1. Southeast Alaska: Easter Steelhead to the Fly

Paul Ford

Western Washington University, paulmaryannford@charter.net
Southeast Alaska
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Paul Ford
A Wenatchee Fly Fisher
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paulmaryannford@charter.net
(509) 667-0922
No sun this bleak Easter morning in Southeast Alaska. Icy on-shore wind and rain sting as we scuttle from jet to airport entrance. Before traveling on, we have errands to run in town--provisions and licenses to purchase even as our teeth chatter and bones rattle. Forty degrees and one hundred percent humidity tax this aging, intractable body recently exposed to five months of desert heat. But that's all right. Two years is too long for me to be separated from wild steelhead that are unplagued by plastic hatchery hens and their resolute bucks. Shivers run on my spine--not so much from cold as anticipation.

Shortly after noon our chartered twin Otter climbs from home waters beside the town pier into thirty-knot wind gusts. The pilot is taciturn--unusual for these friendly talkative guys. Perhaps he is displeased about having to work on Easter Sunday. Flying is bumpy but I have seen worse. Otherwise our luck is good--no snow in the canyon where we will fish and no ice on Upper Lake where we will land prior to packing in over precipitous, snaky riverside trails to the Forestry Service log cabin at Pothole Lake. We taxi, deplane and unload without incident--except for blundering into knee-deep muck. Hunched beneath giant cedars that bounce rain drops on our parkas, surveying gear and food bags piled at our mud-soaked hiking boots, we conclude that two pack trips in will be necessary. Six miles. What the hell--load up and move out. Things ain't gonna improve!

Two hundred yards up trail a four foot in diameter fallen cedar blocks passage except for squeeze-space beneath it. Was wind or lightening the culprit? Splintered, blackened wood-shards make me think lightening. Crawling under this mess without shedding my forty-pound backpack calls for a rare blend of balance and good humor because the pack's top won't pass under the log without my squirming through on my belly. The trail is up and down, up and down, from river level to three hundred feet above. At its peak, the trail overlooks a sheer cliff-side of devil's club, willow, fir, cedar and jungles of blowdowns with torn root balls as big as Volkswagen Beetles.

Hiking this trail with full packs is a gut-buster. Despite the cold, we are soaked in sweat after the second trip--even though we are togged out in the latest high tech clothing that is guaranteed to breath. Our bodies steam while we shed wet clothes down to bare skin in the cold, musty cabin; it is as if we have birthed vapory shades of ourselves. Without any sense of sacrilege, we call ourselves the...
holy ghosts. Dry fleece shirts and pants are just the ticket and so is a cold beer. But we're not going to stay warm long if we don't buck up a fire.

The spare Forestry Service log cabin has one room with two sets of wood bunk beds, an opaque green plastic roof that allows sunshine to warm the interior, a water basin drain under a small pine cabinet and a cantankerous box-shaped black iron wood stove. Windows overlook the wood deck and round lake. Wet clothes' drying nails, some pounded straight but most at crooked angles, tattoo pine window frames—a new design for hanging woebegone curtains comprised of fishermen's gear! This is our nest for a week—a world from Wenatchee.

Previous visitors, good souls, left us a plentiful heap of damp kindling that serves as starter in the cabin's grouchy stove. While stove and cabin fill with smoke, I drag maul and wedge to a lean-to where three-foot fir rounds are heaped. Splitting wood feels good. I have not done it for a long time. The fall of ax and growing woodpile are signs of accomplishment and I am quite proud of my effort. Meanwhile, my accomplice, John Cunningham, has been at lake-side pumping tannic water through his filtration system and then adding purification tablets that turn our drinking water pale yellow. My physician friend wants to be sure we don't get sick. Anything cold and liquid works after a session with the ax—even this nauseous-looking brew. Work done, I look the other way and drink deeply. Rains drip; temperatures fall. The cabin is warm; and so are we.

Not for long, though. It's early evening and we know that just half a mile from our cabin at the small river's inflow into Pothole Lake there will be action. Almost always in the past the fish have been there. Multitudes of rainbow, dollies, char and even a cuttbow now and then rampaging among downstream migrating salmon smolts and alevin. Well-bundled against cold drizzle, we trudge a swamp to find the river almost devoid of feeding fish. An occasional rise, but no sign of predator legions we had expected. Why not? Perhaps fast-moving weather fronts with changing barometric pressures are putting off smolt migration that attracts our fish. Perhaps the moon is not right. Who can know? But one thing is for sure. The weather will change; it always does. Feeders will be here tomorrow and if not tomorrow, then surely the next day. We have faith.

