



ALL PHOTOS BY JON LUKE

Spokane River, WA

Metro Redbands

By Steve Maeder

On the descent from our 14th-floor hotel room to meet our guide for the day, I had to remind myself of the reality of the situation. We had spent the night in a hotel overlooking the second largest city in Washington state and were still just a couple of hundred yards from a river with a wild trout population. It wasn't miles from the hotel to the launch site but blocks. I'd barely settled into the truck before we were pulling into the launch. I hadn't even had time to drink enough coffee to reap the benefits of caffeine.

We descended into the river canyon to get there and it seemed we'd left the city behind. Once everyone had rigged up their gear, I headed to the river's edge through the bankside trees to take a peek at the water. Upriver was a bridge towering so high overhead, I couldn't hear the traffic. Under another bridge not far upstream, the downtown skyline was no more than a half mile away. A look the other direction revealed not a single clue that I was standing within the city limits.

Water holding wild redband trout flowed within a cheap cab fare of a nice hotel and I knew the combination could work. For me, good restaurants, brewpubs, and other amenities that cities offer can constitute a well-rounded fishing trip. I'll take a comfortable hotel over a sleeping bag most of the time. Besides, the TV meteorologist had warned of temperatures in the upper 90s, which, in my book, justifies a room with air conditioning. As I stepped into the boat, all thoughts turned to the wild trout, the other key ingredient to a potentially great angling adventure.

The Spokane River's waters come for the most part from two sources: the roughly 30-mile-long Lake Coeur d'Alene, which is filled by various creeks and rivers such as the Saint Joe and Coeur d'Alene. The highly permeable Spokane Valley-Rathdrum Prairie Aquifer also plays a surprisingly significant role, with water exchanging to and from the river depending on the time of year and flows. Two tributaries, the Little Spokane River and Hangman Creek, bolster currents in the city, with Chamokane Creek converging on the lower river. There are seven dams on the 111-mile Spokane River. All generate power.



While the Spokane River can run wild in places, signs of civilization are also commonplace. The river is truly an urban fishery in the reaches near Spokane, yet it offers respite from the busy city streets (above). There's no mistaking how redband rainbows got their name. These wild trout are the backbone of the fishery in the Spokane River (left).

What you might hope to catch varies a bit depending on which stretch of the Spokane River you fish. We focused on the water below the Spokane Falls in the center of town. This is the better trout stretch. The upper river has a decent population of smallmouth bass and a few pike, which escaped from Lake Coeur d'Alene. You'll have a better chance at a cutthroat upriver also, but they are scarce.

Below the falls is a mixture of wild redband trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss gairdneri*)—the native inland strain—and rainbows from stocking programs. Coastal strains of cutthroat were once stocked in the basin and browns were also introduced for a period of time. While brown trout are no longer stocked, there are a few around.

A couple of other genetic strains in the greater basin have





The author perches on a big rock in an effort to get a longer drag-free drift (above). This redband made numerous blistering runs before finally coming to the net (right).

mixed in with the residents. Steelhead and salmon once ran up to the base of the falls, and you might find a cuttbow or possibly a brookie in the mixture, although it's been some time since the last reported brook trout catch. Mountain whitefish and northern pikeminnows also abound.

On the Water: Day 1

We'd made a quick run to the Silver Bow Fly Shop to grab some flies and meet our guide for the day, the relatively young store owner, Sean Visintainer. Silver Bow, conve-

niently located just off Interstate 90, east of downtown Spokane, is well stocked with everything a fly fisher needs. The atmosphere left me feeling like grabbing a book off the shelf and parking myself in one of the several cozy chairs.

As it turned out, our introduction to a resident Spokane River trout came quickly. The boat ramp was still in sight when the first fish secured itself to the diminutive dropper on the aft angler's line. His rod bent sharply as the line zipped around briskly. To everybody's surprise, the netted fish wasn't all that big. The bright, healthy 11-inch rainbow with a lot of heart put us off to a good start as it darted away. I wondered aloud what dynamic forces a 17-inch fish might display, and Visintainer assured us there was a good chance we'd find out.

As we continued downriver in pursuit of the next fish, I directed my casts to the soft side of the seams when Visintainer recommended I run my rig right down the main current lines. Sure enough, the next fish snapped up the size 18 dropper hanging from my Pat's Rubberlegs Stonefly Nymph and ripped down the express lane. This fish was closer to 15 inches and sported a nice crimson swatch on its sides.

