

# Lower John Day River, OR

## Murtha Ranch: Transforming a Cattle Ranch into a Fishery

By Don Roberts

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 direct-

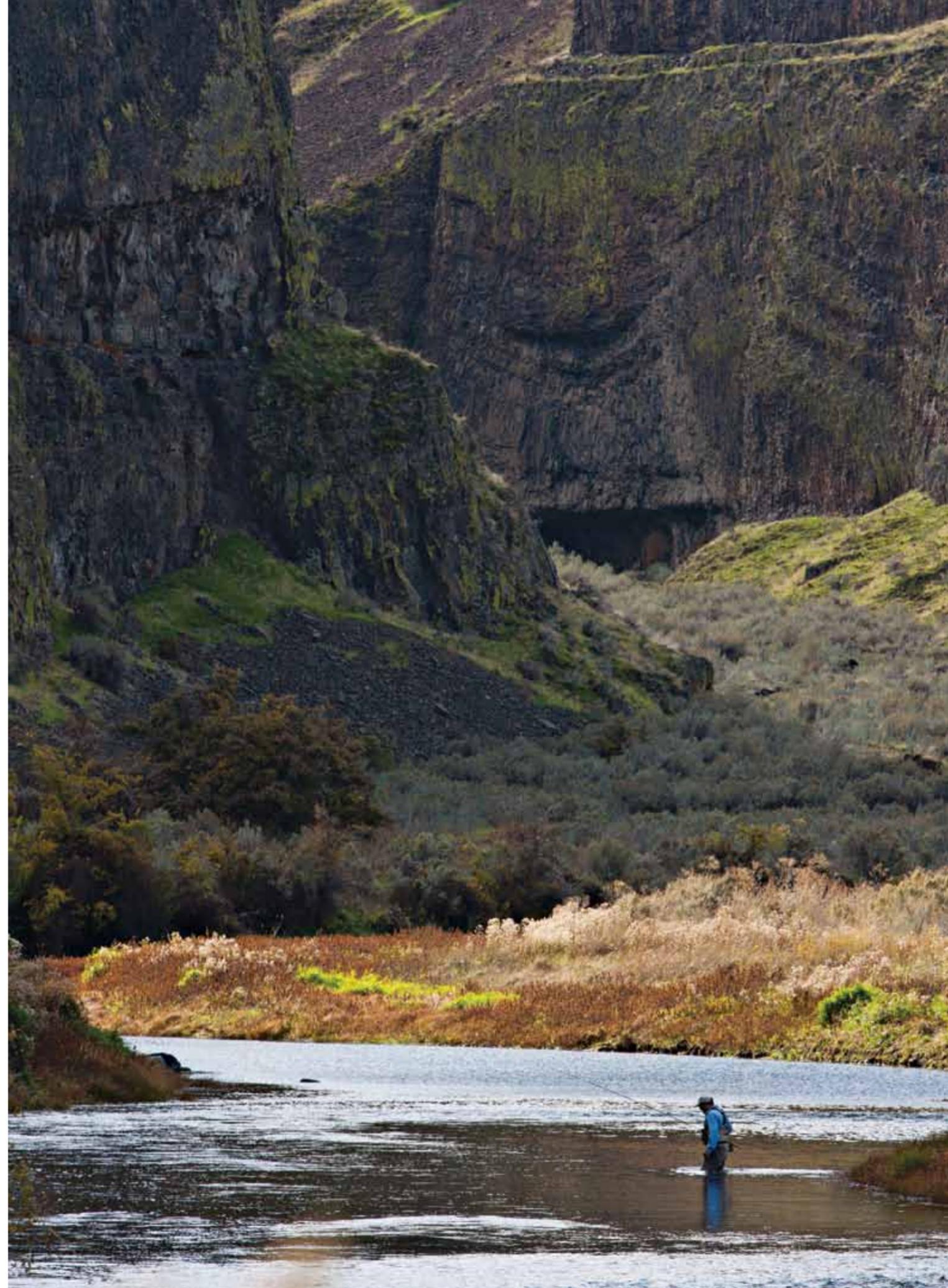
ed them on their way down the Columbia. All proceeded as planned until Crooks and Day approached the mouth of the Mah-Hah River, where they encountered a coterie of not-so-cordial Indians. What the two interlopers couldn't have known at the time was that a previous troop of their brethren had barged 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.



