



Piscatorial Sorrows

Catching and almost catching aren't the same

BY NICK JANS



Chichagof Island

You never know what's on the end of the line till the fish is close to hand. Sometimes, what you learn breaks your heart.

CROUCHED AGAINST A CUT BANK, rod tip high, feeling a quarter-ounce jig tick along the bottom, swept by the current. Then an odd, weightless moment. I spun the reel handle and reared back. *Fish on!* I thought I knew the species; I'd caught and released a fine 13-pound, sea-bright steelhead just minutes before, and then my buddy Jon had landed another gorgeous fish from this very pool. But instead of that signature sizzling run, punctuated by catapulting leaps, I felt a heavy, pulsing tug as my line peeled steadily downstream. The fish acted like it either didn't know it was hooked or just didn't care. I put all the pressure I dared on the ten-pound test and whippy eight-foot rod, and the fish turned at last, as if by choice. Another powerful, slow-motion

run. All I could do was keep my line taut as the fish swam to the top of the pool, then headed downstream again.

Jon and I traded open-mouthed glances. *What the hell?* We knew every hole and run on this little tidal creek on Chichagof Island. In mid-May, the only big fish it should hold were steelhead—the outsized, sea-run rainbow trout we were stalking that evening. But this thing not only fought like something other than a steelie, it also moved like something twice the size of the largest steelhead I'd ever caught, a fish close to 20 pounds. Double that? *A record-class fish, from this little creek? Nah—must be a stray king salmon instead.*

Five minutes into the fight, I managed to guide the fish close enough for Jon, perched on the high bank above me, to

All I had to do was keep my rod high, manage pressure on my line, and wear him down. Then he was gone.

get a good look down into the tannin-tinted water. “Giant steelhead!” he blurted, followed by something less printable. As if to punctuate that exclamation, an enormous tail with a thick, pink-striped wrist broke the surface and was gone in a boiling swirl. This time the run was classic steelhead—a line-burning, direction-changing 40-yard surge. I back-spoiled and hung on. Once again the fish reached the tail of the pool and turned. If he’d kept going to the sea I couldn’t have stopped him.

I remember being calm and clear-headed, confident despite being out-gunned. He wasn’t leaving the pool, and I had plenty of room and no serious snags nearby. I had a good patch of sloping sand for landing and Jon to help. All I had to do was keep my rod high, manage pressure on my line, and wear him down.

Then he was gone. Gut-punched, I reeled in the terrible weight of nothing.

My line told the story. Crossways in the fish’s fine-toothed jaws, it had been frayed by those bulling runs and finally worn through. I couldn’t have done anything differently.

“Well,” I murmured to Jon, “I would’ve let him go, anyway.” That didn’t change the fact that we never got to touch him, heft his iridescent bulk, own that beauty for a moment. I could fish a dozen lifetimes and never see another steelhead like that.

Over my nearly four decades of angling the Great Land, I’ve had my share of chances at outsized fish. Riffing through the pictures and memories, you could say I’ve had a pretty fair run—hundreds of slab-sided, gorgeous fish. But that lost steelhead is just one chapter in a litany of personal piscatorial sorrows. There was the ginormous whatever-it-was (I suspect a salmon shark) that struck in 280 feet of water in Chatham Strait, bent a broomstick halibut rod double, and sliced through 140-pound test braided line; the eight-pound cutthroat trout that came unbuttoned on ultralight gear on a

