

This popular, productive steelhead river
flows through the California State Capital

The All-American River

Don Vachini

Cast and retrieve, cast and retrieve. As I looked around at the leafless trees lining the bank, a kingfisher's harsh rattle demanded my attention. From my place in the riverbed I could see little sign of civilization. A few other anglers dotted the shore while a great blue heron, statuesque in a small side pool, added to the dreary winterscape.

On one particular drift, my yarn fly briefly hesitated and I instinctively reared back. Reacting as no rock ever did, a silver missile caught the reflection of the early February light as it soared, dancing on the surface several times in what seemed like a mere second.

As unlikely as it might seem, my son Jason and I were steelheading in the heart of California's state capital on the American River. The American begins high in the northern Sierra Nevada Mountains as two separate but lengthy forks, both of which pick up snow melt and seepage from the vast back country of the western slope.

The South Fork, most popular and accessible since much of its upper reaches follow Highway 50 for a long spell, originates near Echo Summit.

The North Fork, on the other hand, has no major roads from its origin near Squaw Valley downstream to the Auburn area and is inaccessible except by foot trails. The North Fork also collects flow from the equally remote but noteworthy Middle Fork.

Flowing through rugged and steep granitic canyons, both upper streams are highly regarded for their fine wild rainbow trout fisheries. While catchable trout supplement the heavily-pressured roadside sections, the bulk of the forks remain wild and virtually without pressure.

Folsom Dam, located about 20 miles east of Sacramento, blocks off both forks at their confluence, forming an 11,000-acre water-storing impoundment. Three miles below this reservoir, flows enter Lake Natoma, which is formed by huge

Nimbus Dam. Below Nimbus, the river is reborn, fed entirely by flows from these two stepladder lakes. Known as the Lower American from here on, the river winds another 23 miles through the heart of metropolitan Sacramento to empty into the Sacramento River.

water in the rapidly expanding city. Although the dams cut off all but 20-plus miles of salmon and steelhead territory, they actually brought consistency to the remaining river. Before the dams, river flows were largely erratic. During winter the river was a vast flood plain while



Lineups of anglers are common at Nimbus Dam, the furthest upstream migration point on the river.

In recent seasons the stream has become increasingly popular around both the Sacramento and San Francisco Bay areas with an estimated annual run of between 15,000 to 25,000 steelhead.

For countless centuries before John Sutter first discovered gold in its gravel during the mid 1800s, the American River ran free and unobstructed. The anadromous species were able to utilize hundreds of miles of prime spawning habitat and they prospered.

Even though some noticeable changes have taken place since 1850, the river's fishery still looks to be in excellent shape. In 1956 Folsom Dam was erected and a few years later Nimbus followed to meet the growing demand for more

summer saw the water levels drop drastically and water temperatures rise dangerously. In many cases, redds silted over or juvenile fish perished in shallow, stranded pools. Not only do dam releases provide consistent flows year-round, but ideal water temperatures as well.

In recognition of the fishery's value, the Nimbus Salmon and Steelhead Hatchery was built as mitigation for the dams which cut off over 95 percent of the river's spawning potential. Financed and constructed by the Bureau of Reclamation, U. S. Department of the Interior in 1955, it is operated by the California Department of Fish and Game (DFG). A weir located just 300 yards below

Nimbus Dam directs migrating fish to a ladder and then holding pens.

Since virtually all of the steelhead on the American originate as hatchery releases, the facility is dedicated to maximizing high numbers of returns. Careful use of research aids in this endeavor. According to Fred Meyer, a biologist with the DFG, studies have shown that yearlings released from the hatchery should be a quarter of a pound or bigger to stand a good chance of survival. "Our goal is to raise approximately 500,000 yearlings to that size annually," he informed.

The ten- to 12-inch fish are released well downstream on the Sacramento River near Rio Vista to insure further escape to the sea.

There are actually two steelhead runs established on the river. From late September through December a migration of smaller fish enters the river. "Most of these steelies are comprised of the Coleman strain which run between two to six pounds, with a few to nine pounds," stated Meyer.

From mid to late January the winter run usually begins, peaking sometime in February. These fish consist of the Eel River strain, notorious for their large size and pugilistic qualities. "They run between eight to 14 pounds with a few ranging to near 20 pounds," beamed Meyer.