PHOTO BY DON ROBERTS

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—whether cultivating wheat, grazing cattle, or, lately, sprouting wind farms (turbines). Farther up the John Day watershed, you can add mining and logging to the mix. Much of the land in this region hasn't merely been 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 place had good bones. All that academic stuff would come later. Despite the scruffy first impression, from the very outset Murtha Ranch seemed not only eminently redeemable, but also radiant with promise—the promise of river access alone lending indisputable wattage to that glow. In Sherman and Gilliam, the two counties bisected by the Lower John Day, more than 90 percent of the land is privately held. For generations, the Murtha family ran cattle on their 8,114 deeded acres, plus 8,000 additional acres of adjoining Bureau of Land Management (BLM) property, for which the family "owned" grazing rights. Like all but a very small fraction of other ranchers in the region, they controlled everything in their purview with an iron fist, if not the iron sights of a 94 Winchester.

## Charge of the Enlightened Brigade

Certainly, WRC is not an organization susceptible to angst. Basically, it bypasses any overly ponderous multiple-review routine—the tendency to committee-ize and subsequently flog the decision-making process half to death. Instead of dithering and endlessly triangulating, WRC identifies potential properties and then mobilizes, commando-style, assigning specialists to specific tasks in the realms of finance, law, government, and communications.

In the case of Murtha Ranch—stream frontage in a region, indeed a continent, where river basin properties have become about as common as Baskin-Robbins franchises in hell—WRC sensed a certain urgency. After all, how long would it be before some self-indulgent jet-setter with too much cash and too little conscience bought the place as his own private high-desert Disneyland? Or, worse yet, some unscrupulous developer moved in with bulldozers and rearranged the landscape into a gated compound

replete with gold-paved driveways leading to palatial ranchettes? If you don't think this could happen, just take a drive through southwest Montana sometime. Or Deschutes County, for that matter.

Although WRC operates on a basis in which funding is future tense, notional, moiling in the atmosphere like weather, it doesn't have the luxury of nail-biting. It couldn't wait; too much was at risk. In 2008 it implemented the moving parts, the cogs and gears, of its standard modus operandi: it came. It saw. It contracted. Sue Doroff wryly commented, "We really stuck our necks out on this one, going for a substantial loan without really knowing who might eventually embrace it."

What WRC did know by now was that Murtha Ranch encompassed one of Oregon's finest remaining tracts of grasslands and sagebrush shrub/steppe. And furthermore,

this tract was a prominent migration corridor for native chinook salmon and perhaps the single most viable run of wild 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 extreme downstream section. Despite having 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 micropreserve 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 proved to be something of a soft sell, more like a slam dunk really. Face it: even a blind dog knows a pork chop when he smells one. Converting the ranch to a state park just seemed right on so many levels, including the geographical, historical, biological, and cultural.

Geographically speaking, Murtha Ranch fills a gap. To put this as simply as possible, 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 148-mile-long federally designated John Day Wild 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 the state-sanctioned Columbia Plateau Ecoregion Conservation Opportunity Area. The conversion of Murtha Ranch to Cottonwood Canyon 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 high-desert habitat.

The ranch's history runs shallow, which, ironically, makes it that much easier to encapsulate within the informational framework of a state park. Although there's evidence of casual aboriginal use—scattered obsidian artifacts, grinding stones, and petroglyphs (in undisclosed basalt clefts)—not even the tribes, localized along the Columbia River, bothered a great deal to exploit the Mah-