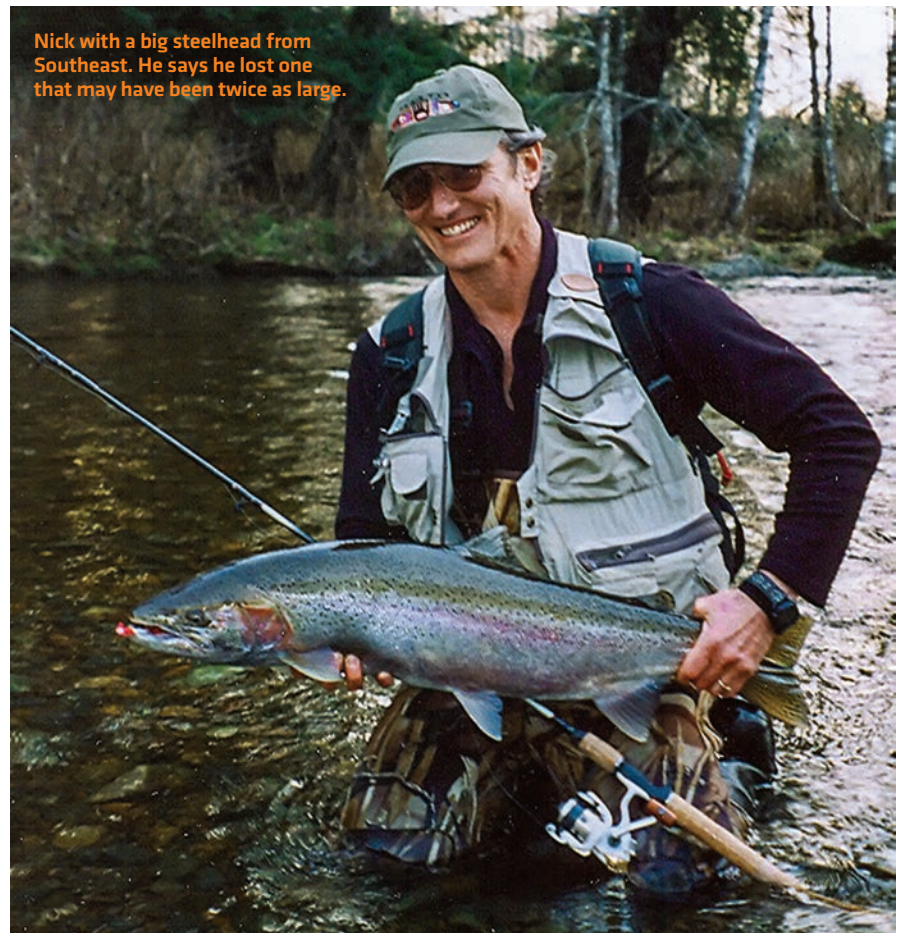
crystalline Baranof Island stream; that gator-headed pike up the Pah River engulfed my spoon right underneath the boat and busted me off in the weeds; and a handful of others.

All giant fish. But this next one tops even that enormous steelhead. I was fishing alone on the upper Kobuk River on a summer evening back in the early ’90s. Though it was past midnight and rain-spattered, the air was suffused with that luminous arctic glow, and the sheefish—an exotic, bucket-mouthed member of the whitefish family, resembling saltwater tarpon more than anything else—were just going nuts. Pretty much every cast drew a strike, or several. I’d lost count of the fish

over 20 pounds, and landed a half dozen over 40. One gill-hooked fish I brought back weighed 42 pounds on the Ambler village post office scale, twelve hours later. But that monster female was dwarfed by the one that I lost, played out, and had almost within touching distance in three feet of water, its great silver flanks practically wide as my chest. I knew then, and still believe, that fish was a new world record—around 60 pounds, topping the old one (caught on the same river) with room to spare. By myself, I just couldn’t skid her up the steep gravel bank, and the hook twisted out. Again, I would have let her go, but catching and almost aren’t the same.

Yeah, the big ones really do get away, but that’s all right. They’re right where they’re supposed to be—swimming free, out there somewhere, at the edge of dreams. 🐟

*Nick’s quest to lose big fish is ongoing. Meanwhile, his latest collection of true arctic stories, *The Giant’s Hand*, is available from nickjans.com.*



Nick with a big steelhead from Southeast. He says he lost one that may have been twice as large.