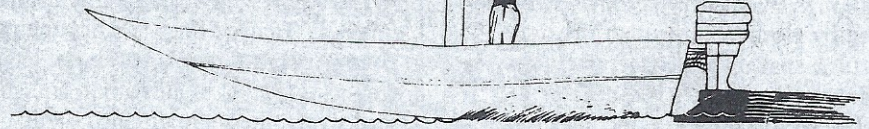
It was during a February trip that I tied into the mint bright scrapper. After feeling the sting of steel, the fish headed toward the brushy south bank but steady pressure soon changed its intent. It quickly became apparent that the steelhead was not as large as it would seem from the battle it waged. Releasing the shiny four-pounder, it was hard to believe I was in the middle of the populous state capital and not on some distant, isolated water. The undeveloped banks are part of the American River Parkway which virtually follows the whole lower course of the river. This pleasant streamside setting is due to a land purchase bond issue voted on in 1972, which ultimately lead Congress to give Wild and Scenic status to the Lower American.

While the traditional steelhead opener is January 1, the area immediately below Nimbus Dam, known as the Nimbus Basin, is open throughout the year. Since this represents the furthest upstream migration point, it is usually graced with a long lineup of anglers. In an effort to spread out angling pressure on this urban water, the DFG is attempting to establish a larger summer run.

RIFFLE RUNNER®

Permanently raise your Outboard 7½" to avoid rocks.

Let the Jets follow you!



The strong fiberglass tunnel lifts water to surround the propeller so it can act as intended. Little or no speed loss — No moving parts to wear out — Fits most engines from 10 to 35 hp and some to 60.

E.H. Spaulding Co.
2758 Rodman Drive
Los Osos, CA 93402
(805) 528-2161

In Alaska:
Riffle Runner of Alaska
549 West Fireweed Lane
Anchorage, AK 99503
(907) 243-8078

MERCURY OUTBOARD CLEARANCE SALE!

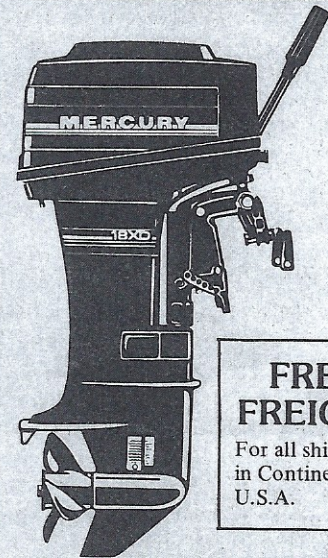
COMPARE OUR PRICES BEFORE YOU BUY!

MODEL	LIST	SALE
1985 2.2M	\$ 507	\$ 349*
1984 3.5M	\$ 666	\$ 429*
1985 4.5M	\$ 875	\$ 599*
1986 6HP	\$1059	\$ 799*
1985 7.5M	\$1154	\$ 799*
1986 8HP	\$1250	\$ 949*
1984 9.8M	\$1500	\$ 999*
1985 9.8E	\$1684	\$1199*
1986 9.9HP	\$1574	\$1149*
1985 18M	\$1794	\$1299*
1983 18ML	\$1720	\$1099*
1985 25M	\$1985	\$1399*
1985 25E	\$2530	\$1649*
1985 25ELH	\$2196	\$1599*

Washington residents only, add sales tax.

*All motors come with Gas Tanks, Electric Models include: Props, Controls and Cables

WE STOCK FULL LINE JET PUMPS
25 HP TO 200 HP



FREE FREIGHT

For all shipments in Continental U.S.A.

Dealers for
BAYLINER, ARIMA, ALMAR
& BOSTON WHALER

FINANCING AVAILABLE
On all Mercury packages through
MMAC, in the Continental U.S.A.

MERCURY OUTBOARDS



BOSTON WHALER

INFLATABLES

"Super-Quick & Super-Stable"

Check our Super-Prices on all Boston Whaler Dinghys in stock 9' to 14'

EXAMPLE: 9' DINGHY list \$695
HAWLEYS' PRICE \$499

Hawleys
MARINA

2111 Iowa St. • Bellingham, WA 98226

In Wash. 1-800-858-0859
In USA 1-800-631-6316
Local Phone 1-206-734-9660

Even though many of the summer fish brought in from other drainages are susceptible to disease, this goal is gradually being achieved as more and more steelies are showing in July and August.

King salmon also provide fine fishing, although this fishery is somewhat limited by closures to protect the only natural spawning area left to them. The salmon closure, which runs from October 16 to January 1, includes the stretch from Ancil E. Hoffman Park upstream to the hatchery. Meyer estimates that more than 50 percent of the salmon originating in the lower river come from natural spawning and not the hatchery.

