It started unremarkably, by word of mouth. It seems that a self-confessed angling fool (fanatic, to be more polite), who shall remain anonymous, hired a guide to take him down a river literally and figuratively far removed from the general populace, out among the sage steppe of north-central Oregon. He had a hankering to hook a steelhead: not just any steelhead, but a wild summer-run. As the guide gracefully sculled through a shallow riffle, they glided by a Realtor’s sign posted on the riverbank. It beckoned—a siren song of pastoral allure. The client took it all in and jotted down the particulars. Upon his return to the so-called real world, he couldn’t help but reflect, daydream really, on the juniper- and sage-infused essence of the place. He made a call. Given his position on the board of directors at Western Rivers Conservancy (WRC), he was assured of a sympathetic ear—very sympathetic, in fact, as it was Sue Doroff’s ears and she is WRC’s executive vice president. He told Doroff about the river and the real estate sign, and summed it all up succinctly: “Listen, if I had 10 million bucks, I’d buy this place.”

The Naked Truth

The John Day River has always been a bit quirky, starting with its name. If you know anything about this area, you know it’s an environment where you don’t want to go romping around in the nude. Not for long, anyway. Human skin is too receptive an organ for the myriad insults indifferently perpetrated by this hardscrabble terrain. Throughout the entire lower canyon it would be hopeless to look for so much as a smidgeon of cool moss with which to soothe an owie. And make no mistake, there’s countless sources—from relentless sun and wind to poison sumac and puncture vine (aka goatheads)—ready and willing to inflict varying degrees of misery.

With that in mind, you can bet your mule-skin moccasins that a Virginia woodsman didn’t exactly choose to shuck his leathers and go wandering around this country in the buff. John Day was a member of the Astor-Hunt overland party, a contingent of would-be sodbusters bound for the emerald isles of the Willamette Valley. In the winter of 1811/12, Day and a companion named Ramsay Crooks fell behind the main party. Despite terrible deprivations, they managed to slog through deep snowpack in the Blue Mountains. An encampment of friendly Walla Wallas aided them with shelter and sustenance for the remainder of the winter and then in early spring directed them on their way down the Columbia. All proceeded as planned until Crooks and Day approached the mouth of the Mah-Hah River, where they encountered a coterie of not-so-cordial Indians. What the two interlopers couldn’t have known at the time was that a previous troop of their brethren had barged in and relieved this particular band of their horses and provisions. And they hadn’t asked nicely. Undoubtedly still smarting from the abuse they’d endured, the Indians attacked Crook and Day and took everything: every firearm and knife; every flint, kit, and bedroll; every stitch of clothing—every scrap of dignity. Perhaps amused by the prospect of all that bare white flesh running amok in the bush, the Indians let them keep their lives. Fortunately, an indeterminate time later (some historians say days, others claim weeks), another party of settlers, under the leadership of Robert Stuart, found the near-starving, half-mad Crook and Day wandering the river breaks. Of course, the occasion was later commemorated not by chastising the miscreant intruders but, instead, by ripping away the ancestral name for that river, the Mah-Hah, and replacing it with a bland Euro-moniker, the appellation of a naked Virginian, no less.

The John Day River is a haven for wild summer-run steelhead (above). The Murtha Ranch acquisition by Western Rivers Conservancy ensures protection and public access for a stretch of the river critical to John Day steelhead (right). Photo by John Shewey
Good Bones
Without a moment of apprehension, a cadre of WRC staff immediately embarked on a field trip to the John Day. While standing on a small bluff overlooking the river canyon’s maw, Sue Doroff eyeballed the Murtha Ranch spread out below and concluded, “This is a lot of river, but boy, it sure looks like crap. …[However] as soon as we saw this place, we realized it was important to fish …and we knew we had to dig deeper.”

