

## On The Squamish River

Grey mist curtains the water from bank to bank and only the downstream hiss and roar of the Squamish River cuts through it. From our vantage point in the inflatable boat, visibility is about 30 meters, an uncharitable short distance if desperate maneuvers are required.

We are dimly aware that the river splits into two channels before recoiling from the sheer granite wall of the right bank, somewhere below. The oarsman's mind is boiling with possibilities - the boat thrown up against jagged rocks and upended, tripped up by a submerged tree or locked into a logjam.

Sitting in a profound state of ease at the bow is Joe Kambeitz, river rat, poet painter and at the moment, a recollector of a book he once read about a giant whirlpool that sucks up seagoing vessels.

He senses a lack of amusement from his audience.

"If you don't want to row anymore, you could give me the oars," he suggests. "Of course, we'll go around in circles."

This is meant to be a joke. Kambeitz, 44 lost his left arm at the elbow as a youngster, run over by a bus. This is not to suggest he's incapable of piloting the boat, just that we weren't carrying the leash he buckles to his stump in order to pull the oar.

The tension eases. Attention is diverted by two mountain goats - scarcely more than white dots from the distance - picking their way along ancestral graze halfway up the wall.

The trip around the corner is uneventful, even disappointing. We're looking for water that will accommodate fly fishing and from 24-mile (just above the goat run) all the down to 20-mile, we make just one more stop. It is more in homage than interest.

At Joe's behest we pull in just below the site of his most glorious day, 18 Steelhead hooked standing in one spot in 1986. But the river bed has shifted, leaving no water here for the big Trout to hold in.

Kambietz duped all of those fish with a single fly, the Squamish Poacher, his sometimes controversial legacy to the art of fly fishing.

The fly is named for the elusive poachers who played cops-and-robbers with Kambietz when he was a fisheries enforcement officer working in Squamish almost 20 years ago.

"I've always been inspired by names of flies, Wind River Witch, Bloody Butcher . . . but what inspired me is the unseemly nature of the Poacher."

Like it's namesakes, the fly is something of an outlaw. It violates a venerable tradition that Steelhead flies are intended to catch the eye, excite fish with color and movement rather than imitate a specific food item.

The Squamish Poacher imitates a shrimp, its most distinctive feature, the use of fluorescent orange surveyor tape to simulate the creature's shellback. "It helps to be artistic," he concedes. "Being an artist is like being a cook. The entire world is raw ingredients and you can see the potential of everything that's available to you."

"I realized that some part of the Steelhead's diet is made up of shrimp-like creatures. When I designed the fly I looked at everything from lobsters to euphasids. I found four common features; each has a dark prominent eye, long whisker, a segmented body, and a well-defined carapace. I tried to make a generic shrimp pattern. It seems to work pretty well."

At times it has worked too well. Take the time Kambietz introduced it to the Dean River, the remote north-coast stream that is considered the finest Steelhead water in the world.

Kambietz flew in with a handful of other anglers, and as the Dean River green horn, he was selected to take the lead as the group fished its way down a favorite run. Fly fishing etiquette dictates that the lead man move to the back of the line after catching a fish, to give the next angler first crack at the fish.

Kambeitz caught a fish, released it, and moved to the back...

And caught 11 more fish, while the anglers in front of him caught none. It was suggested Kambeitz impose some kind of handicap on himself, i.e. switch to less effective fly.

"I said, what more do you want me to do?" Kambeitz recalled. "I'm fishing one handed and I've never been on this river in my life."

Much of the Squamish Poacher's success comes from the way Kambeitz fishes it— "The technique isn't to everyone's taste. If you don't get the Poacher down to the bottom of the river, the Poacher doesn't get fish."

To that end he employs 15 feet of 12-weight sinking line attached to a nine-weight level floating line, propelling this rig with an eight-foot rod. Compare that to the 15-foot two-handed Atlantic Salmon rods favored by some Dean River anglers.

"I find those big two-handed rods embarrassing, because they're unnecessary," Kambeitz confides. His own casts are enviable, his stump gathering the line into lovely loose coils that ride out through the guides with textbook ease. That same stump is an unflinching prop for the rod as he reels in fish that can exceed 20 pounds.

"Somebody asked me if I could have one thing in my life over again, what would it be? I said he wouldn't believe me if I told him. He said, another arm, right" I said, "no, I would like my legs to be four inches longer." "Do You have any idea how debilitating it is to be six feet tall and have a 28-inch inseam?"

Before his conversion to fly-fishing, Kambeitz had averaged 200 Steelhead a year as a bait fisherman (his favorite bait was ghost shrimp). His attitude changed the day he caught himself cursing in disappointment after releasing a "measly" 10-pounder from the Squamish River, and realized he'd run out of challenges.

It took exactly 15-minutes for Kambeitz, to fly-catch a Steelhead, on a Poacher, the first day he put down his bait rod for good.

But what followed was a resounding lesson in humility, a full year without another fish.

The low point came on an excursion to the Chilliqack-Vedder River when he hooked his toque and cast it into the river. It stayed on his line and the weight of it in the current caused his rod to bend as if he had a fish on. Shouts of encouragement from friends angling nearby died in embarrassed silence as Kambeitz reeled the sodden wool hat close to shore.

"All the way round to the next March, I never caught a fish. And boy did I fish. Then I came up to the Squamish River and caught five in one day, bing-bing-bing-bing-bing.

"I'm amused by the attitude that the fly fisherman is an elitist and has some kind of special ability. If I can fly fish with one hand, anybody out there who can cast a bait reel can fly fish."

By Scott Simpson,  
Sun Outdoors Reporter (name and date of paper unknown)

*The **Squamish Poacher** was a favorite Steelhead fly of Walt Quint. This was a news paper article that Walt had read and clipped out of a news paper after fishing with the Poacher. Walt loaned the article to me so that I could publish it in one of our news letters. For those of you who would like to tie one up (tie several they're easy) and fish it, the **Squamish Poacher** pattern follows.*

*Jeff Mac Lean*



## SQUAMISH POACHER

- HOOK:** Eagle Claw L1197G, size 2; Mustad 3908, 3906B, size 2.
- THREAD:** Fluorescent orange, 6/0.
- ANTENNAE:** Sparse fire orange calf tail, or orange buck tail.
- EYES:** Green glass bead eyes melted onto monofilament, slightly forward of the hook point. (A tip from Henry Hoffman, you can also use the plastic craft store bead chain eyes. To get the proper spacing, cut off three eyes and the middle eye flatten with needle nose pliers.)
- BODY:** Fluorescent orange chenille, figure 8 around the eyes. (for weighted fly wrap lead around hook first.)
- HACKLE:** Fluorescent orange, full behind the glass eyes and palmered to the eye of the hook, trimmed flat across the top and around the abdomen.
- SHELLBACK:** Fluorescent orange surveyor's tape tied in over the hook eye, bound down over the abdomen, defining segments with rib wire or thread, pulled forward and doubled over the thorax and tied off.

This prawn fly was originated by Joe Kambeitz in 1974, for Steelhead fishing. It is a good winter pattern, sinks well and is much brighter than other prawn patterns. Kambeitz named it for one of his favorite rivers, and he suggests fishing it "on a downstream swing along the bottom for the best results." Kambeitz is a conservationist and nature photographer from White Rock, British Columbia. You can read more about Kambeitz and his fly in "Fly Patterns of British Columbia" by Art Lingren.