

Risk And Reward

More steelhead than you think return to the Olympic Peninsula's boat-biting Sol Duc River.

A tethered Sol Duc steelhead
(MIKE Z'S GUIDE SERVICE)

BEAVER, Wash.—Deep in the heart of the steelhead capital of the world, Forks, Wash., the Sol Duc flows almost untouched in almost all of its 78 miles, a true gem of a river that's also a tad rough and tumble.

Its given Indian name means "sparkling waters." It can be sparkling with fish, but it is always bubbling with whitewater.

Indeed, there are two main reasons why most of us have heard of the Sol Duc, but few have actually fished it. The first is that it's pretty much a drift boat-only river. The second, its waters are treacherous.

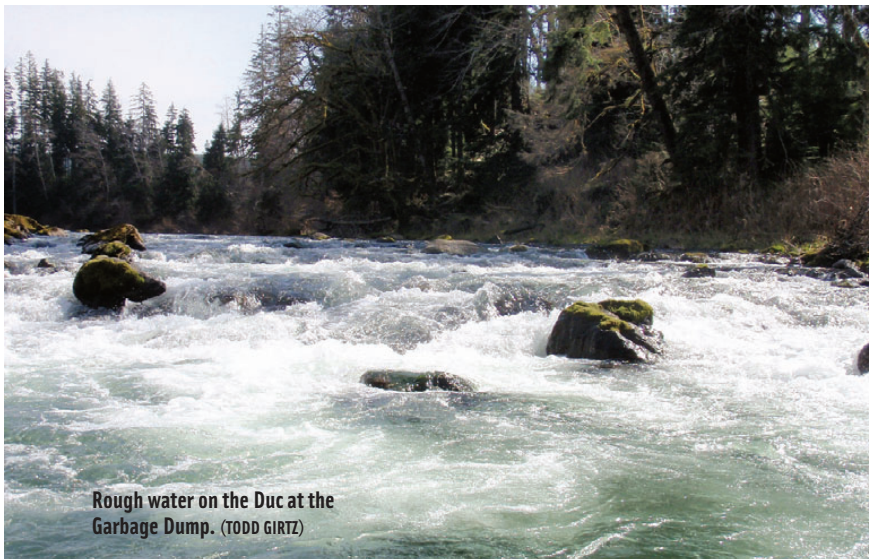
Some of the absolute nastiest water, with boulders the size of Mack trucks that can flip a boat in a second, may lie just around the next bend. Or there may be a series of rapids that's almost impossible to read until you're in their midst.

So why take the risk? It's simple Economics 101: risk and reward. The Sol Duc *has* steelhead! And here's a little secret: It has *more* than you think!

ONLY THOSE WHO ARE PRIVY to the Snider Creek Steelhead Enhancement Program actually know about this little gem that I'll spill later in the article. But first, let me tell you about his fantastic program that I believe we should get going on other rivers in our state.

The Snider Creek program is an effort by the Olympic Peninsula Guides' Association to put more steelhead in the rivers, specifically to enhance the early runs of fish and provide more opportunity for anglers. However, the OPGA's contract with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife only has a couple years remaining. After reading this, or better yet, after fishing the Sol Duc and experiencing success, please let WDFW know you support this program.

I spoke with two of my guide buddies who are very much involved with this program for more on it. They are Bob Kratzer (Angler's Guide Service; 360-374-3148) and Mike Zavadlov (Mike Z's



Rough water on the Duc at the Garbage Dump. (TODD GIRTZ)



Steelheaders chase three runs of winter fish: hatchery, broodstock and wild. (ANGLER'S GUIDE SERVICE)

Guide Service; 360-640-8109).

First of all, it's a broodstock program which takes eggs from wild, native fish in hopes that more and better stocks will return.

"The whole idea behind this effort is to increase the runs of early steelhead on the Sol Duc with more and healthier fish," says Kratzer. "By only collecting healthy wild fish, and taking care of the fish and the eggs during the whole process, we've seen greater runs in both numbers and size come back starting in January and going through March."

Getting the fish for the program is the fun part – we catch them! That's right, as long as you're part of this program, you can catch these native fish and "donate" them.

In January, wild fish are collected, then held and spawned in spring.

Here's what happens.

- First, you simply fish! Nothing wrong with that. If you hook a wild fish, do everything you can to bring the fish to the boat in the least stressful manner.