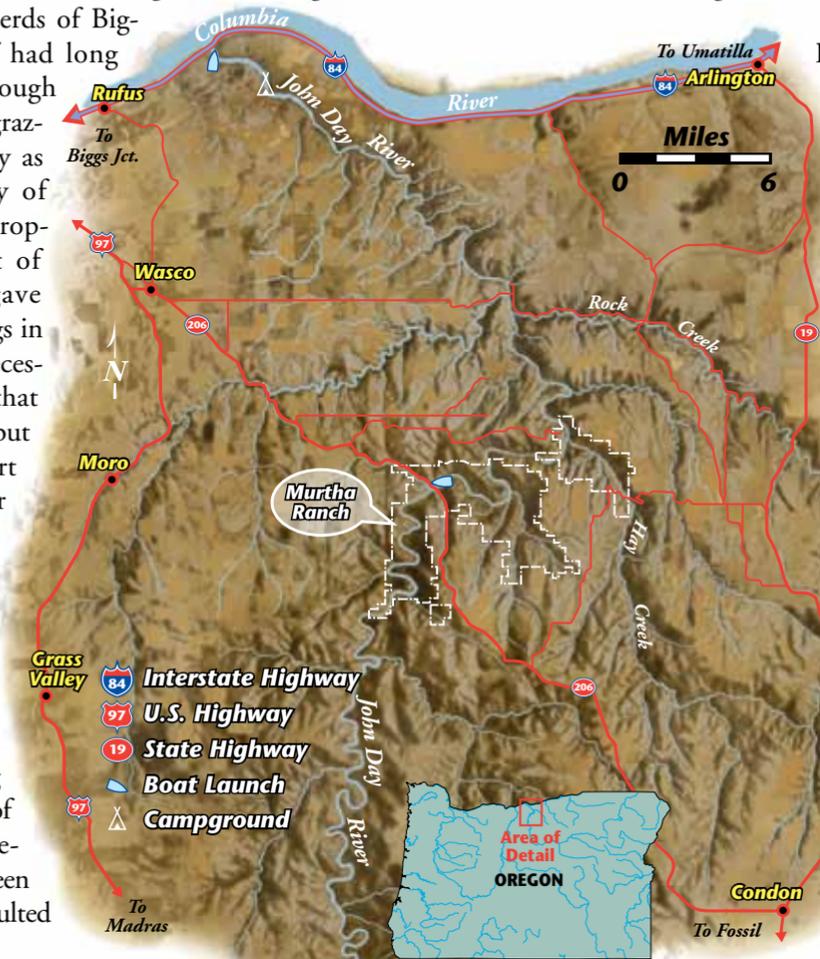
Hah. Why should they when, right out their front door, unimaginable numbers of salmon clogged the Columbia? Incidentally, the Confederated Tribes of Umatilla and Warm Springs have agreed to provide advisors to assist with articulating and defining the Indian heritage of the newly christened Cottonwood Canyon State Park.

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 traipsing 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 beaver. 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, whipping their mules up the Grass Valley stretch of the Oregon Trail.

Noting the abundance of bunchgrass and rich browse in the bottomlands, serious cattlemen and sheepherders 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 cowhide than most people would imagine. 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 even greater quantities of leather, on a per capita basis, to keep man and beast (belts, boots, and bridles) 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 big pond, immigrating to America, continuing west, and securing 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 Ranch in the 1940s, replacing original buildings lost in a fire. In a Johnny-come-lately deal, Murtha acquired the Burres place in 1966, thus almost doubling Murtha Ranch's bottomland and river frontage.

One of the jarring criticisms aimed at state parks has been the image of park personnel putt-putting around on 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. Admirable. 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. One of our hopes is that people will use the park as an introduction to the John Day River and push themselves to go just a little farther into the ruggedness than they would normally.”

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 of a state park opening, we have seen the number of fishermen in the area increase dramatically, thus increasing pressure on wild steelhead. ... This year a client landed a wild fish that had its adipose fin severed off; it was [a] fresh cut. ... I propose fishing regulations change to eliminate bait and that the usage of single barbless hooks be implemented to protect wild steelhead. ... My second concern is the campground proposed for Hay Creek. ... The Hay Creek area is sensitive habitat and a spawning ground for steelhead. Developing the area will lead to overuse and impact from people. How will this coincide with habitat restoration and protecting wild steelhead?”

During the public-hearing process, a number of local residents, especially ranchers on adjoining properties,

expressed a host of concerns, including the possibility of camp-caused wildfires, trespass from public to private land, lost property tax revenue (state parks don’t pay taxes), and the fear of property condemnation (government seizure of land). Though in my opinion most of these complaints embrace the usual inflated paranoia of die-hard isolationists, OPRD went out of its way to respond graciously and forthrightly to all public input.

The fact is, times are a-changin’, and the majority of local citizenry realizes that the feared influx of Portlanders will actually substantially benefit (that is, pump cash into) community coffers. Mike Weedman, who farms a spread above the John Day, mentioned that a park will

bring some inconveniences, but also acknowledges that it will be “a nice little park.” He observes dryly, “When you get a flood of people, they will cut fences, dig up archeological sites, and leave garbage. That’s a given.”

More traffic, more problems. Right? Well, not necessarily. Back in the day when the only watchful constituents were a handful of river guides and cowhands in pickup trucks, some of the less savory locals were at liberty (who’s gonna catch me?) to do what they damned well pleased. There’s no denying a long-held outback Oregon attitude—a Tea Party-like resentment of government and regulations—that tacitly condones sneering at the rule book. Bringing home the bacon, a wild steelhead or two, was/is a god-given right. Case in point: a high-profile, local “sportsman” once bragged to this

writer about an especially fruitful episode of bait-fishing a pool on the Lower John Day. “My buddy and I caught so many steelhead, we ran out of eggs,” he boasted. “Then, just for the hell of it, I put a chunk of an Oscar Mayer wiener on the hook and caught another fish.”

