my first one and if it was that large and I was that young again, I very well have done the same thing. Or worse, because when I was that young I sometimes did kill them. On the other hand, it seems to me that growing old should teach us a thing or two. In this case it should have resonated in the veteran's mind, as he struck the fish its death blow, that his path, and that of the fish came together in a single moment, in a flash of time and light...and the recognition that killing something like that kills more than a single fish. It kills something that desperately needs to be alive if the world is to remain what it should always be.

**Bright:** You and I have talked about this, and I think we both agree, it will take a conscious decision and effort on a cultural level — call it political will — to keep wild steelhead and salmon around. Why should we keep them around? What value do they possess for the greater good — why are we poorer without them? What can we possibly do to convince those who don't fish that wild fish and wild rivers are worth their sacrifice of convenience, if indeed that's what may be required to sustain wild fish populations?

**Waller:** To begin, it may be argued that we really don't need wild steelhead and that we can survive without them, that in fact we could survive for a very long time without a lot of the wild animals and plants which inhabit the earth

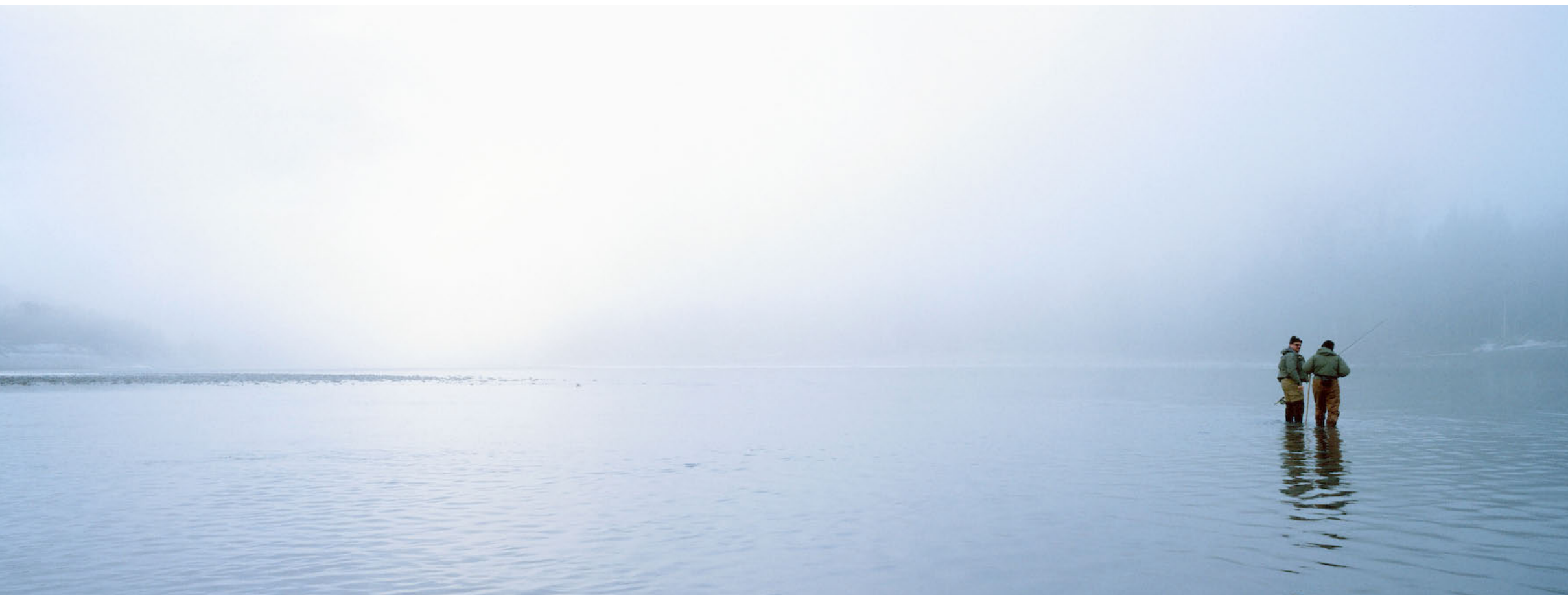
— if the landscapes and environmental niches they once occupied remained healthy.