August is a good month to troll for kings at the river's mouth with the action

RICK SCOTT FISH TAXIDERMY
8710 - 163rd Ave. N.E.

Granite Falls, WA 98252 (206) 691-7583

Write for Free Trophy Fish Care Instructions



BOAT PLANS
CATALOG \$2 (REFUNDABLE) US Funds Only
ALASKAN RIVERBOATS: 16'
15' PLY CANOE
MANY MORE!!
DRIFTBOATS: 13' (FOR PICKUPS) STEELHEADERS FOR 15' (OUTBOARD WELL)
20' SURF DORY
DUCKBOATS: 12' (W/TRANSOM) 15' (DOUBLE ENDED)
FERNWOOD, Dept. S, Box 2005, Lynnwood, WA 98036

peaking during late August-early September. While not really plentiful, they are mint bright and tend to hit lures or flies more now than at a later date. During the main runs from mid-October through December, angling is not a lonely venture as anglers crowd the limits of the closures. Tangled lines and hot tempers often become allies of the kings. However, as is typical of all salmon and steelhead rivers, these crowds also signify where the action is.

I have seen a wide variety of gear on the American, ranging from ultralight to heavy action spin, bait or fly casting rods. While a light action outfit can be very effective in hooking large salmonids, it can prove difficult fighting them in the fast flows. Many an undermatched fisherman has been stripped of line or experienced broken tackle while working these bruisers. For this reason I would suggest a medium to heavy action spinning rod and reel matched with 8- to 12-pound mono. Rods should have a sensitive tip and stout butt section.

Roe and night crawlers are favorite baits among shore anglers while good lure choices include Glo-Bugs, big Oaie Drifters, Kastmasters and Big Montis. I have had excellent success using fluorescent beads with orange or red yarn fished with pencil sinkers to keep them ticking bottom. The yarn helps create better hookups since its fibers become entangled in the fish's teeth, allowing more time to set the hook.

Fly anglers will have to make long casts and keep retrieves near bottom so high density sink-tip lines are a must.

Medium action rods with plenty of muscle are suggested. Brindle Bugs and Silver Hiltons are popular flies, especially in clear water.

Hip boots and chest waders are almost mandatory to properly work the water.

Up until a few years ago the majority of angling took place from the bank. The drift boat trend, gaining in popularity, has taken hold on the American, too. Whereas fishermen used to work only the larger holes with aluminum boats, the drift boat offers the opportunity to cover more and varied types of water. The boat sits high on the water and is easily maneuvered into pockets, riffles and holes.

More often than not, the technique of "backtrolling" is used. Lures are put out in front of the boat and the current imparts action. Since the boat can be kept virtually still, it is very effective at working the lures correctly. Hot Shots, Wee Warts and Tadpollys, seemingly made for backtrolling, perform admirably on the American, too.

I have found that slightly high water with a little color offers the best chance at connecting. Slightly murky water enables the use of heavier line which increases chances of landing bigger fish. Offerings must be kept at or very near bottom, so should have just the right amount of weight to keep it there and yet not impede action.

High, colored flows are not the only conditions that produce action. One early October morning Jason and I found ourselves alone on a promising stretch. We didn't really expect much since the water was low and clear. Both of us rigged with 4-pound line and tied on Smolt lures — well-known for their fine action in low water. Jason's fifth cast produced a smashing strike and he was fast to a fish. As sunlight gleamed off his taut line, he fought a careful yet smart battle using a loose drag and steady pressure. While walking ashore with the netted five-pounder, a smile broadened on his face — proof that action is possible when least expected.

Some popular bank areas include Nimbus Basin, Sailor Bar Park, Upper and Lower Sunrise, Rossmoor Bar, Goethe Park, Watt and Howe Avenue bridges, Paradise Beach and Discovery Park, where the American and Sacramento rivers join.

The secret to fishing the American, however, rests not in where it flows but how it flows. Water releases from the dam greatly determine where and how the river can be fished. The best times

Steensen BOAT COMPANY
BUILT BY FISHERMEN FOR FISHERMEN
BOATS CUSTOM BUILT FOR THE SALMON, STEELHEAD, BASS OR WALLEYE FISHERMAN
WHITewater WALLEYE/BASS MODEL PICTURED
STEENSEN BOATS
3306 N.W. 319th Street, Dept. ST-1, Ridgefield, Washington 98642
(Exit 16 off I-5 between Vancouver & Woodland) (206) 887-3652

DON'S TACKLE SHOP

Don and Lola McClain

"Fly Fisherman's
Headquarters"

