

WHEN FISH GO MAD

By Tony Robnett

Ask an angler what he seeks as he pursues his favorite avocation and you will receive many responses. Some of us seek good company while others prefer solitude. There are those who want meat for the table while many treasure the quiet satisfaction of releasing a strong fish to be caught again by another. Yet others savor the skill required to “out wit” their reluctant quarry in spite of adverse conditions. If truth be told, I have pursued my sport for all of the reasons mentioned and for one more. I am forever seeking insane fish!

As will become apparent, my first encounter with crazy fish was less than a happy one. I had returned from Korea and was living with my young family in Eugene while I attended the University of Oregon on the G.I. Bill. One summer weekend, we met Helen’s and my parents for a picnic in Astoria. Dad and a friend had chartered a crab boat to fish for Salmon in the lower Columbia River. I clearly remember scorning at the offer of sea sick pills. After all, thought I, I had traveled to Korea on troopships and seemed immune to such mundane problems. Wrong!

After we had boated eighteen Chinook and Coho Salmon in less than thirty minutes came truly terrible news! The fishing was so good that the party had decided to hook and release. From my position bent over the rail, I could only moan my dissenting vote. On and on the madness continued. The salmon were joined by large sea bass, every bit as savage. Two anglers had a wild tussle hooked up to the same bass. It became almost impossible to get more than two lines in the water before “fish on” was sounded by someone. No member of that expedition has any accurate estimate of just how many fish were caught, but the guesses have been wildly expanded in family folklore. Even I staggered up occasionally to fight a fish, but without joy. *Finally*, five ecstatic anglers deposited one sick puppy on solid ground.

My next brush with piscatorial insanity happened one hot evening on the Metolious River, nearly twenty five years later. My companions were Massako Tani (the future Mrs. Dave Hughes) and Dave. As the sun set, the evening caddis hatch finally arrived on the stretch above Allingham camp ground. We had started to pick up widely scattered trout when Dave moved about thirty feet below a large boulder in the center of the stream. Shortly, he called Massako and me to join him and all three of us began to hook fish on nearly every cast. The slick area behind the rock probably measured a little more than five feet by five feet, but it was literally boiling with fish rises!

Every fish we hooked was a fat Rainbow Trout from 12 to 18 inches long and capable of a strong fight. When we could no longer see our flies, we struck on splashes. Finally, weary and incapable of seeing those splashes, we returned to our camp. How many fish did we catch? Who knows.

In the years since, whenever I’ve fished the Metolious, I have not failed to drop several casts behind that same rock and have never gotten a strike!

Two or three years later, Dave Hughes and I are sitting in the shade of a large sage brush, eating lunch and downing a beer or two. We are on the banks of Buchanan Reservoir, trying to decide if it’s worth fishing. We have heard that the reservoir, normally dry in the summer, has retained water during the past year and has been

populated by Redband Rainbow Trout from Riddle Creek. A few boats troll near the middle but we see no fish hooked. We are, quite honestly, a little jaded by fishing after being out for nearly two weeks. Finally, we decide to give it a go but stipulate that we'll head back to camp on the Blitzen, about 40 miles away, should we not have pretty rapid luck.

For what ever reason, I tied on a weighted black marabou that had worked well on Mann Lake a few days ago. On the second cast, I'm into a beauty. Then, it's Dave's turn on the little rocky point. He hits on the first cast! So it goes for six or seven fish each. Then, Dave decides that he has to have pictures. We get silly and decide that the "off" (non fishing) guy gets to take pictures while the "duty" man has to work (I.e. "fish"). Dave has a fish which takes all his line and half of his backing out to the middle of the lake. Somehow, he corrals it and saves his line. We get even sillier when worm fishermen show up, fishless. They set up about 100 feet away but remain skunked while we continue to nail them. I catch a fish bleeding from the gills so we kill it and examine its stomach contents. It is absolutely stuffed with tiny backswimmers, not a bit similar to our big marabous. Finally, we run out of energy (but not fish) and call it a day. Again, neither of us have any idea of the number of fish we had caught.

The following spring, I returned to the lake with my brother, intending to show him some "real" fishing. Also on the lake that week were Bill Bakke, Cal Cole, and Jim Schollmeyer. None of us even saw a fish!

So, how does one find critters afflicted with "mad fish disease?" I simply have no idea but sincerely hope it happens some time to you. (Or, again to me!)

This was an article that Tony had written years ago for the RFC news letter. He gave me a copy of it so that I could republish it again in the "Fly Line" for those of us who were not around the first time it was in the news letter. I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did. Hopefully some day while fishing, I to, may come upon fish that have "gone mad".

Jeff Mac Lean