

OlyPen, Cowlitz The Bright Spots For Westside Winters

Puget Sound fisheries see further reductions.

by Terry Wiest, Steelhead University

SEATTLE—By now most of us have gotten our salmon fix for the year and it's time to look forward to the moment that defines the diehard fisherman — winter steelhead season.

Rain? Don't care.

Snow? Don't care.

Subfreezing temperatures? Don't care don't care don't care — let's go steelheading!

But there is something we should care about, the fish themselves. What the heck is happening to our beloved steelhead in Western Washington, especially Puget Sound?

Ocean conditions have not been kind for years — more than a decade, really — but for the 2011-12 winter season, smolt releases in Puget Sound are down by one third from last winter, and over the past five years, have been reduced in half. As if the runs don't have problems as it is, you reduce the production of smolts?

Heck, if the state needs help at the hatcheries, I'm all in.

There are other factors at work. Do the tribes in Western Washington deserve some of the blame? Not totally, but they're not necessarily helping. They, of course, have treaty fishing rights, but gillnets don't differentiate between hatchery and native fish. Now, to be fair to the tribes, many are also being proactive with



Before she was the Pautzke's blogger on SteelieU, Bryanna Zimmerman was knocking 'em dead on the Kalama.
(BRYANNA ZIMMERMAN)

FISHING

WINTER STEELHEAD • TROUT • BURBOT • COHO • CHINOOK



Among the Westside's sure-fire bets for at least a decent season – which translates to a superb season on every other state-run river – the Cowlitz, where Corby Berentsen of Silverdale landed this 18-pounder last December drifting a prawn baited leader through the Blue Creek area. (WRIGHT & MCGILL/EAGLE CLAW PHOTO CONTEST)

hatcheries and smolt production, and you'll find there are better returns on rivers that have a tribal hatchery than those that don't.

Then there's us. Can you believe some people still bonk *native* steelhead? Come on people, we have to start doing something to help our fish – not continue to kill them off.

Do you think the state is going to help us on all this? With their budget problems, think again.

It's no wonder I'm looking forward to joining my Canadian brothers this coming year on the Skeena River where they expect nearly 50,000 steelhead to return to the region.

That's 50K, eh.

All right, enough with my rant, let's move on to what we can expect this winter on Westside rivers.

FIRST OF ALL, the Cowlitz will once again be the top winter-run producer in the state, yielding many limits and lots of action for those fishing from boats or the bank.

Side-drifting from the Blue Creek Hatchery down should be good from December through March for quality fish. From just below the hatchery to the clay banks provides plenty of bank access, but also attracts plenty of fisherman – and for good reason: The bankies do very well here, primarily fishing a double Corky setup (hint: for a color, go with peach) and sand shrimp. Eggs are good too, but they don't stay on as well in faster flows.

The hatchery has disabled access and for those who have a state handicap fishing license, can be phenomenal with a jig under a float.

Outside of the Cowlitz, if you want big numbers of steelhead – close your eyes, you may not want to read this – you may have to consider fishing on tribal rivers. Sorry, folks, but this is reality in this day and age.

The Quinault and Salmon Rivers on the southwest side of the Olympic Peninsula will both provide plenty of action. And while hiring a tribal guide does not necessarily mean he/she will be "guiding" you – pretty much anymore they just accompany you to the river and let you fish on their land – fishing can be absolutely fantastic on both. But there's also a sliver of the Salmon where tribal guides aren't required, and it's downstream of the hatchery. It's best fished after a rain when new fish move through. Just under 138,000 smolts were planted

FISHING

WINTER STEELHEAD • TROUT • BURBOT • COHO • CHINOOK

for this season; last year produced 410 in the nontribal fishery. Late November and January are prime; jigs are most productive.

Unfortunately, until the state figures out how to again provide enough smolts for good returns on public waters, more and more people are going explore the opportunities on tribal land.

of the Forks-area rivers and this year should be no different. Early catch estimates show that nearly 3,000 winter runs were recorded last season.

The river below the rearing ponds has great bank access and is very popular. The hatchery drift is always busy with drift boats, and for good reason – the fish will be there!

and white) and it will be “Bobber down!” all over this short, boulder-ridden stretch of water.

The Snoqualmie receives slightly more smolts than the Sky, so expect good numbers to return. The combat fishing zone is from the mouth of Tokul Creek down to Plum Landing launch, a short stretch.

On the opposite side of the river, there's lots of access off David Powell Road.

Tokul itself will have fish, but I'm not a fan of fishing 1-foot-deep water that's less than 4 feet across. Between the Snoqualmie and the creek, anglers kept 807 winters last season.