- ◆ Custom made rods—"The rods with KNOW-HOW built in"
- ◆ Rod repair and wrapping
- ◆ Reel repair and parts
- ◆ Custom tied flies—send us a sample or tell us the name of the pattern
- ◆ Largest selection of fly tying materials in the Portland area
- ◆ Information on the hot spots

When in Portland, drop in and see us!
Tues-Fri, 10:00-8:00; Sat, 10:00-5:00

DON'S TACKLE SHOP
7622 S.E. Foster Road, Portland,
Oregon 97206, (503) 774-5270

are when average amounts are released. Flows range from just under 1,000 cubic feet per second (cfs) to tens of thousands of cubic feet per second. Ideal flows range from 950 to 2,000 cfs. Releases of 3,000 to 4,000 cfs make it tough for anglers to keep their offerings on the bottom while anything over 6,000 cfs virtually wipes out the fishing.

Check out releases beforehand. Sacramento newspapers usually carry the information on an every-other-day basis while most bait and tackle shops keep close tab of releases, too.

During periods of heavy rain, huge amounts of water are let go, also wiping

out angling. However, the river becomes fishable fast, usually a day or two after the rains cease. Even when the river is high and muddy, the knowledge that the fish are always there adds to the challenge.

Access can easily be achieved by heading for one of the several bridges which cross the river. Bike paths and paved walkways, constructed to blend in with the surrounding flora, provide refreshing overviews of the freestone waterway. Countless trails branch from these paths.

We have friends who live exactly five minutes' driving time from the Hazel Ave. bridge. Whenever we visit, we are

FGE

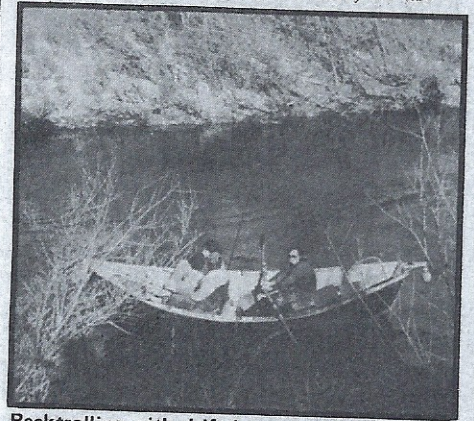
fish line

1-800-632-FISH

Call 1-800-632-3474 (toll-free in Oregon) for up-to-date information on these streams:

- Discharge from Pelton regulating dam at 8:00 am and expected Deschutes River discharge for the next few days.
- Flow in the Clackamas River below River Mill Dam.
- Number of salmon and steelhead over North Fork Dam for past three days and the total fish for the month.
- Number of salmon and steelhead over Marmot Dam on the Sandy River for three days and the monthly totals.

THIS INFORMATION IS UPDATED DAILY
BY 9:00 AM WEEKDAYS
AS A PUBLIC SERVICE



Backtrolling with drift boats is gaining popularity on the American.

allowed three to four hours of prime time fishing as well as all the comforts of home. The trail system allows us to seek less crowded sections away from the parking lots.

The future steelhead fishery on the American looks bright for the one key commodity, water, seems safe. The Bureau of Reclamation also recognizes the desirability of maintaining a healthy flow on the Lower American. In 1972, the Water Resources Control Board issued Decision 1400 which established minimum flows based on recreational conditions which, in addition to angling, include rafting, horseback riding and cycling.

From July 15 to October 14 minimum flows must be at least 800 cfs while from October 15 through July 14 they must not be lower than 1,250 cfs.

Under two hours' driving time from the greater Bay Area, the American is truly a river which bears exploring. Besides continuing DFG efforts to maintain quality, run an efficient hatchery with consistent returns, and expanded steelhead seasons, the assurance of adequate water makes the future appear rosy. With the inner qualities of a wild river and yet only a stone's toss from a bustling metropolis, the American is truly an All-American River!

NORDLING MARINE

YOUR COMPLETE BOATING HEADQUARTERS



SMOKER DRIFTER
&
SMOKER OARS

1986 15 hp

15 hp longshank \$1488 \$1419
WITH NEW AUTO BLEND

SPECIAL!

REG. SALE
\$1464 \$1395

EVINRUDE

OREGON'S LARGEST
EVINRUDE DEALER
OUTBOARD MOTOR REPAIR

NORDLING MARINE
15351 S.E. McLoughlin Boulevard, Milwaukie, OR 97222
(503) 659-6764