When asked what he and his pal did with all the steelhead, his expression turned to mocking disbelief. “What do you think? What are freezers for?”

If you’re attentive while walking down the old ranch road on the river’s east side, in about a mile or so you’ll see the faint, unnatural hues of a cipher painted on the cliff face. Apparently, at some point in the murky past, the sign had been brush-stroked onto a flat edifice of lava rock well over 100 feet above the canyon floor. Not, by any means, an easy spot to get to. The basalt billboard, if you will, was executed in early 19th-century

## Elder Statesman

By John Shewey



PHOTO BY NORTHWEST FLY FISHING

- 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)

block lettering, the type of loud signage that was once commonly seen on painted wagons selling tonics and elixirs. The sign beseeches “Let Me Insure Your House.” Curiously, nobody seems to know what it’s doing there, who painted it, or why he chose such an obscure location. To be sure, such an inappropriate advertisement is naked vandalism. Yet it isn’t. After all, the ground rules were different back then. Besides, the sign is now so old it seems downright innocent—quaint.

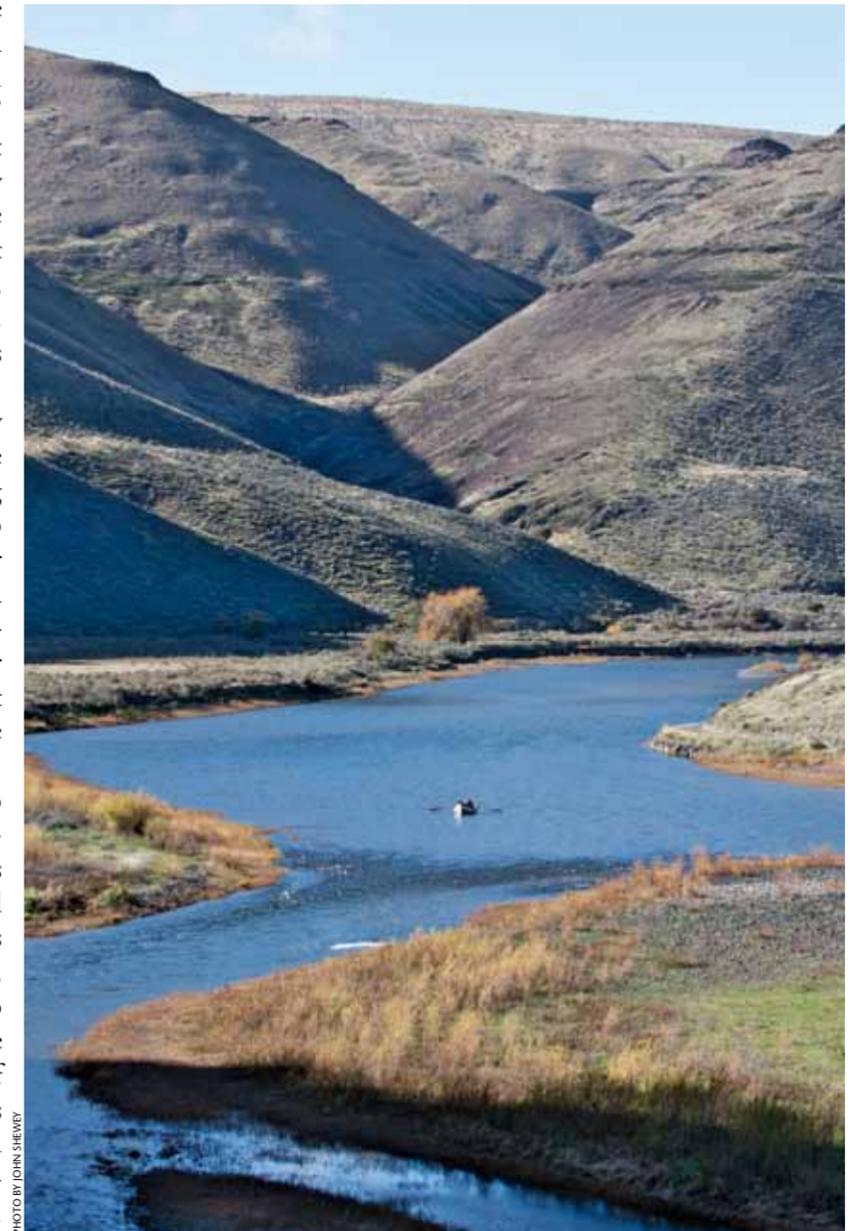
Even today, the good citizens of nearby towns seem more than willing to cut some slack for their high school graduating classes, who are not in the least loath to unholster cans of Krylon and spray their runes on bridge abutments, abandoned buildings, and, yes, rock walls. Fortunately, Cottonwood Canyon lies just far enough away to be an inconvenient target for teenage taggers. But it does beg the question of enforcement.