What they found was a huge tract of high-desert rangeland where herds of Big-Macs-on-the-hoof had long had their way. Though the effects of overgrazing were not nearly as bleak as on many of the neighboring properties, the extent of abuse certainly gave pause. To put things in perspective, it’s necessary to recognize that agriculture has all but dominated this part of Oregon for decades. Cattle, treading the grazing, counting the calves, etc.; it’s been assaulted with brass knuckles. Nonetheless, it didn’t take any formal science-based assessments or exhaustive resource surveys to reveal that the land in this region must be more carefully tamed; it’s been assaulted with brass knuckles. Nonetheless, it didn’t take any formal science-based assessments or exhaustive resource surveys to reveal that this tract was a prominent migration corridor for native summer steelhead in the Pacific Northwest. As soon as WRC took title, it instigated a community- and agency-wide battle plan to begin restoring habitat, starting with a take-no-prisoners campaign to eradicate invasive plants and noxious weeds, followed by the phasing out of livestock grazing along the river and the painstaking replanting of riparian zones with indigenous cover vegetation. Of particular concern was Hay Creek, one of the exceptionally rare tributary streams located in the drainage’s downstream section. Deep in the heart of Hay Creek, often been trampled to a pulp by witless mobs of moo-burgers, Hay Creek persisted in running clear and cold enough to sustain a steelhead nursery, the only one of its kind in the lower canyon. It was easy to see that the creek, given gentle nurturing and rehabilitation, held promise as an especially fecund spawning site—a kind of functioning microreserve for the wild steelhead genome.

From Pasture to Park
Convincing the Oregon Parks & Recreation Department (OPRD) that it should take Murtha Ranch off WRC’s hands was important to Oregon—whether of a soft sell, moving to slam dunk really. Face it: even a blind dog knows a pork chop when he smells it. Converting the ranch to a state park just seemed right on so many levels, including the geographical, historical, and cultural. Geographically, Murtha Ranch is a gap to the John Day is simply a hole, think of current state and federal agency involvement in the management and oversight of the John Day River basin as forming a giant, loosely conceived, crudely stitched tapestry. The foremost section, the fabric holding everything else together, is the 150-mile-long, 80-mile-wide John Day River and Scenic River corridor. The remainder of the tapestry is composed of all the irregular pieces, including the BLM’s patchwork holdings throughout the system and, in particular, the Lower John Day Wilderness Study Area; Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife’s allocated John Day River refuge; and, of course, Columbia Plateau Ecoregion Conservation Opportunity Area. The conversion of Murtha Ranch to Cottonwood State Park not only forges a logical link in this resource’s overall management, it also significantly advances the reach of scientific efforts to preserve meaningful swaths of this ecoregion.

The ranch’s history runs shallow, which, ironically, it didn’t take even greater quantities of leather, on a per capita basis, to keep man and beast (hogs, bovines, and bitches) up and running. According to the paltry records available, John Murtha, the family patriarch, married a lass named Kathleen Cantwell in Ireland in 1910. John was the first to cross the bridge leading to America, continuing west, seeking to secure property at the Hay Creek site in 1918. Kathleen soon followed, and by 1932 the entire clan, including nine offspring, had established residence on the banks of the John Day. Though Murtha owned the land straddling the east side of the river, the west side belonged to J. S. (Shelt) Burres. It was Burres who constructed Cottonwood Bridge in the 1940s, replacing original buildings lost in the 1937 flood. As soon as WRC took title, it instituted a community- and agency-wide battle plan to begin restoring habitat, starting with a take-no-prisoners campaign to eradicate invasive plants and noxious weeds, followed by the phasing out of livestock grazing along the river and the painstaking replanting of riparian zones with indigenous cover vegetation. Of particular concern was Hay Creek, one of the exceptionally rare tributary streams located in the drainage’s downstream section. Deep in the heart of Hay Creek, often been trampled to a pulp by witless mobs of moo-burgers, Hay Creek persisted in running clear and cold enough to sustain a steelhead nursery, the only one of its kind in the lower canyon. It was easy to see that the creek, given gentle nurturing and rehabilitation, held promise as an especially fecund spawning site—a kind of functioning microreserve for the wild steelhead genome.

The most oft-repeated refrain regarding John Day's yesteryears would have to be “Just passing through.” The Lewis and Clark Expedition voyaged down the Columbia but did little tramping up the side canyons. The most intrepid of front-runners, French fur trappers, also ignored the John Day, for the same reason as the tribes: lack of easy pickings—that is, a scarcity of large game and a dearth of beast. Lured by the purported manna from heaven to be found in the Willamette Valley, early waves of settlers crossed the John Day at a shallow ford located just downstream of what was to become Murtha Ranch, then pressed on, their mules up the Grass Valley stretch of the Oregon Trail.

