



## Yakima River, WA

Sometimes You Can Go Home Again

*By Michael Hamilton*

Once in a while, revisiting something old to find out something new is worthwhile. In the case of the Yakima River, Washington's only true-blue catch-and-release fishery, the combined elements of salmon, high water, habitat, and hatches merit a closer look. The Yakima River—or "Yak," as locals call it—displays multiple personalities (some might add "disorders" to complete the phrase). The Yak can be very kind to anglers at times and relentlessly cruel at others. It reminds me of my favorite fly-fishing shirt. Ignore the frayed cuffs. Overlook the permanent pocket stain. Forget the missing button. Regardless of how it looks or what others think, I keep returning to it time and time again.



*On a sunny early summer day, anglers fish the river from an exposed gravel bar at Chukar Run, at the top of the Beavertail, milepost 20 in the Yakima Canyon (spread). A Brewer's blackbird snacks on a Green Drake. The hatch of these huge mayflies seems to be increasingly strong on part of the Yakima (above left). Yakima River rainbow (above right) Photo by Steve Maeder. Bighorn sheep gather on a rocky bench above the Yakima River in the canyon. Wildlife abounds along the Yakima (middle left). Male and female osprey deliver the goods to their fledglings. They don't practice catch-and-release, but fly anglers should play trout quickly, keep them in the water, and release them gently (middle right). Red's Fly Shop guide Joe Rotter nets a wild rainbow that ate a Morrish Hopper on a warm August morning in the Yakima Canyon (top) Photo by Joe Rotter. All other photos by Bruce Skotland except where noted*

Located in an algae-corroded irrigation culvert at the south end of Lake Keechelus, on the east slope of Snoqualmie Pass in the Cascade Range, the Yakima River's unromantic and humble origin is a lot like a Charles Dickens character who's forced to begin life in a miserable workhouse. Fortunately, these beginnings are short lived. Quickly gaining tempo and swelling with personality as it goes, the Yakima starts a 214-mile dodge through pine-scented forests, towering cottonwoods, slender white-barked aspens, flatlands planted with potatoes and Timothy grass, craggy basalt cliffs, humpback hills of sage and canyon scrub, and endless miles of fertile valley before widening into the Yakima River Delta and reaching its destination, the mighty Columbia River.

The Yak's history is rich with oral tradition and noteworthy facts. It was named for the indigenous Yakama people (note the spelling difference, which was adopted by the tribe in 1993), and the first western explorers to see it, 215 years ago, were Lewis and Clark, in October of 1805. The expedition camped at the confluence of the Yakima and Columbia but never went upriver. If it had, it would have encountered the Yakama people catching wild salmon with nets and wooden fish traps. Today, it is the Yakama Nation's past that informs their present efforts to restore depleted stocks of spring and summer chinook, coho, and sockeye to the Yakima River and its tributaries. My relationship with the Yak began in 1993 under the

watchful eye of Bob Aid, one of only a handful of fly-fishing guides whose names may sound familiar to baby boomers and totally foreign to millennials. With the late Tim Irish in the lead, others, such as Aid, Larry Graham, Jack Mitchell, John Farrar, and Chuck Cooper, led the early cry of collective fly-fishing voices in the 1990s attempting to convince the Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife (WDFW) to designate approximately 75 miles of the upper reaches as catch-and-release. Every river has its legends, pioneers really, who did the heavy lifting so the rest of us could follow in their footsteps.

Floating from high country to lower canyon, anglers seldom encountered another drift boat. But times change. Today, more than two decades since the river went “wild,” five guide shops along with a handful of independents work the river year-round from Easton to Roza Dam.

The upper Yakima’s 75 miles designated as a catch-and-release fishery boasts optimal habitat for trout: clear, cold water; rocky bottoms in riffle and run areas; as many pools as there are riffles; areas of slow, deep water; abundant and stable banks with a lot of plant growth. Furthermore, Yakima trout use undercut banks, overhanging vegetation, rocks, deep pools, water turbulence, and woody debris as cover to protect them from predators.

