

By: Buzz Ramsey

It's Summer Steelhead Time

In case you haven't noticed, better than usual numbers of Summer Steelhead are surging up the Columbia, Willamette and their respective tributaries. As of this writing, the fish counts at Bonneville Dam and Willamette Falls are near or above 10,000 fish each.

When it comes to steelhead, it's the Skamania stock of Summer Steelhead that make up the entire Willamette run and the majority of the early hatchery steelhead bound for tributaries entering the lower Columbia. On the Columbia River above Bonneville Dam, most of the early Skamania fish are headed for Bonneville Pool tributaries like the Hood and Klickitat rivers. For summer fish passing the fall at Oregon City, most are headed for the upper Willamette and Santiam system.

The fishing success on these tributaries and those further downstream like the Clackamas, Sandy, Washougal, Lewis, Kalama, and Cowlitz should be peaking now.

On the Columbia, the steelhead counts will change dramatically in early July as fish bound for tributaries in eastern Washington, Oregon and Idaho begin to dominate the Bonneville Dam fish counts. In total, it's believed, over 350,000 Summer Steelhead will pass the Columbia's first dam before the end of summer with the early returning Skamania segment accounting for roughly 10 to 15 thousand of the above Bonneville total.

While you can now ambush the Columbia's upriver-bound run of Summer Steelhead plunking the big river west of Bonneville Dam, many anglers wait and tackle them after they've entered the lower Deschutes River. Avid Deschutes anglers monitor The Dalles Dam fish count, www.fpc.org, and hit the river when the daily tally exceeds 1,000 fish.

Realize that the Deschutes River ranks third, only outdone by the main Columbia and Snake Rivers, when it comes to the number of sport caught Summer Steelhead. Besides the superb fishing, what draws anglers to visit the Lower Deschutes Canyon is the fact that there are no roads for the first 24 miles.

On the lower Deschutes, and especially with a steelhead smoking line off your reel, it's hard to not think you're in paradise when viewing the deep basalt canyon cut by a whitewater river that seems almost too big and beautiful to believe. In addition to outstanding river scenery, you may spot a Big Horn Sheep or Mule Deer feeding within sight of the river.

All this makes a person want to return again and again, which is why the Deschutes is one of the most regulated rivers in the region. For example, you cannot fish from a floating device (your feet must be firmly planted on the shore or river bottom) and the use of bait is prohibited. Only artificial lures or flies are legal on this river.

In addition, there is a first come/first serves limited entry system in place for boaters who must purchase a permit to run the river, and powerboat use is allowed only downstream from Mack's Canyon (river mile 24) where it is restricted Thursday through Sunday on alternating weekends beginning June 18 through 21. For a complete list of river rules or to purchase a Deschutes Boater Passes visit www.boaterspass.com.

None of this bothers veteran Deschutes guide Brad Staples, 503-250-0558, www.deschutesriverjetboats.com/staples, who claims the combination of spectacular fishing and scenery keeps his Deschutes season booked months in advance. Even with the recent economic downturn, Brad says he will only have an opening if one of his loyal clients cancels.

In addition to a native and hatchery run of its own, the Deschutes receives visits from other steelhead. You see, to evade the Columbia's warm water, upriver-bound steelhead duck into the Deschutes for a cool water breather. Most steelhead that stray into the Deschutes will leave the system by early fall, when the water cools, and continue on to their natal stream located in Idaho or eastern Oregon or Washington.

In addition to high numbers of fish passing the fish counters at main-stem dams, Brad says, "High spring flows, like we've experienced this year, seem to draw more stray steelhead into the Deschutes.

Brad Staples, like other seasoned guides, employs a variety of fishing methods to entice Deschutes steelhead - often instructing his clients on the proper casting of spinner, plug or bobber n' jig. For those clients not adept at casting methods Brad provides personal instructions on how to properly fish a plug behind a surface side planer – no casting required here.

The same fishing methods Brad employs on the Deschutes produce when used on other tributaries where Summer Steelheads are now lurking.