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A NEW STEELHEAD STREAM

John Clark Hunt  
Field and Stream Magazine

July, 1948

For miles and miles the Trinity River ran red and thick with mud

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## A New Steelhead Stream

By JOHN CLARK HUNT

**N**INETY-FIVE years is a long time for a good trout stream to remain practically unknown to fishermen, particularly a stream whose banks have been inhabited since 1850 by hordes of white men. Besides, the best fishing waters of this river—the Trinity in northwestern California—are but two hours' drive from Redding, on the principal north and south Pacific highway.

The reason outsiders and even natives of the Trinity country did not know of the river's excellent fishing is simple. It was mud—gold-mining mud.

When the gold-hungry miners pushed into the big, rugged, sparsely Indian-inhabited Klamath and Trinity area during California's gold-rush days, they found the yellow stuff, millions of dollars' worth, along the river bars and on the tributaries. They immediately began to wash gold from

the gravel and the creek banks, and mining mud discolored the clear, cold waters of the Trinity. But gold pans were not fast enough; so rockers, crude cradle-like boxes, came into use. This method was followed by flume boxes with riffles to catch the gold. Then came the inevitable mass production—hydraulic mining—wherein the power of water is employed to wash gold from high gravel bars, stream banks, and even from whole mountain-sides.

The Trinity ran red and thick with mud. It ceased to be a river, and became a debris canal carrying muck to the Klamath River, thence to the Pacific.

By the time the big hydraulic diggings were working out, another method of mining had been found. Modern monsters known as dredgers began working the river flats that had been spared in the early days, and re-worked the old placer diggings where white

men and Chinamen had dug by hand. These huge floating destroyers of bottomland efficiently claw up the earth to bedrock, and leave in their wake man-made hills of bare rock with the soil washed into the river.

That is why the Trinity remained unknown to steelhead fishermen until 1942, when a wartime restriction on the use of material and men forced gold mining to close down. Then, probably for the first time since 1850, the river became really clear. By 1945 a small number of anglers had learned that the Trinity was a jim-dandy steelhead fly stream. Slowly the news leaked out that fighting steelhead beauties were waiting in a river which had been considered the exclusive domain of the miners.

During the autumn of 1945, the first year I fished the Trinity, there were very few fishermen. One year later there were hundreds. The water was

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clear and the steelhead runs were large. It seemed that the newly discovered stream might become a rival of such famous steelhead rivers as the Klamath and the Eel in California, the Rogue and Umpqua in Oregon, the Skykomish, Stuck, Saleduck and Green in Washington.

When I first tried the Trinity in September of 1945, I was a confused fisherman. Although I had fished for various species of trout in streams and lakes for several years and had come to think of myself as a fly fisherman, I didn't seem to have the know-how to catch steelhead. After three weeks of using the large, brilliantly colored bucktail flies that were recommended, I still was not catching the big silver and red fish I could see in the deep riffles and pools of the river.

Then I decided I would play wise and watch the native anglers. I found that they were using everything except flies. Mostly they used salmon roe and spinners, with spinners producing the greatest number of fish. Knowing that I had never been successful as a bait fisherman, I settled for spinners. I had a casting outfit I

had used for black bass and trolling for large lake trout. But after hooking one big steelhead that fought like a wild bronco until he broke my line, I was not able to hook another, although I tried for days.

"To heck with this," I finally told myself. "Something is wrong. You've caught plenty of trout, large and small, and steelhead are trout. So use your own method."

And, being a hard-headed fellow, that is exactly what I did. I bought a supply of Gray Hackles with peacock bodies on 6 and 8 hooks, Gray Hackles with yellow bodies on the same sized hooks, and as an experiment I added a few of Joe O'Donnells tied on 6 hooks. Armed with these small, dull-colored steelhead flies, I took the big fancy patterns out of my book and went out again to catch steelhead.

The morning I chose to fish in my own way without heeding the advice of anyone was bright and cold at dawn, for it was now the middle of October and the autumn mornings are cold along the upper reaches of the Trinity. I left Weaverville an hour before day-

light, and when I arrived at the stretch of water I had admired for several months the mountain peaks were just beginning to reflect the wan, steely light of dawn.