Noting the abundance of bunchgrass and rich browse in the bottomsland, serious cattlemen and shepherders began arriving in the 1860s. Still, most were not tempted to take root, preferring to run their herds until the grass was depleted, then move on to greener pastures, so to speak. The livestock industry at that time had little to do with rib eye steaks or lamb chops. There simply weren't enough people around for a knife-and-fork market. And no refrigeration. Rather, sheep provided wool, and cattle production was all about hides. Even today, there's a bigger demand for beef than for leather, and people would imagine much more. Take, for example, the National Football League: it takes 3,000 cows to supply the NFL alone (to say nothing of high school and college leagues) with enough leather for an annual inventory of footballs. Back in the “old days,” it took much greater quantities of leather, on a per capita basis, to keep man and beast (hogs, bovines, and bitches) up and running.

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One of the jarring criticisms aimed at state parks has been the image of park personnel putt-putting around in riding lawn mowers, manicuring acres and acres of...
golf course—like greens. No worries with Cottonwood: OPRD has pledged to honor the rusticity of Cottonwood Bridge Ranch, the anointed site of park headquarters, and to retain the overall unaffected—some would say bucolic—atmosphere of the entire property. Admireable. And ambitious, considering the relative enormity of the place. Chris Havel, OPRD spokesman, sums it up this way: “One of the lessons we’ve learned from the land and the people who live here is the different sense of scale. This will be a large park [the largest state park in Oregon]—up to 8,000 acres of state parkland next to another 8,000 acres of federal land—but it’s being envisioned as a pretty modest park. We’re designing small parking and camping facilities, and emphasizing trails and solitude. We want this to be a place you visit to see more birds and bighorn than people. We want you to hear more crickets than cars. . . . The deeper you get into the park—the farther into the rugged, subtle canyon land—the more solitude you’ll earn.”

When viewed from the perspective of a ranch and public park, the historical and the cultural meld into one.

Basalt Billboard

The OPRD’s openhearted desire to attract energetic visitors to the John Day happens to be some other folks’ idea of a bad trip. Mia Sheppard, who with husband Marty operates Little Creek Outfitters, voiced their reservations: “With the announcement to the John Day River and push themselves to go just a little farther into the ruggedness they would normally.”

By John Shewey

Elder Statesmen

Hook: Alec Jackson Spey hook, sizes 3–1 5
Tag: Silver tinsel
Tail: Claret hackle fibers or claret-dyed golden pheasant crest
Butt: Fine or extra-fine silver oval tinsel and cerise silk floss twisted together
Body: Claret dubbing
Hackle: Claret
Wing: White hair
Cheeks: Jungle cock (optional)

By John Shewey

Boating the 19 miles from Cottonwood Bridge, on Oregon Highway 205, down to McDonald Crossing requires at least two days (fly anglers are to plan ample time for fishing). Be sure to check flows and consult the Bureau of Land Management for current camping and boating regulations.

For the most part, though, learning things in the high desert is not a full-speed-ahead experience. You’ve got to spend time, immerse yourself. Ultimately, more of the area’s secrets are revealed when one is patient enough to wait. And listen. Or as Barry Lopez asserts, “You must overlook things, as though you’d come into a small and desolate town and paused by an open window.”

Every arroyo, slope, and lava rock crevice in Cottonwood Canyon offers an open window.

The farther you get from Oregon Highway 206, the less you hear. And the more you hear. Walk a couple of miles downstream and the00 adviser is the place where the medieval adage Solvitur ambulando—it is solved by walking—is more applicable than Cottonwood Canyon State Park. Indeed, one of the overriding goals of the park is to get people off their seat and onto their feet. Aside from the headquarters complex at Cottonwood Bridge, the entire 16,000-acre park has been planned and conceived to be backpack and bootstrap ready (steelheaders take note).