The fish were clearly in high gear. Any time we were on slower water, Visintainer encouraged us to throw a "tweaker twitch" to get those rubber legs moving. I mentioned that I'd never heard of the "tweaker twitch," at least in the context of fishing, and Visintainer explained that Spokane, like most cities, had challenges that you needed to keep in mind from time to time, such as where you parked your car and what you left in it. I observed that unsavory opportunists were not just a city problem.

At the time, we seemed to be far from an urban environment, but when the afternoon heat set in, we started

seeing folks scattered along the bank taking advantage of the cool water. Average July temperatures here are around 83 degrees, but this day's forecasts had predicted the mid-90s. The word "Spokane"—in its native meaning—is "children of the sun," and the city has about 175 days of sunshine a year, providing reliably good weather during most of the fishing season.

The fishing was consistent throughout the afternoon, though we didn't rack up great numbers. The quality of the fish, especially their spunk, definitely kept our attention until we hit the take-out. We had pulled into town at 1 a.m., and a short night's sleep combined with temperatures close to the century mark left me ready to call it a day, a good one at that.

As we loaded our raft and gear at the launch, I couldn't resist inquiring about watering hole options. I was fading fast now and the rewards of urban angling became apparent when just 15 minutes later, I found myself sitting on a stool in the Brooklyn Deli, pondering the interesting hand-crafted brews. The whole urban angling deal was sealed for me with the first bite of my delicious sandwich. Short drive times, comfortable hotels, good eats and brews, and beautiful, lively trout easily made for good times.

On the Water: Day 2

We had a day off between our first and second float. During the short drive to the river, I asked about our chances of hooking a brown trout. A smile broke out on Visintainer's face as he pulled out his cellphone to show us a photo of a fish his previous day's clients had landed. A beautiful brown measuring 19 inches, it left me green with envy. Sean lamented that "we don't catch many browns . . . but when we do, they're generally nice fish." The photo backed up his claim.

We began after lunch and intended to fish till dark, and that is exactly how it played out. We repeated the same float as on day one. Where there was "good water" to the left, there was usually good water to the right. Even two guys didn't stand a chance of covering it all properly, even in two

days. We caught about the same number of fish as on day one—consistent but not out of hand.

Mid-afternoon, we pulled up to an island to take some fishing photos. There was a series of riffles with obvious pockets and slots. To my eyes, the water looked very fishy, so I worked my way to what appeared to be a prime position. What I quickly learned was that the Spokane is not an easily wadable river. Big, round, slippery rocks in strong current suit the trout but are a different story when you have feet instead of fins.

My hunch was right, though, and I was into a darn fine 'bow in short order. After an inordinate number of lightning fast runs and a few jumps, it came to net. I was glad I had a 3X tippet on because 5X or 6X wouldn't have cut it with these fish. It was the best fish yet.

Over the course of the day, we switched up flies now and then. The changes were mostly to the droppers, and I realized how key the tiny droppers and the rubberleg nymphs were when I saw how many such patterns Visintainer kept in his boxes. We were having good success with the go-to stonefly nymph rig, but curiosity got the better of me and I mentioned I hadn't seen a rising fish all day. Visintainer quickly explained that most of the time, fishing





Wild trout live downtown in Spokane—few large cities can make such a claim.

this river was a double-nymph game, although streamers had their uses, too. Pat Way, one of the owners of Northwest Outfitters in nearby Coeur d'Alene, flat out stated that he thought he could count on his fingers the number of fish he had caught on dries, adding that it wasn't for lack of trying. Way backed up Visintainer's opinion to a tee but added that swinging a soft hackle just under the surface can also work. Flies on top, though, will disappoint you more often than not.

Neither angler had a solid explanation, though they offered a couple of good theories. They thought that birds of prey increased the risks for any fish close to the surface as did gin-clear water. While Joe Roope of Castaway Fly Fishing Shop said the Spokane had a great number of caddisflies, so you might conclude the fish could get all they

wanted under the surface, Way suggested that the lack of reliable dry-fly angling might be the reason for the low fishing pressure on the river. That might be a good trade-off, given the plentiful dry-fly possibilities nearby in Idaho.