The OPRD is notably adept at two things: education and enforcement. As concerns education, it’s learned that if visitors are swept up in a park’s aura—the natural history and heritage—instilled by means of legend boards, displays, and literature, those visitors will generally feel a kinship to the place and cheerfully abide by the rules. Then there’s the less pleasant aspect of enforcement. One thing about state parks is that they’re usually supervised 24-7, which is achieved by a policy of hiring both live-on-site professionals and qualified locals, and additionally by recruiting volunteers.

Some of the more freewheeling folk out there might think the state exerts authority to an annoying degree and are inclined to chafe at the perceived mother hen syndrome. But viewed more broadly and honestly, OPRD’s typically zealous attention would make most mothers, including Mother Nature, proud.

### Less Humidity, More Humility

There has never been a 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).



Boating the 19 miles from Cottonwood Bridge, on Oregon Highway 205, down to McDonald Crossing requires at least two days if 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 overhear 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 downriver and the clamor of civilization—downshifting trucks, car doors slamming, kids screaming—be-

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 gossipy clucking of chukars, the descending blues note of a canyon wren, and, if you're lucky, the rueful, cliché-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 that fabled hole in the suburban soul or merely to brandish a fly rod in the eternal quest for steelhead, one thing is certain: you'll rarely, if ever, experience a wider realm of possibility.

Cottonwood Canyon may be one of the precious few places left on this ramshackle planet where, if a steelhead does deign to attack a skated fly, you'll actually be able to hear the slurp. ➡

*Don Roberts is the Oregon/Washington field editor for Northwest Fly Fishing magazine.*

## Lower John Day River NOTEBOOK

**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](http://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](http://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 MOAL in black/purple; Waller Wakers in black or orange; Stetzer Bomber in purple, black, or rust; Foam-Top Wogs in purple or hot orange (size-4 and -6 flies are popular for steelhead). *Bass:* Black or olive Woolly 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.

**Fly shops/guides:** *Hood River:* Gorge Fly Shop, (541) 386-6977, [www.gorgeflyshop.com](http://www.gorgeflyshop.com). *Maupin:* Deschutes Angler, (541) 395-0995, [www.deschutesangler.com](http://www.deschutesangler.com). *Portland:* Royal Treatment Fly Fishing, (503) 850-4397, [www.royaltreatmentflyfishing.com](http://www.royaltreatmentflyfishing.com); River City Fly Shop, (503) 579-5176, [www.rivercityfly.com](http://www.rivercityfly.com). *Condon:* Little Creek Outfitters (steelhead and bass/walk-in and drift trips), (503) 944-9165, [www.littlecreekoutfitters.net](http://www.littlecreekoutfitters.net).

**Books/maps:** *John Day River: Drift and Historical Guide* by Arthur Campbell. *Oregon Road & Recreation Atlas* by Benchmark Maps, *Oregon River Maps & Fishing Guide* by Frank Amato Publications.

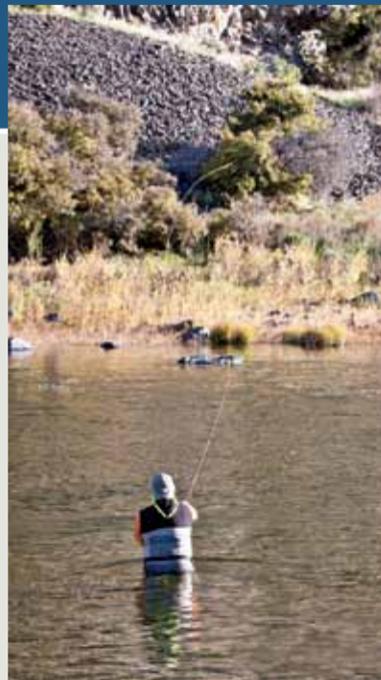


PHOTO BY JOHN SHEVEY



Photo: Schaefer

# 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](http://www.westernrivers.org)



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