- Once subdued, the fish is tethered to the boat with 7 to 8 feet of cord (preferably parachute cord) via a slit through underside of jaw. The fish is handled as little as possible, and the boat drifts slowly until the takeout or a pickup spot. If the fish looks stressed, anchor up for a few

minutes until it calms down and regains its strength.

"If a fish looks really stressed and I still have a ways to go, I'll let the fish go," says Kratzer. "It's better to let it go than to have it die on the tether."

Amazingly, almost all tethered fish make it alive to the truck waiting to pick them up.

- The fish are then transported to the hatchery and split between males and females until ripe enough to spawn.

- Eggs are taken from the females and then fertilized by the hand-stripped males.

- The eggs are incubated at the state's Sol Duc Salmon Hatchery until they hatch.

- Steelhead parr are transported back to the Snider Creek facility where they are reared until ready to release

- Smolt are released into the Duc.

From there it's business as usual for the smolt. They go to sea, feed, get fat, and come back in a few years.

SO WHAT ABOUT THAT "SECRET"

I mentioned earlier?

Get this: The 100,000 smolts released into the Sol Duc from this program *are not* included in WDFW's official smolt release numbers.

Are you kidding me?

That's double what the state re-

leased in 2008 for this winter's fishery. Does it work? Hell yes, it works!

"My clients hooked over 60 program fish this last year," says Kratzer.

Adds Zavadlov, "We had over 45 Snider Creek. We usually average 35 to 40 program fish each year."

So if you say an "average" program fish catch per guide is conservatively 30 per year, and there are 15 to 25 guides working the Duc each season, that's 450 to 750 hooked fish a season that normally would not be available.

And that's just from the guides, *and* that's only bonked fish!

Many more are left to spawn naturally, and thus their smolt come back as *wild* fish in two years. Doesn't this program make sense?

And how do we know they're fish from this program that's causing an increase in the numbers? That's simple.

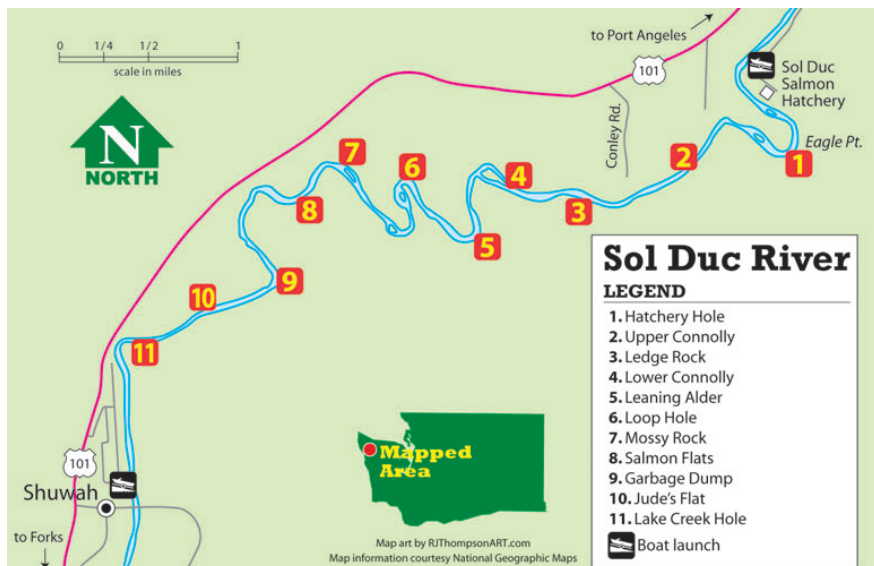
"We clip the left (ventral) fin on these fish" says Kratzer. "Many people mistake them for wild fish because of the adipose fin, but the vent fin will be missing or deformed."

"We need 45 fish for the program to achieve the maximum benefit" says Z, "30 hens and 15 bucks. We only collect wild fish so the program fish coming back are technically hatchery fish, but are actually wild only one year out. If they get a chance to spawn, then what they produce is considered wild again."

OPGA will dedicate all day Jan. 18 to retaining the remaining fish for this program. If you would like to participate, whether it be fishing, picking up fish or volunteering in any of the many aspects of this program, call OPGA president Bob Ball (360-374-2091) or Sam Windel (360-374-5439).

Who can participate? You! As long as you get signed up prior to fishing and have an official Steelhead Enhancement Program placard displayed on your boat while fishing, you can participate.