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By John Shewey

Less Humidity, More Humility

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gins to fade away. You must stand very still and wait for it—wait for the hush—a hush broken only by the liquid trill of meadowlarks, the strange conversant burbling of ravens when they think they’re alone, the soft gossip clucking of chukars, the descending blues note of a canyon wren, and, if you’re lucky, the rueful, cliche-riven yelping of coyotes.

Of course, as regards this magazine’s readers, Cottonwood Canyon State Park’s pièce de résistance would categorically have to be the 16 miles of walk-in-accessible river. The John Day ranks as the longest undammed—and undimmed—native anadromous stream in the Columbia River system. And it hosts the largest remaining wild spring and fall chinook salmon runs in northeast Oregon, not to mention showcasing perhaps the single most vital run of “exclusively” wild summer steelhead. Given the gut-wrenching decline of other native stocks throughout the Columbia/Snake River Basin, the John Day’s importance as a gene pool repository cannot be too strongly emphasized.

On the one hand, there’s the weighty concerns of responsible stewardship, and on the other, the affable expectations of sport. So whether you come out here to fill the fabled hole in the suburban affable expectations of sport. So whether you come out here to fill the fabled hole in the suburban

**NOTEBOOK**

**Lower John Day River**

**When:** John Day lower canyon stretches open year-round. Bass fishing strong from late May into early Sept. Depending upon fall rains and closure dates for agricultural irrigation, steelhead fishing usually begins when river flows recharge in mid-Oct. Fly fishing remains promising until arctic fronts drop temperatures into the teens: some years in Nov., others not until Jan. or even Feb.

**Where:** North-central OR; over 16 mi. of river, from Cottonwood Bridge on Hwy. 206 to below Hay Creek canyon.

**Headquarters:** Upon official dedication in 2013, the main entrance/park base will be at the existing Cottonwood Bridge Ranch on the river’s west side. In the meantime, there’s only a basic boat launch/pit toilet/picnic area on the east side of the bridge embankment. **Information:** Oregon Parks & Recreation Department, www.oregonstateparks.org. Limited food and lodging available at Condon, approximately 20 mi. SE on Hwy 206; Condon Chamber of Commerce, (541) 384-7777, www.condonchamber.org.

**Appropriate gear:** Bass: 4- to 6-wt. rods, floating line, 5- to 7-ft. leaders, 3X–4X tippet. Steelhead: 6- to 8-wt. Spey or single-hand rods, floating line, leader length equal to length of rod, 8- to 10-lb. Fluorocarbon tippet.

**Useful fly patterns:** Steelhead: Marty’s Metal Head in red/orange or blue/purple; LaFollette’s Royal Treatment; Marabou Green Butt Skunk; Fergus’s MDAL in black/purple; Waller Wakers in black or orange; Stetzer Bomber in purple, black, or rust; Foam-Top Wags in purple or hot orange (size-4 and -6 flies are popular for steelhead). Bass: Black or olive Wooly Buggers; adult damselfly patterns; small black, yellow, or chartreuse poppers with rubber legs.

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**Bass:**
- Black or olive Wooly Buggers
- Adult damselfly patterns
- Small black, yellow, or chartreuse poppers with rubber legs

**Necessary accessories:** Fall/winter steelhead fishing: Layer up with high-tech undies and polar fleece, breathable waders, boots suitable for both wading and hiking, polarized sunglasses, sunblock (you can fry even when it’s cold), drinking water, and roomy day pack. **Summer bass fishing:** Baggy shorts, long-sleeved Supplex, sturdy river sandals, big hat, polarized sunglasses, lots of sunblock, lots of drinking water.

**Nonresident license:** $12/1 day, $22.50/2 days, $33/3 days, $43.50/4 days, $43.75/7 days, $61.50/annual plus $12 steelhead/salmon tag.


**Sometimes to save a river, you have to buy it.**

Take the John Day River. When a large ranch went up for sale, we acted quickly to purchase its 16,000 acres and 16 miles of river frontage. Our vision was to keep the land whole and the river wild, restoring native habitat to bolster a premier steelhead run. The property will be conserved as Oregon’s largest new state park, sure to be an unforgettable experience for generations of anglers.

With your support, we can seize once-in-a-lifetime opportunities to preserve great fishing streams across the West. Discover where we’re working and how you can help at www.westernrivers.org.