

Happy 'Nooch Year!

The south OlyPen winter steelhead fave might be a bit busier this season.

By Terry Wiest, Steelhead University

MONTESANO, Wash.—For those wanting to start 2012 off with some fresh steelhead, you better get to the Wynoochee because it should be on in January. The indications are a strong run is expected back, and the river will be a bright spot for Western Washington steelheaders.

The 'Nooch, as it's known, originates in Olympic National Park. Unlike most Oly Pen rivers, it flows south until it ends up in the Chehalis River, but like its cousins, it produces good numbers of winter steelhead.

I spoke with Keith Burns, foreman of the state hatchery which produces steelhead smolts for the Wynoochee, and he confirmed that 175,000 were released to return this season, a jump from recent years.

"It was a great wet, warm spring, which usually yields higher returns from our smolts," says Burns.

Among other indicators which are positive was the fact there was no flooding during or soon after the smolt release, ocean conditions were positive, there was a very low mortality rate in the smolt holding pens and there were no diseases detected which would impact these fish. On the flip side, coho and steelhead returns tend to echo, and the former were off somewhat in the region.

NOW, THE WYNOOCHEE is no stranger to most steelheaders as it's typically among the higher producing rivers as it is. But because of the lower anticipated catch rates around the state this year, expect



Side-d drifting cured prawns, Dennis Dodson scored his second and third steelhead ever last January on the Wynoochee. "I might as well quit now because in all likelihood I'll never have a day like that one again," the Edmonds, Wash., anglers said. (WRIGHT & MCGILL/EAGLE CLAW PHOTO CONTEST)

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the 'Nooch to even stand out more. It's been really consistent at producing good numbers of hatchery fish, but with consistency comes the crowds. Still, you can usually count on hooking up as long as conditions are fishable and you're drifting a worthy presentation.

The river's production of an estimated 1,146 hatchery winter runs last year puts it right up there with the Sol Duc, but distanced by the 2,920 of the Bogachiel which is the perennial peninsula leader. Don't expect it to pass the Bogy, a hatchery-producing behemoth, but don't be surprised if it out-produces the Duc.

Bankies, drift boats and sleds all have room to play on this steelhead haven – there's even room for plunkers.

But no matter which method you choose, make sure and bring some bait! Eggs, shrimp or prawns, they're all fantastic on this river.

Oh, don't forget the pink worms. And remember to pack the jigs and floats too.

Heck, just make sure you have good quality bait or lures and know how to present them. Method will be determined on how each stretch of river looks. In flats and deeper holes, use bait; for boulder-ridden areas and near brush, use jigs; around undercut and slots near the bank, use pink worms. But these are just suggestions. A good presentation is key and all of the above will produce fish.

FOR THE BANKIES, there are plenty of



duce fish and safe access is available next to them.

Some of the best bank spots are up high, near spur road 7400. Get a GPS as this access can be a bugger to find – and to get out from in the dark. The skinny water up high has always been a favorite of mine for jigs. As the river widens a little there is some prime pink worm area, both drifting and under a float.

Plunkers, near the mouth closer to the town of Montesano there is some slow water in tide-water. As fresh fish move through a Spin-N-Glo with eggs or a nice sand shrimp will be awfully tempting to them. This is also a method for those who normally don't plunk to give a shot during high water conditions. As long as there's some clarity to the water – 1 to 2 feet is plenty – then there's good probability that the plunkers will be on.

HAVE A JET SLED? The lower end is a good area, but with a ton of debris down here, caution is advised when moving up from the Chehalis. You'll want to get up above the tidewater on an incoming tide. Outgoing you can fish lower as long as the flow

is moving downstream, but it's still best to get higher up to benefit from the natural flow of the river without having to work the boat to maintain speed. As long as your plugs are properly working and tuned, they're quite effective down low.

A good stretch is from Black Creek back down to the Chehalis. Now if you're in a sled and want to get first

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The author prepares to release a wild Wynoochee winter-run. (TERRY WIEST, STEELHEADUNIVERSITY.COM)

water, only go up half to three quarters of the way as the drift boats will be launching at Black Creek and working their way down. This is also good practice so it doesn't appear that sleds are invading drift boater territory.

Free drifting is the key: The standard is two No. 4 hooks with a Corky in between. Did I mention bait? Don't forget it! Make sure your bait is fresh before each run. This can be crucial as a steelhead is more apt to hit fresh bait that is producing a nice scent trail than bait that has been run through the water several times and has lost its appeal.

FOR DRIFTERS, the 'Nooch is a very good river. From 7400 to White Bridge is a very popular but long drift – about 14 miles. The tendency here is to fish up high because the holes look so damn good.

If you're looking for more first water or less fished water, skip the top and

start out in the middle of the drift. What usually happens to me, and a lot of others, is we fish the top and then row like hell to get to White Bridge before it gets too dark. Usually we don't make it and the last mile or so is in the dark, so make sure you have a spotlight or at least flashlights with you. Remember, 14 miles is a long ways when you're spending time up high hooking fish!

This top drift is also excellent for those in a pontoon. Only one section is a little tricky and that isn't even that bad. The Sol Duc? Now that's a different story and the two don't compare.

Again, up high there is some nice skinny water that's very productive for jigs and pink worms. As you move down through the drift there are some very long flats where the bank is undercut, perfect for side-drifting. There is also some good plug fishing water up high, but I'd save that for the lower drifts – just my opinion as this upper drift you want to cover water.

The next drift down – White Bridge to Black Creek – is also excellent, side-drift heaven. This has some drifts that have produced just incredible numbers year after year and the majority are taken by drift boats side-drifting along this stretch. Of course, there's also some good float and jig water, so always make sure you have a float rod handy.

Black Creek to the Chehalis is an option, but not for me. Once you get to the Chehalis you'll have to row *upriver* a third of a mile or so to the South Montensano boat launch on the Chehalis. Not worth the effort after a day on the river. But if you do fish it, there are some prime spots for pulling plugs in this stretch.

January through March should be productive with mostly hatchery fish into early February.

Need a shuttle? Call my friend Mick: (360) 249-3127. He also does the Chehalis, Satsop and Hump. **MS**