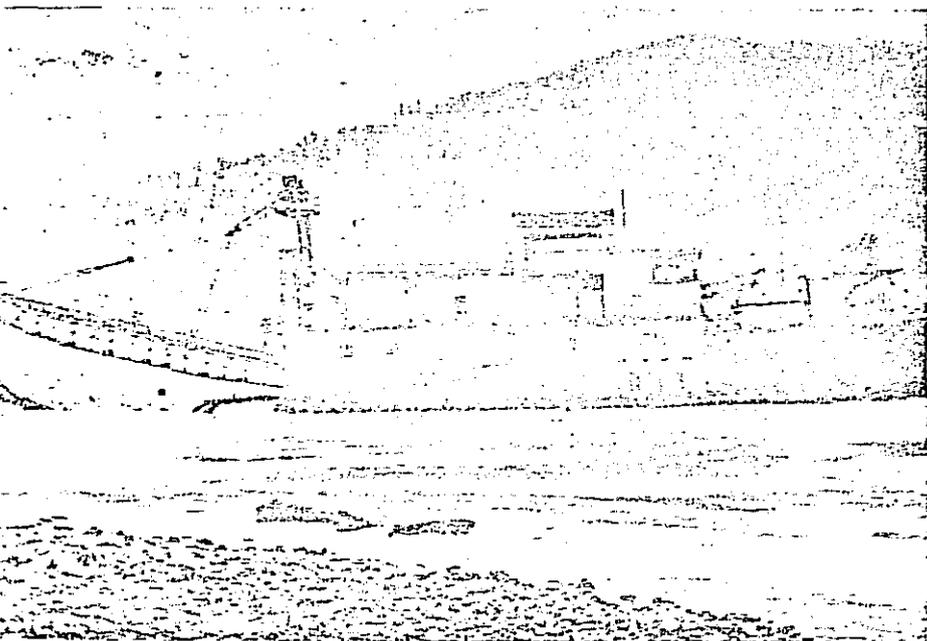
I selected a Gray Hackle with a yellow body and tied it on a 7-foot leader I had made and tapered from 12-pound-test to 6-pound. I cast across the riffle and a little upstream. Allowing a small amount of slack, I let the fly swing in the current just under the surface. Nothing happened the first two casts. I cast again and watched the fly dance and swing in the waves of the riffle. Then, just as the leader was straightening downstream, a silvery streak cut through the water and my fly disappeared. The shock of the strike was solid and violent.



The author's 5½-pound steelhead

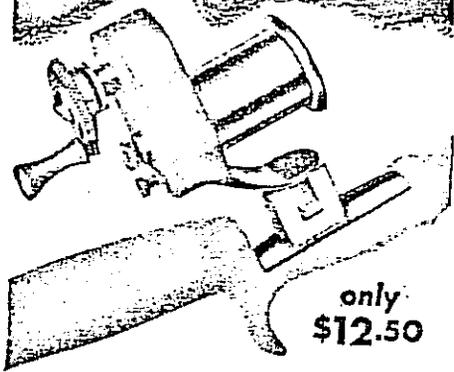
But the fight had only begun. For the next thirty minutes my 6-ounce steelhead rod bent and whipped like a willow in a terrific windstorm. All I could do at first was keep the tip of the rod up and watch the line streak from my reel, then fight desperately to get a few feet of it back. While the steelhead charged up and down the river he broke water fourteen times. He shot from the surface and doubled up, lashing at the leader; he stood on his tail and fought: he lay on the surface and thrashed. It was like a series of explosions. Finally he went to the bottom and sulked. I could see him hugging the bottom of the deep channel, but I could not pull him loose. I threw several rocks into the current above him, and one drifted down and frightened (Continued on page 106)

***The Trinity River in California could rival the famous Klamath and Rogue, but it will take an army of sportsmen to save it from becoming a debris canal***



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**FOUND - A NEW  
 STEELHEAD STREAM**

*(Continued from page 25)*

him and the fight continued. I finally fought him into a small cove; then found that he was much too large for my landing net. But the net wasn't needed, for the steelhead suddenly stopped fighting and lodged, lifeless, against a rock. He had literally fought himself to death. I waded out and placed my fingers in his gill and brought him ashore. He was my first Trinity steelhead, his belly silvery white, his back steely blue and his sides bright red and light pink. Eight pounds and more than 30 inches of gallant, game fish.

My arms were aching and my knees were weak. I filled my pipe and sat down at the edge of the river and rested.