As we slog homeward through marsh and swamp, booby-trapped with roots and sinkholes, I am struck by what it is that draws me here to fish. There are certainties about this place and these waters—that at some point during our stay, fish will come to the fly; that we are unlikely to see other humans; that the days will vary from calm to bluster and from bright sun to brooding black overcast. But trapped within all those certainties are the uncertainties. And perhaps it is anticipation of the unexpected in this wondrous, wooded coastal valley that is the grand seduction. Uncertainty. For me this is like being a lad again—trekking terrain just at the edge of young courage.
Easter steelhead to the fly

Scotch, steaks and quiet conversation provide comfort as does an overheated cabin. Although the trip in has exhausted me, I do not sleep much. My night is spent wrestling an air mattress that slides on hardwood bunk flooring beneath me. I describe the mattress to my companion as being more reluctant than an adolescent’s uncooperative girlfriend. Rain beats and “splots” and then its sound softens as I drift off to sleep. I dream of the little river of big fish.

Moth-sized wet snowflakes cascade by our window at chill dawn. The front deck is three inches deep with fluffy snow. Sipping coffee, we muse about the probabilities of being snowed in. The lake’s far side shore is a white blur. So we sit and wait—our only hope a tiny blue and gray birdlet twittering at window-side on a six-foot fire-blacked snow-crowned stump. “That little guy knows the weather will clear.” We toss out breadcrumbs that induce joyful chirps and bounces. And, by ten AM sun bathes our snow bowl valley. That winter bird was right.

We’re off, clothed against inevitable rain and shod in cleated, waterlogged wader brogues—along a snow-slippery river trail that edges granite outcroppings and wanders the old cedar forest. Lime-green lichen and moss drip in grassy strands
from tree limbs and tangle on the trail. Yellow skunk cabbage blooms fluoresce off-trail in cotton-white snow bogs. Soggy with perspiration, we arrive at the classic drift—so-named by John in a year past for its perfect steelhead fly water characteristics.

“You go through first. Start at the head. When you get into the tail, I’ll start the head,” says my amiable companion. “But don’t let me catch a fish behind you, because I won’t let you forget it!” He stays above in the riffles hooking foot-long rainbows on an egg pattern as I slip and slide over rounded foot-sized boulders—the kind that like to trip you. My wading staff is a must. Casting slightly upstream and running my sink-tip through perfect holding water, I hit nothing and more of nothing. Surely the fly is swimming deep enough. But perhaps it’s not the right fly.

John is fishing behind me now—down and across with a barbless, flashy black marabou decked out in a bright orange conehead. To me, the fly is a creeping catastrophe. But not to a fish! Quickly, too quickly, a lovely fresh steelhead hen toe dances in the pool’s tailwater. John’s 6-weight is not quite enough rod for the fish as she hangs against the near bank—just above rapids and quick freedom. I pray she will run into the rapids! No such luck. With a slick wave of his wand, John sweeps eight pounds of silver onto a slack-water golden gravel pocket at river’s edge. With an easy wrist turn he frees the valiant shadow. Giggles above riverwhispers: “Caught one behind yuh!” If my arms were long enough I would choke this ebullient Hutz!

Traveling below to what we call the meat hole John rigs his spey rod with a weighted fly, fifteen-foot leader and a big float at the leader’s top. No backcast is possible and so, standing on a log over four feet of water, he flips his float seventy feet cross stream for a perfect drift above deep, holding water. I cannot help myself. “For heaven’s sake what you’re doing is no better than bait fishing. Want me to dig some worms?” He’s oblivious and casts several times more when “plop” goes the bobber and he lays into another bright hen. I can see that he will have a helluva time trying to land the fish from his log perch and yell, “I hope you fall in. Any guy who bait fishes with a fly deserves a bath.” Fishing down river I hit nothing—not a fish, not even a rock. Disgusted and dejected I bid farewell and lurch off to the cabin for a nap before evening fishing.

My friend returns late that afternoon to report other fish hooked and lost at the meat hole. Immediately he goes to work on me—fifteen years his senior in age and steelhead fly fishing experience! His technique is based on irritation. “Give up that sink-tip stuff. It doesn’t work here. Try a floating line with a long leader and one of these coneheads. You’d better. You haven’t caught a fish—not one fish all day—and from what I’ve seen you haven’t even had a pull. Hell, I even caught a fish behind you.” This is my friend and he shows no respect. I, of the know-it-all tribe, reluctantly rig as directed—floating line and fifteen-foot leader. I am
shamed and in despair. Hell, I even tie on a repulsive conehead fresh from John's vice.

Fair weather has changed to foul as we depart to the river's inflow. Drenching squalls are on the little lake; winds nip our cheeks and tear our eyes; red noses drip; cleated wader boots feel heavy as elephants' feet. A captive of gloom, I have the dull, heavy sense that the fish "ain't gonna" hit. After twenty minutes of fruitless casting and showy mending, my pessimism peaks. John is sitting on the bank watching, "Keep casting, guy. You can't catch 'um if you don't fish 'um."