AS FOR THE REST OF Puget Sound, the rant's going to start again. What the heck is going on with *my* Green River? Only 75,000 smolts for the 2011/2012 season? Are you kidding?!?

At just one-quarter of the release that fueled last winter's fishery, this could translate into one of the worst seasons in history on the river where I grew up steelheading. Don't expect more than 200 fish *total* – if that – to be carded.

The deal is that Palmer Ponds was closed two years ago and with it went most steelhead production in the system. As it stands, for this winter 35,000 smolts were released at Soos Creek, 15,000 at Flaming Geyser and 25,000 at Icy Creek. Another 33,000 were also let go, but, unclipped, they're part of a wild-stock integration program and will likely return after fishing closes.

Then there's the Puyallup, the one-time king of the state. Those days will fade even further into the rearview mirror this winter now that production at Voights Creek Hatchery has ended. Its last release, basically a January 2009 flood, yielded just 15 fish last year. The release for this winter was one-tenth as large.

Pitiful.



A cold December day last year on the upper Snoqualmie turned hot for Tony Olsen when this winter-run bit his jig. (WRIGHT & MCGILL/EAGLE CLAW PHOTO CONTEST)

TO THE NORTH in the Forks area, the Bogachiel and Sol Duc should have another strong season for hatchery fish. Last year was one of the best runs I've ever experienced, with almost every trip producing double-digit days.

“Because of great ocean conditions and everything aligning just right, last year we had 11,000 fish return to the hatcheries in the Quillayute system,” nearly twice the escapement goal, says Mike Gross, Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife biologist.

“This year the early forecast is for a good run, but it's probably not going to match last year. Ocean conditions are neutral at this time whereas last year they were very favorable,” he says.

The Bogey typically is the strongest

The Sol Duc should also be productive again this year, thanks to a 54,000-smolt plant from the Snider Creek broodstock program. The river is best floated, but because of its technical nature, hire a guide if it's your first float or are new on the sticks.

CLOSER TO THE SEATTLE AREA, there will be a couple good opportunities.

The Skykomish received over 150,000 smolts, so once again it should be a top 5 winter-run river (an estimated 1,358 were retained last season, 29 percent of the tally for all of Puget Sound). Reiter Ponds will be combat fishing at its best, but the rewards will be there. This area was just made for float fishing a jig (hint: pink



FIRE CURE AND BORX O FIRE

AVAILABLE AT THESE FINE DEALERS:



PAUTZKE.COM



Where once upon a time, Northwest steelheaders were bottom-bouncing fools, these days many of us run floats and jigs for winter-runs. Example A) this pair that bit for Winston McClanahan and Karen Chapdelaine on the upper Skykomish last season. (WRIGHT & MCGILL/EAGLE CLAW PHOTO CONTEST)

The Carbon? A carbon copy of the Puyallup, which it feeds.

OK, I'M GOING TO BLOW A FUSE, so I better switch back to the positive.

For some decent forecasts, how about some "E" rivers? Both the Elwha and the Elochoman look promising this winter.

The Elwha has limited bank access, therefore is underfished, but if you can get on the 3.3 miles of river between saltwater and the hatchery, there should be fish to be had. Mid-November through December should produce; an estimated 150 winters were retained here last winter.

The Elochoman is definitely not underfished, and in fact can be another combat fishery near the Beaver Creek Hatchery. If the water is low, it's possible to wade, but be mindful of private property.

Both of the E's are small and received around 100,000 smolts, give or take, for this winter.

Note that this will also be the last season for steelheading on the Elwha before a five-year fishing moratorium takes effect as the two upstream dams come out.

Up north, those who fish the Cascade River should be very happy. Over 200,000 smolts should provide very

good fishing from the mouth and up its banks for the first 1/2 mile. These are great scrappy fish and are willing biters to a proper presentation.

Good numbers are also forecasted for the North Fork Lewis, Wynoochee and the Skookumchuck.

There is more frustration, however: In the Snohomish River basin, two more streams were added to the list of waters where smolts were not stocked for return this winter – the Sultan and Pilchuck. The duo join the North Fork Sky, Raging and Tolt, where hatchery fish have not been set free in recent years due to changing management policies that bar releases in rivers without fish traps. Since the stock was listed as threatened in 2007, the number of release locations in Puget Sound has been shrunk 60 percent as managers seek to reduce the odds of hatchery fish spawning with wild ones.

And the Washougal, Humptulips and Hoh all received considerably fewer smolts for this season.

But let's hope the forecasts are wrong and that we get strong runs back on all systems.

As for me, I'm taking the center pin out and am going to master it this year. Yeah, that'll get the frustration out! **MS**