As this is the last year of OPGA's contract with WDFW, I strongly encourage everyone who wants to see this program to continue to email the WDFW Region 6 office at teammontesano@dfw.wa.gov and agency director Phil Anderson



1. Hatchery Hole: “This is a killer hole for both salmon and steelhead,” says guide Mike Zavadlov. “At 10 boards you can’t beat side-drifting here.”

Go all the way through the tailout, then slide up river and re-row.

If the water is lower, seven boards and down, this makes a good “bobber” hole. Jigs are the key here especially when it’s low and clear.

Boards refers to how many planks are below water at the Maxfield launch.

2. Upper Connolly Hole: A deep trench just begging for a plug.

“In general, green plugs will outfish any other color on the Duc, including Dr. Death,” says Z. “Put a green hornet X4 Worden’s Flat-Fish on and you’re in business.”

In lower water, you can also side-drift.

3. Ledge Rock Hole: A very deep hole. Side-drift from midhole to tailout.

4. Lower Connolly Hole: From top to bottom, side-drifting or plugging this hole hard can be very productive.

5. Leaning Alder Hole: A deep sweeping corner well-suited for plugs in deeper water. High or low you can side-drift it.

Where this hole really comes to play is in low water, really low one- to two-board water. The fish will stack in there and annihilate a well-presented bobber and jig.

6. Loop Hole: Boulders at the top make this a great bobber hole, but higher water calls for a plug.

7. Mossy Rock Hole: Finally, a bobber fishing hole!

A true boulder garden, it provides some great habitat for steelhead to hide. Too snaggy for side-drifting, it’s a true bobber fishing hole. (Can’t tell I like “bobber” fishing, can you? Also, I normally would say “float” instead of “bobber,” but as Mike Z is the expert on this river, I’ll go with his terminology.)

This hole drops down fast. Fish the right side.

8. Salmon Flats: About ¼ mile down from Mossy Rock, it’s loaded with boulders but has boat-crushing rocks in the middle. Beware and stay *right*!

Again, because of the boulders this makes a great bobber fishing hole, but also it’s good for pulling those green FlatFish!

9. Jude’s Flats: Named after one of guide Bob Kratzer’s clients who landed a high-20-plus-pound fish, this can be very productive as well. It features boulders at the head then gravels out. Side-drift the right side at first, then bobber and jig from side to side and include the middle (in the flats).

10. Garbage Dump Hole: Nice deep hole to try side-drifting through. Not a great hole but does have a tendency to hold fish.

11. Lake Creek Hole: When the water is low, one to two boards, the fish will absolutely stack up in this hole. Bobber and jigs will knock ‘em dead. Pink, pink and white, peach and also a jig pattern co-developed by Mike Z and Kratzer, black head, pink and charreuse rabbit’s fur with a crystal flash tail! Try that bad boy and see what happens. **-T.W.**

(director@dfw.wa.gov). Let them know this is a great program and we need to get it going on other rivers as well.

SO HOW DO WE FISH the Duc?

“The Sol Duc has six runs which will all have fish from January through March” says Z. “From the top down is Riverside, Bear Creek, Hatchery, Maxfield, Middle Run and Lower End.”

Which run to fish is personal preference, but the guide issues a stern warning: “This is some of the most technical water in the state. Make sure if you run it, you know what you’re doing on the sticks.”

Riverside and Bear Creek are probably the two most difficult runs and it’s highly suggested you book a trip with a qualified guide who has made these runs numerous times. And I stress the last point: Make sure they are experienced on *that* run if you book it. The Sol Duc eats boats each year. Don’t be another one added to this list.

Snider Creek is actually above the Riverside run in closed waters.

“It’s great. All the fish come up to the hatchery but are not allowed access, so they go up just above Snider Creek into some beautiful flats which are closed to fishing to spawn naturally,” says Kratzer.

When we talk about the Hatchery Run (mapped at left), it’s actually the Sol Duc Salmon Hatchery where we start. It is 7 miles of gorgeous boulder runs that look steelhead perfect almost the whole way. But don’t let the picture-perfect scenery fool you – again, it’s also got some nasty water.

Now when you hook all those fish and you happen to notice on some of them the left ventral fin is missing, think of the program that made this happen, the Snider Creek Steelhead Enhancement Program.

On all fish just be thankful for the beauty in each of them and protect our resources. **-Terry Wiest**

Editor’s note: The author operates Steelheaduniversity.com and speaks at fishing seminars around the region.