### A Game of Give and Take

Currently, according to Joe Rotter of Red’s Fly Shop and Ted Truglio of Troutwater Fly Shop, stonefly populations on the Yakima remain as strong as these guides have seen in their careers. Both cite the *Skwala* stoneflies as being—in the words of Truglio—an exciting “big-meal, season-starter” insect that draws more eager anglers to the river in late winter than ever. Even while the *Skwala* stoneflies are still hatching, the Yakima’s early-season hatches of little *Baetis* (Blue-Winged Olive) mayflies begin.

However, hatches of Blue-Winged Olives in the lower canyon where they used to thrive have been noticeably absent lately. The reason is anybody’s guess. Did the high water events of recent years take a toll? “It’s a puzzle with many missing pieces,” notes longtime Yakima guide Bruce Skotland, owner of Yakima River Angler. Luckily for anglers, the fish adapted to the shifting menu and by all accounts, are doing better than ever.

Skotland—who spends much of his time fishing in the lower canyon—adds that hatches of Pale Morning Duns and March Browns, traditionally strong in the lower canyon, are currently sporadic at best and nowhere near historic levels (although it’s worth considering that the codified history of Yakima River hatches doesn’t span many years anyway). However, upriver through the farmlands to Cle Elum, other guides tell a different story.

“Fishable dry-fly hatches on the upper river from Easton to Ellensburg are consistent and as diverse as ever,” says Jim Gallagher, co-owner of Troutwater Fly Shops in Cle Elum and Ellensburg. Gallagher maintains that he and his guides encounter both sparse and dense seasonal hatches of *Baetis*, PMDs, March Browns, Green Drakes, and more.

Steve Worley, owner of the Worley Bugger Fly Co. in Ellensburg, spends most of his guiding days in the farmlands and upper river. He says that he’s personally witnessed, on a regular basis, intense March Brown hatches lasting four hours. “This is a hatch that in past years you could count on being anywhere from 20 minutes to an hour at the most—if you were lucky.”

Worley adds that in recent years, he has seen many days when March Browns, Blue-Winged Olives, and *Skwala* stoneflies were all on the water at the same time for hours, especially through the Thorp and Cle Elum sections of the Yakima River.

Worley and Gallagher both mention that craneflies are a food source that’s overlooked by most anglers. Dry and larvae patterns can be effective in both spring and fall. Cranefly dries draw the most attention from trout on softer water. Moreover, while *Skwalas* seem to be the darlings of the Yakima stoneflies in recent years, anglers who fish the river from May through summer should come armed with flies to match Salmonflies, Golden Stoneflies, and Yellow Sallies.

Other guides on the Yakima also cite impressive hatches, although as Steve Joyce, owner and general manager of Red’s Fly Shop, points out, “Talking about hatches is relative to whether the fish are actually keying in on them and not necessarily the number of bugs you see.”

Further, he says, “I really think the hatches have shifted a bit from the high-water events that we’ve been hit with the past several consecutive years.”



Kodiak Skwala Nymph  
Joe Rotter



Cranefly Larva  
T.J. Zandoli



Yakcaddis  
Derek Young



The Golden Road  
Derek Young



KOA  
Derek Young



Yaksalmonfly  
Dave Carpenter

## Eat or Be Eaten

Setting high water aside for the moment as a cause for changing bug populations, another possible factor to consider is the increase in predation. For example, many mayfly species feed on algae or diatoms, but a few are predatory, eating each other, while everyone else snacks on them. In other words, a larger population of predator mayflies in the Yakima could, over time, change a species' dynamics. But it's another predator that people wonder about.

The Yakama Nation—in a well-publicized effort to reintroduce indigenous salmon to the Yakima watershed—has reared 810,000 spring chinook at its Cle Elum Supplementation and Research Facility since 1997. Averaging 4 to 5 inches when released, the smolts are discharged in the spring from three acclimation points, two in the Yakima River and a third on the North Fork of the Teanaway River. What impact, if any, has the sudden presence of thousands of smolts had on insect populations in the river?