As part of this argument, some also say that we can simply save what I call “symbolical populations” of wild steelhead (or any wild animal) and still get on with the business at hand. In other words we can set aside a few rivers, or wilderness landscapes as “sanctuaries” which still hold some steelhead, or grizzly bears, lions, etc, and that's good enough, and all we can hope for. We've done our part and the rest of the watersheds, forests etc can then be logged, dammed, polluted, drained, etc.



On the surface these may arguments may appear to have some merit, as in the case of the passenger pigeon and others species which we have eliminated, or which are now at the brink of extinction, but this argument and perspective has its limits due to one unassailable fact: the reason for the disappearance of these animals is not only because we have “over harvested” them for economic gain, or for food, but because their disappearance is inextricably intertwined with our destruction, and dysfunctional modification of the natural world. It is man’s unsustainable manipulation of the natural world itself that is at the heart of these losses.

So, I think we should keep wild steelhead around because when they are there, so is the vitality, strength, and health of the rivers and the landscapes through which they flow. We need a healthy world in which to live, and this includes our wilderness areas and our natural environments of all kinds. I think the existence of such things adds to our own sense of wellbeing, of belonging to the world and being a part of it. In this sense the return of wild steelhead each season is a reminder of the original beauty, power, and strength of the world — one which will also strengthen us, and sustain us, if we only know how to see it for what it is, and we can learn to live with it.



The only way we can convince people of the value of our rivers and wilderness landscapes is to show them examples of what happens when these kinds of resources are damaged. What are the decidedly human costs of such losses? These losses are real but sometimes the obvious needs to be illuminated. I think it is also helpful to ally our cause with other causes. In other words put steelhead conservation into a larger context. We must build alliances with other environmentalists working to conserve and protect forested watersheds and the rivers flowing through them.

We have an opportunity here in the west to use the efforts at wild salmon conservation to help our cause. As I wrote in Chapter 14, titled “On Conservation”:

“Not many people may know of steelhead, but almost all people, regardless of their circumstances and location, have heard the story of salmon and their importance to the Northwest cultures and societies that have been using salmon for thousands of years. If nothing else, they have seen salmon on the menu and table, and the salmon’s value and reputation as a food source is common knowledge.”

More than anything else, we need to get wise about this; we need to see our connection with the natural world for what it is: the necessary background and life support system for all life, including human enterprise and wellbeing. I would argue that when a wild steelhead returns to the river, they are bringing this wisdom with them. What we do with it is up to us.

**Bright:** Certainly, I’m not saying you’re done — in fact, seems to me you’re hitting your stride! But after decades of ambassadorship for steelhead and steelhead fly fishing, the popular video/dvd series and now two fine books, what do you hope your legacy will be?

**Waller:** Thanks, Jeff. I would hope that my legacy would include the fact that I worked hard to truly explain our endeavor — to illuminate all the effort, faith and appreciation which is a part of this kind of fishing, and that the idea that our angling does not exist as a solitary perspective. In other words what we do as anglers is connected to the rest of the world and to the rest of our lives.

Secondly, I’m not perfect, and have made more than a few mistakes along the way, but I would hope to be pardoned for them, and that people would see that I tried to give as much, or more back to life and fishing than I took from them.

**Bright:** OK, one last question — practical advice for steelhead mastery class: You’re fishing cold water, say 36 degrees, the soft edge of the main current. Your fly completes its deep swing and is “on the hang down” directly below you. You feel a subtle weight on the line; you know it’s a fish. It has your fly in its mouth. But it doesn’t turn. You’ve fished for five days without a grab and you know this may be your only chance on the trip. What do you do? Do you drop line? Do you strike? If so, what angle? Straight up? To the side? Help!

**Waller:** I usually strike that fish with a hard and vertical lift. A sideways lift or sweep with the rod is also good if the cast is fairly short — say fifteen to twenty five feet because at shorter distances you can often move the fly to the side of a steelhead’s mouth, especially with a longer two-handed rod — but I oftentimes don’t do that and simply react vertically with the rod.