Late in the afternoon, the action tapered off somewhat. I noticed a sign on the bank warning of the hazards of consuming the river's fish, and it seemed a bit odd given how clear the water was. It was yet another contradiction. Wild trout in the middle of a city, loads of caddisflies yet limited surface action. Things just weren't always as they appeared. It reminded that a friendly, experienced guide is worth every penny when fishing new waters. About an hour before sunset, subsurface action picked up again, giving us a perfect ending to the trip.

RL Tweaker

By Britten Jay



PHOTO BY NORTHWEST FLY FISHING

Hook:	2X-long nymph hook, sizes 10–16
Thread:	Color to match body, size 8/0 or 6/0
Abdomen:	Olive or natural Hareline Hare's Ear Plus Dubbing
Rib:	Gold oval tinsel
Collar:	Hungarian partridge
Legs/tail:	Brown rubber legs
Bead:	Gold

Prime Time on the Spokane

While you can fish the Spokane most of the year, the river is closed annually from mid-March until the beginning of June to protect the spawning native redbands.

The best fishing is when the river levels drop after the spring runoff, which is generally sometime in the second half of June or early July. Flows will continue to drop and angling tactics shift toward smaller flies accordingly. The river has a regulation requiring floaters to wear life vests, and I could see why, even at summertime levels. Below the spot where we took out is a section that in higher water is for experts only; I strongly suggest checking with the shops before floating that section anytime. In high water, streamers can be the ticket, but again, places for wading are limited. It's best to call a shop before making a drive of any distance before July.

Enjoyfine Urban Angling

With a population closing in on a half million people, the Spokane metro area might be a surprise to anglers in search of good fishing, especially if you consider that the water flowing from Lake Coeur d'Alene contains enough pollutants that the Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife has declared the fish inedible below the lake. Nevertheless, the angling is excellent and the trout are wild to boot. One can hope the worst is over regarding pollutants from mining in the hills of Idaho. Today, numerous active groups are spreading awareness of the river's value to the community and the need to preserve such an asset. Cleanup efforts and riverside enhancement projects reinforced by legal funds are all parts of the efforts to reverse the damage and neglect of the past.

Reasonable rates for half-day floats make fitting in some time on the water easy for anyone traversing I-90 or visiting the area for business or pleasure. The Spokane's location really opens up some possibilities for a diverse day. You could do a 5-hour guided float, have a nice dinner, and visit the elegant Spokane Opera House for an entirely different experience. In a sense, it's amazing the river gets as little pressure as it does from the local population. Joe Roope probably summed it up best when he said that he's as guilty as anyone of running to the Coeur d'Alene River, the Saint Joe, or even the Clark Fork for most of his guiding and fishing. But he quickly added that the Spokane River is an excellent fishery. Make no mistake about it. And the fact it exists in the middle of a lively city is nothing short of amazing. 🐟

Steve Maeder, advertising manager for Northwest Fly Fishing magazine, is a freelance writer and photographer who lives in central Washington.

Spokane River NOTEBOOK



When: Upper boundary of Plese flats to ID border open 6/1 through 3/15. Release all unclipped rainbows.

Where: ID border to Nine Mile falls.

Headquarters: Spokane. Information: greater Spokane Valley Chamber of Commerce, (509) 924-4994, www.spokanevalleychamber.org; Visit Spokane, (509) 747-3230, www.visitspokane.com.

Appropriate gear: 4- to 6-wt. rods, floating and sinking-tip lines, 3- to 8-lb. tippet.

Useful fly patterns: flexi-gerdle Bug, Pat's Rubberlegs Stonefly Nymph, beadhead rubberleg Prince Nymph, Trina's Copper Micro-Stone (tan), Anderson's Bird of Prey, Silvey's Edible Emerger (olive), Rubberleg Hare's Ear Nymph, partridge soft hackle patterns, g 6 Caddis Pupa, beadhead soft hackle Pseudo Sawyer, Bloody Mary, tungsten bead Bread crust, Woolly Bugger (black/olive), Big Bird Bugger, Sparkle Minnow, Elk Hair Caddis.

Necessary accessories: Waders, studded boots, wading staff, polarized sunglasses.

Nonresident license: \$18.15/1 day, \$26.95/2 days, \$33.55/3 days, \$82.50/annual.

Fly shop/guides: Spokane: Silver Bow fly Shop, (509) 924-9998, www.silverbowflyshop.com;

Maps: Washington Atlas & Gazetteer by DeLorme Mapping; Fly Fisher's Guide to Washington by Greg Thomas.