Dave Fast, research manager with Yakama Nation Fisheries, says, "What people don't realize is that the smolts are only in the system for two to three weeks. Since they have been reared on a vegetarian diet in the hatchery before release, they are slow to start eating insects. By the time they do, they are usually migrating out." Additionally, Fast notes that the biomass contributed by salmon spawn and salmon carcasses should lead to higher production and survival of insects, not less.

Because the Yakama's spring chinook salmon smolts are known as aggressive feeders, albeit they begin life as vegetarians, I asked Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks senior biologist David Schmetterling what he thinks would happen to aquatic invertebrates if hundreds of thousands of smolts were introduced into systems like the Clark Fork or Bitterroot Rivers near Missoula. Schmetterling is a renowned research scientist and a frequent contributor to magazines and periodicals. He told me, "I am totally speculating, but I don't think there would be any deleterious consequences to aquatic invertebrates; in fact, on the contrary, maybe a benefit. Smolts could be a source of food for some invertebrates as many of the released smolts would die before leaving [such rivers] either naturally or as a result of shock or confusion. These smolts would also be a source of food for other scavengers [crayfish] as well as

mink, herons, kingfishers, and, of course, other fish."

Aquatic entomologist and author Rick Hafele, when asked the same question, agreed with Schmetterling. "Typically, from my experience, if resident fish are growing larger, healthier, and gradually increasing in numbers . . . as they are in the Yakima, then there would have to be abundant food to support the increase in biomass, which includes invertebrates."

There is a silver lining in this play-book—the overall size and health of the trout being caught in the Yakima are exceptional. "Even though there are fewer small mayflies hatching during big flows in some stretches, there is abundant food and clean, cool water, which we have seen by the size and health of the fish the past few seasons," says Steve Joyce.

Some speculate the river's cutthroat trout may be faring even better than the rainbows. The cutts have expanded their range in the river and are more numerous than ever according to longtime Yakima anglers. They are now caught all the way down to Roza Dam; 15 years ago, cutts were almost unheard of in the canyon. Not only are the native cutts numerous now, they are also growing to impressive proportions—last year, an 8-pound cutthroat turned up during electroshocking surveys.

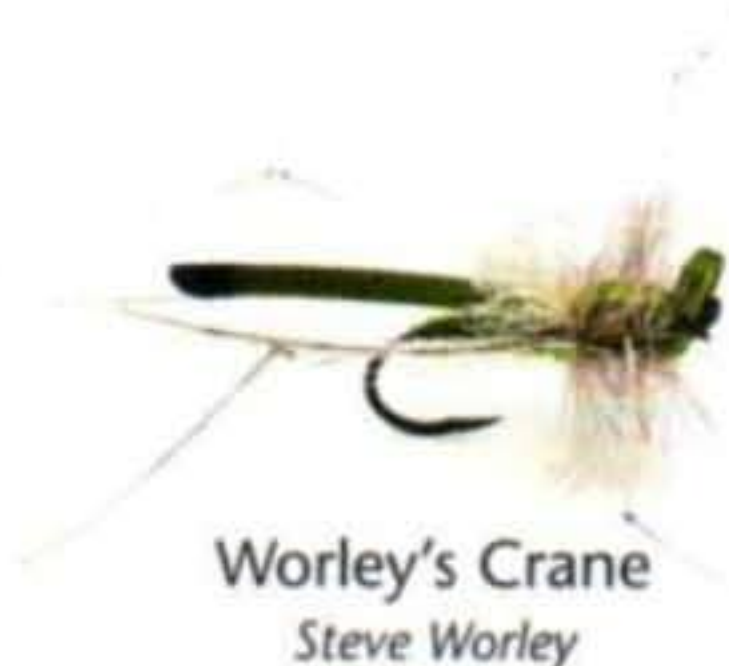
In addition to catching healthier and heavier wild trout, fly anglers are also adjusting their techniques and meeting with success by fishing more underneath than on top.