Both a vertical strike, or a sideways one, however, would have been preceded by a slow and steady retrieve during the very end of the swing and into the “hang down,” because I know that a cold water fish often times will not hold the fly for long and that a soft take by this kind of fish does not usually drive the hook home by itself. So I believe that the sooner I know a “cold” fish is there, the better my chances are for hooking it.

You can also help yourself by mending toward the shore as the fly ends its swing, as long as the fly does not speed up too much. This seems to help “sweep” the fly in a sideways motion...something I always prefer, no matter what the water temps are, because it seems to hook better than a straight upstream pull on the fly.

The wild card in all of this is your statement that I’ve gone five days without a strike. That can take the edge off your game, and if you’re not careful that one take comes and goes so quickly that all you have is the memory.

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## REELING UP THE SLACK

As the week wore on, it became apparent the fishing was going to be a challenge of high order. The region was clearly over a month behind in the cycling of seasons: brisk air temperatures, static river flows and several feet of snow obscuring the gravel bars were more representative of February's grip than the beginning to spring we were hoping to find. What steelhead that had come in were congregating in a few deep, nearly currentless pools, their location betrayed only when a restless fish would break the flat surface.

Still, from my perspective, the stark, chilled landscape set a compelling backdrop for contemplating Lani's expansive replies, and for seeking a fitting tone in pictures.

As always happens on a fishing trip, the final day came too soon. All in the group had hooked at least one steelhead and had brought at least one to hand. All save Lani. The irony of which was not lost on him, nor anyone else. We all had a good laugh about it.

But, as trip host, the situation weighed on my mind. It shouldn't have, I know. I've played this gig enough to realize fairness is not in it. There is more than a little luck involved in putting your fly in the right place at the right time and, accordingly, the rewards are where you find them. They don't necessarily have to come in the shape of a large trout. So, why should it matter? As mentioned, the man has caught A LOT of steelhead, many bigger than most of us will ever see, and, by all appearances and words, he'd feel complete even if he never caught another.

But it was there, nagging at me, a light but persistent burden. I'm not sure why, but somehow, on a primary level, it did seem important that all of us should make the connection at least once before stepping back into the airplane and heading off to places much less wild. We're on a journey. The fish are on a journey. It's the meeting we crave. The tug. The pull. The acknowledgement that we're somehow involved, no matter how insignificantly, in the infinite, unending story. I wanted to take the high road and be fine with idea of Lani going fishless, but I couldn't get there.

Then, as if scripted, mid-morning in the glass-flat tail of an extraordinarily long, deep pool, Lani hooked a good fish. His rod bucked sharply with the fish's shaking head and the water boiled with life. From my position upstream, I scrambled for my cameras. The entire week had collected on this point, poured into a funnel and concentrated on this moment. My pulse quickened. Adrenaline and joy...yes!

Then it was gone, as quickly as it began, the pool silent, again hiding its secrets. Lani let out a groan of disappointment, but quickly settled back into the beatific smile he had been wearing all week. It was plainly evident — here was a man doing what he loves and doing it with a level of appreciation for each moment spent doing it. He faced the situation honestly and reeled up the slack line with grace.

Later in the day, it became apparent there would be no additional chances. From the previous days we knew which pools were holding fish and which weren't. We drew a blank in the water that offered the last hope. Nearing the take-out, as our guide Greg negotiated a set of boulders and whitewater in the raft, I overheard Lani singing under his breath. It took me a moment to ID the song. Then I got it...a tune from an old Hollywood film...Bogart and Bergman, Nazis, good and evil clearly marked...“It's still the same old story, a fight for love and glory, a case of do or die...”

*Thanks to the guides and staff at Nicholas Dean Lodge for exemplary hospitality and camaraderie during the week. They were more than willing to put in the extra effort to give us a reasonable chance at finding fish in what were very tough conditions. All counted, several steelhead included, it will be a trip long remembered.*