After that I caught many steelhead on flies, mostly on Gray Hackles and Joe O'Donnells tied on Nos. 6 and 8 hooks. But I learned when and how to use several other flies. I found that in swift riffles I got the greatest number of strikes by casting a wet fly slightly upstream or directly across the stream and allowing the fly to swing until the leader straightened and pointed downstream, then retrieving.

If the riffle is slow, I cast across it and retrieve the fly in short jerks as it swings downstream. I learned that steelhead lie in the riffles where the swift current passes above or to one side of them, never where they have to fight against a strong current. In slower water, however, they lie in deep channels where there is a definite current. They only stop in pools or areas of quiet water while they rest and prepare to migrate farther upstream. Great numbers of steelhead will be found resting in large pools where the colder water of tributary streams pours into the river.

During the fishing season of 1945, I became interested not only in how to catch steelhead on flies but in the steelhead as a game fish and how it was possible that the runs had continued to survive in the mining mud of the Trinity River.

For instance, it requires approximately six weeks for steelhead eggs to hatch in waters the temperature of the Trinity or its tributaries (about 50 degrees). The tiny fish takes another six weeks to emerge from the gravel of the spawning beds. After that for a few weeks the young fish must feed by sight. If there is a heavy content of mud suspended in the water, it can settle on the spawn and seal it in, spoiling the eggs; it can kill the fry in the gravel after they hatch; or it can starve the young fish by preventing them from finding food in the dark, muddy water.

I asked a lot of questions about steelhead and mining mud, but I got very few sensible answers. Steelhead were just a kind of fish that came in from the ocean, and it was foolish to talk about mining mud. One miner even told me "mining is good for the steelhead. Think of all the worms and grubs mining operations have washed into the river for the fish to feed on."

But down on the lower reaches of the river I talked to an old man who said, "I have lived here all my life, and I've fished the Trinity for more than sixty years. It was always awful muddy in the winter and summer, but each fall there would be a spell when the miners

would become fairly clear. That's when I'd get my fishing. As to how the steelhead have been able to live in the Trinity, I believe you'll find that it's because the big runs went in while the miners were low on water; then as soon as the rains raised the creeks and the mining started the steelhead moved out of the river into the few creeks which were clear."

I checked the tributaries of the Trinity and found that most of them head in the high, rugged mountains of the Trinity Alps Primitive Area in the Trinity and Shasta National Forests. I also found that the steelhead always migrate into the tributaries from December to March, where they usually can spawn in clear, clean water, then go back to sea.

It seems reasonable to assume that during a few years before the second World War, when mining had decreased, and during the war years, while there was practically no mining mud, more steelhead spawn had hatched, more young fish had survived and gone to sea, thus increasing the runs of adult fish in 1945 and 1946.

The season of 1947 indicated that the future of the Trinity as a steelhead stream was still in grave doubt. Gold dredgers kept parts of the river discolored much of the time, and on occasions most of the river was brown with mud.

The mouth of the Trinity is in the Hoopa Indian Reservation. An age-old custom of the Hoopas is to build dams of willow poles and sticks across the river. Behind these barriers they annually caught a small part of the steelhead and salmon runs for winter food. This has been accepted as an inherent right of the Hoopas. But in 1947 they used a more efficient device—gill-nets.

The result of mining mud and the gill-nets has been poor fishing. Sportsmen have been disappointed and have protested, particularly against the muddy water. Newspaper headlines have read, "Feud Brews in Trinity between Anglers and Miners," "Trinity Miners Post 'No Trespass' Signs along River," "New County Law to Limit Silt Left by Gold Operation."

The Trinity River appears to have but one chance to prove that it is a good steelhead stream and not a debris canal. It will have to be rescued by the huge army of sportsmen whose strength is great enough to right such wrongs and rescue a river. If this is not done, a steelhead stream, so recently found, will again be lost.

**PLAY 'EM  
 PSYCHOLOGICALLY**

*(Continued from page 36)*

down; he could set out to carry the fight to the fish and "break his heart," and those tactics would pay dividends in quicker and more certain captures.

Fish, like animals, are thinking creatures having, to some degree, most of man's emotions. Fish know fear and they know anger. They know elation and they know depression. They have minds, and through their minds we can hasten their capture. To put yourself in a fish's place, try to make your mind a blank to all human intelligence and consider that you've grown up in the law of the wild, eating those living things smaller and weaker than yourself and beating a swift retreat when something bigger and stronger than you are comes along.