"No question the nymph game on the Yakima is productive because 80 percent of what trout eat lives underwater, not on top," says Joe Rotter. This upheaval in technique, notes Rotter, has gradually caught fire and today, nymphing is often the meat-and-potatoes technique for catching trout on the Yakima. "The standard nymph rig usually features an indicator with two flies like a Pat's Stone on top and a smaller mayfly or stonefly imitation on the bottom," explains Rotter.

Most anglers, he observes, equate nymph fishing with success. However,

he also points out that when he adds up the time he often spends untangling nymph rigs, he will frequently suggest using one nymph or switching tactics to cast dries or streamers when hatches and conditions dictate.

Worth noting, too, is that the Yakima is also home to a variety of baitfish. Streamer patterns that imitate sculpins, shiners, and other minnows can be very effec-



Worley's Crane  
Steve Worley



Worley's March Brown Dun  
Steve Worley



Stacked Wing Caddis  
Tim Irish



Skwamer  
Al Parke



Al's Skwala Nymph  
Al Parke

tive, especially in the shoulder seasons leading to fall, winter, and spring. Fished on the swing with floating or 10- to 15-foot sinking-tip lines, streamers elicit violent strikes from big fish.

## Salmon Homecoming

The construction of Roza Dam in the late 1930s was one of the many regional efforts to take water born of mountain snowpacks and use it for expanding agricultural development. In an era before terms like “ecosystem” and

dependent on how coho recover because they migrate up tributaries, spawn, and die. Their carcasses provide a food source for steelhead, bull trout, and rainbows.”

Fast says that adult sockeye are transported from Priest Rapids Dam in the summer and spawn above Lake Cle Elum. Historically, 200,000 sockeye used to return annually to four lakes—Bumping, Keechelus, Kachess, and Cle Elum. The 2014 season marked the first returns of the sockeye transplanted to Lake Cle Elum. While their returns are in smaller numbers, anglers have been reporting sightings of silvers in the fall during recent years.

For the river’s trout anglers, burgeoning salmon stocks hold the promise of even better things to come: if these species take hold, the river’s biomass will continue to increase.

## Finding Your Way

The farthest upstream WDFW public launch is at Ensign, below Easton, adjacent to a ranch owned by the Mormon Church. Take exit 78 off Interstate 90 onto Golf Course Road. Private cabins and homes frame most of the 5-mile float down to Bullfrog, the site of a former state park now gone to seed. The first three weeks of June on this section can offer incredible Green Drake hatches. Anglers can also walk and wade upstream from Ensign’s public access point.

Bullfrog to South Cle Elum comes next and is ripe with sweepers, logjams, and tight corners downriver to the confluence with the Cle Elum River; it’s a treacherous float for drift boats or any novice in

a pontoon boat. There are big fish to be had, no question. However, if you are determined to try this stretch, get advice from Jim Gallagher at Troutwater in Cle Elum first.

The 5-mile float from South Cle Elum to “State” (East Cle Elum) begins at a primitive public launch at the bridge in town. It requires skilled trailer maneuvering to back a drift boat or raft down the steep bank. The float presents no major obstacles and the take-out is at a state launch site off State Route 10 in East Cle Elum. From I-90, take exit 85 and follow old US Route 10 a short distance toward Blewett Pass on SR 970. Turn southeast off SR 970 at the Public Fishing sign. Trout hold in very specific places in this reach—off a drop below a riffle behind a rock. You need to be able to read the water. Expect bigger fish but not as many as you move downriver. Some anglers will forgo the float, choosing instead to walk and wade upstream to the Cle Elum confluence.

Next comes State to Green Bridge (Thorp). Just below the launch, the river splits and staying right is always recommended. In June, after runoff, Green Drakes hatch, and in



PHOTO BY STEVE MAEDER

*Fall fish on the Upper Yakima can be discriminating. Josh McLellan assesses his fly options. (above) An old Yakima River buck! This westslope cutthroat is ready for release (right).*

“environmental impact,” visions were followed and potential consequences were not considered, if even they were understood. Strong runs of great sea-run fish were taken for granted in some cases and often undervalued at the same time. The resultant impact on regional migratory fish was catastrophic by almost all accounts. But times have changed and, to many, the current fish stocks are unacceptable. Compensatory actions are even mandated by law in some cases.

Today, some river systems are seeing measured success, but it comes at a steep price. The Yakama Nation Fisheries has invested heavily in an attempt to restore part of its tribal history and culture. In addition to the Yakama Nation’s Cle Elum Supplementation and Research Facility, which focuses on spring chinook salmon, the Yakamas have also reintroduced a run of summer chinook, which are released on a lower stretch of the Naches River.

Coho and sockeye, notes research manager Dave Fast, were extirpated but are also making a comeback in the Yakima. “The long-term health of the watersheds is

July, Golden Stoneflies steal the show. Long riffles, deep pockets, big boulders, and silky tailouts hold many 14- to 20-inch trout. Below Thorp, a short run of 2.5 miles to Diversion Dam sees little pressure. Expect consistent dry-fly fishing with stoneflies active from July through September and BWOs and Mahogany Duns in fall.

KOA Campground to Irene Reinhardt Riverfront Park in Ellensburg is a relatively short float that offers some protection from the notorious winds that whip up in the Kittitas Valley. In spring and fall, the next section, the float from Irene to Ringer, is usually passable, but be careful: from KOA to the Ringer boat launch, narrow channels, whitewater drops, and sweepers can form hazards, depending on water levels. Before you float this stretch, call a local Ellensburg shop for updates on blockages or portages.

In fact, regardless of where you float, it's wise to check in with any of the shops or guides before making your



PHOTO BY ION LURE

first drift of the season or after any high-water event because some stretches of the river are prone to changes and hazards come and go every year.

### The Canyon and More

Though diverse and productive, the upper sections of the Yakima don't bask in the fame of Yakima Canyon, which is in a league of its own in terms of both fishing and scenery. Yakima River trout populations reach their highest density here. The river runs deep, cold, and fish friendly; precipitous arid slopes rise dramatically to towering heights.

In mid-February, *Skwala* stoneflies begin to hatch in earnest. Nymphs migrate shoreward when the water reaches 38 to 40 degrees. Adults hatch when the water temperature rises into the mid- to upper 40s. Fish nymphs early in the day, then switch to an adult *Skwala* pattern in the afternoon. In April, March Browns often emerge about 1:30 p.m. It's a tough hatch to predict. For the past two years, it's been a stronger emergence in the farmlands and above.

Mention the month of May and Yakima regulars immediately think Mother's Day Caddis. Sunny days bring indescribable swarms of egg-laying caddisflies, which are good for trout gorging below the surface but not so good for you. Cloudy days are much more angler friendly because the adult caddisflies sit on the surface, making a size 14 or 16 X-Caddis deadly.

After June runoff, casting ants, beetles, and even small grasshopper patterns downstream and tight to the



# Yakima River NOTEBOOK



PHOTO BY STEVE MAEDER

**When:** Year-round Lake Easton to above Roza Dam; March–October is prime.

**Where:** Kittitas County, WA.

**Headquarters:** Ellensburg, Cle Elum, Roslyn. **Lodging:** The Lodge at Canyon River Ranch, (509) 933-2100, [www.canyon-river.net](http://www.canyon-river.net); Ellensburg KOA, (509) 925-9319, [www.koa.com/campgrounds/ellensburg](http://www.koa.com/campgrounds/ellensburg).

**Appropriate gear:** 4- to 6-wt. rods, floating lines, sinking-tip or sinking line for streamers, 7.5- to 9-ft. leaders, 2X–6X tippets.

**Useful fly patterns:** Midges, Green Drakes, BWOs, PMDs, Mahogany Dun, various caddisflies, *Skwala* stoneflies, Salmonflies, Golden Stoneflies, Yellow Sallies, terrestrials, craneflies, Comparadun, Parachute Adams, Stimulator, Dave's Hopper, Morrish Hopper, X-Caddis, WD-40, LaFontaine's Sparkle Pupa, Zebra Midge, Buffalo Midge, BH Flashback Pheasant Tail, Lightning Bug, Hare's Ear, Prince Nymph, Copper John, San Juan Worm, Red Brassie, Seal Bugger (olive, black), Muddler Minnow, Woolly Bugger, Sculpzilla, Articulated Leech, October Caddis, CFOs, Chubby Chernoble, Flesh Fly.

**Non-resident license:** \$20.15/1 day, \$28.95/2 days, \$35.55/3 days, \$84.50/annual.

**Fly shops/guides:** Red's Fly Shop, (509) 933-2300, [www.redsflyshop.com](http://www.redsflyshop.com); Troutwater, (509) 674-2144 (Cle Elum) or (509) 962-3474 (Ellensburg), [www.troutwaterfly.com](http://www.troutwaterfly.com); Worley Bugger Fly Co., (509) 962-2033, [www.worleybuggerflyco.com](http://www.worleybuggerflyco.com); Yakima River Angler, (509) 697-6327, [www.yakimarivernagler.com](http://www.yakimarivernagler.com); Emerging Rivers Guide Services, (425) 373-6417, [www.orvis.com/derekyoung](http://www.orvis.com/derekyoung); The Evening Hatch, (509) 962-5959, [www.theeveninghatch.com](http://www.theeveninghatch.com); Ellensburg Angler, (509) 607-1804, [www.ellensburgangler.com](http://www.ellensburgangler.com).

**Books/maps:** *Yakima River (River Journal)* by Steve Probasco; *Washington Blue-Ribbon Fly Fishing Guide* by John Shewey; *Flyfisher's Guide to Washington* by Greg Thomas; *Washington State Fishing Guide*, 9th Edition, by Terry W. Sheely. *Washington Atlas & Gazetteer* by DeLorme Mapping.

bank, drag free, can bring the big boys to the net. In July and August, canyon flows stabilize at around 4,000 cubic feet per second. The trout are fat and feisty. Shortwing Stoneflies (aka Summer Stones), along with those grasshoppers, are always on the menu, as are caddisflies after the sun moves off the water.

Things change dramatically in autumn, when regional irrigation slackens and the heavy flows that feed it subside. The river drops and gravel bars emerge again. When low flows stabilize in October, the river reawakens in dramatic fashion. A new crop of insects stirs surface action upriver, including renewed hatches of *Baetis* (watch for spinner falls in the evenings and imitate them with a tiny Red Quill Spinner).

Fall BWO hatches can be fleeting in the canyon but are especially strong in the farmlands and on the upper river. Anywhere on the river, if luck holds, you may find larger Mahogany Duns and possibly even Pale Evening Duns hatching alongside the little Blue-Winged Olives. On some sections, giant October Caddis appear. Of course, fall is also a fine time to pull big streamers for the largest trout.

## The More Things Change

Is the Yakima River changing? Are its fish and hatches and ecology in a state of flux? Probably. That's the nature of rivers—they are dynamic ecosystems and in the case of Washington's unofficial blue-ribbon trout stream, the changes are for the better.

Even while Yakima Canyon continues to get most of the good press, the river as a whole offers amazing and diverse prospects for anglers. And while changes wrought by years of surge flows, the reintroduction of salmon, and other catalysts may not be quantified by science, for anglers, conclusions are easy to come by: the trout themselves are bigger and better than ever, native cutthroat seem more numerous and more widely distributed, and hatches such as *Skwala* stoneflies and March Browns have increasingly become predictable major events in the farmlands and upriver stretches.

So, if you haven't fished the Yakima lately or at all, it's time to introduce yourself. Explore it head to toe, embrace all the seasons, learn the hatches all over again, and rejoice in the big, beautiful wild trout. If you've never cast flies on the Yak, ponder this river in the reverent tones usually reserved for waters like the Madison and Henrys Fork and Bighorn: the amazing Yakima is one of those places every angler needs to experience. ➔

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