There is nothing here. Nothing! I am as miserable as the weather. But then comes a violent yank with a big snout and tail thrashing surface and a surging run out into the lake. I'm into a good steelhead buck and belt out, loud enough to stir the dead, "Hey man, I got one. Fish here cannot be landed at river's edge because tangled surface and submerged logs and limbs make such impossible and so I hand-tail the fish mid-river. John is impressed. Two casts later I am into an even larger fish, landed, picture taken and released. And then another fish--landed. At
dusk smaller fish start to show and so we switch to silvery little flies that imitate smolts or alevin.

Marauders savage downstream migrants all across the inflow and I have exactly the fly they want—a Tony Route blue smolt pattern. Fresh-minted sea-run dollies with faint dime markings, brown-red char with white outlined fins and black-backed silvery rainbows slash, smash and chew the minnowy fly. A good way to attract these fish is to snip the leader to about two feet in length and then skitter fly, leader and floating line on the surface in fast, long strips. Predators wake the surface as they attack this fast-moving prey. And the feeders are fearless, chasing baitfish between my wadered legs. It is not long before John’s fingers have found their way into my fly box.

Our blue smolts are torn and shredded with only a few threads of dressing hanging to silver hooks, but darkness has fallen and it’s impossible to see to change flies. Nevertheless, the onslaught continues. We whoop and holler—two so-called adults behaving like adolescents. Night settles but the fish do not. Nevertheless, it’s time to stumble home—over the river’s dead logs and limb-strewn bottom and through the swamp with its sinkhole traps and sunken willow snares. Ground fog oozes up along our marshy trail and by the time we reach home, we are living in Edgar Allen Poe land.

That evening as we sip Scotch and wait for steaks to sear, we discuss tomorrow’s fishing. John wants to be up at the crack of dawn to hit the river inflow and after that to go down river. Without trying I stir a lively debate by stating that fish—specifically salmonoids—won’t hit when fog hangs low. Citing years of failed foggy day fishing on Cape Cod’s trout ponds, I advise him not to rise early. He stares at me as if I am deranged, quaffs a mouthful of Johnnie Walker and laughs, “That’s the most serious nonsense I’ve heard since the feds closed the Wenatchee to fly fishing for steelhead.” The argument ebbs with dinner’s end, but the Doc is up at 5AM, thumping around in his wader boots and then gone. My only companion is a little brown spider that lives in a log crack just opposite my nose. A listless swipe at it is unsuccessful—and I am fast asleep again.

CLUMP, CLUMP CLUMP, SCREECH. Boot feet and the cabin door opening. About 7AM and still too early for me to be fully awake on a foggy morning, big bad John returns. “How many?” I inquire, “And don’t you lie to me!” Peeling his multi-patched neoprenes, he smiles, “None.” But would he admit I was right, even once? Hell no. Have you ever met an M.D. or for that matter any other professional including your attorney, broker or daughter’s math professor who would own up to error or better yet concede the wisdom of another’s argument? I am worse than most at confessing error!

Still debating the effect of fog on fishing, while washing down lumpy oatmeal with boiled coffee, we watch sunshine open a cloudless sky. Although our debate
is at impasse, we do agree to test the inlet again. Little do I know that soon vengeance will be mine.

John is first through the inlet water drift. He fishes beautifully. But no takes. Nothing. My turn. Using his conehead marabou and his floating line method, I catch a fish behind him! He is probably sorry he ever helped me. Having caught my fish and uttered proper insults, I turn upstream to face him and take his picture against the riverscape. Rod cradled in my left arm and conehead bottomed out and fluttering thirty feet behind me, I am fussing with the camera. A wrenching yank nearly pulls the rod from my grip. Must have been a cruising steelhead that saw the marabou undulating in the current. Fortunately for my relationship with friend John, the fish comes unbuttoned and is gone. "Do you really think that was a steelhead?" he sorta' whines. Today, I've learned something. Use my friend's technique and his flies; works every time! And if you don't feel like casting, just let your fly flutter in the current.

John's actions indicate that the farther away from the cabin he hikes, the better his chances are for more and bigger fish—or so he thinks. Either that or he doesn't like my company! Each day now he heads down river to the classic drift, the old dam or the meat hole—always searching for the perfect drift. But finding such water is not so easy. The reason?
Pothole River is geologically young, still down-cutting—mostly flowing straight and fast. There are few bends and elbows to create drifts with bank-side holds and fruitful tails. This is canyon pocket water jammed with logs and high water debris. Its undercut banks are overgrown with brush and low hanging willows—a fly caster’s nightmare. Pocket water provides good “hides” for fish and frustration for the fisher. Still, John searches on for steelhead Mecca. Sometimes I accompany him, but not today. We both need time alone. Time to think our own thoughts. There are times to be together and times to be apart. Good friends know that.

So I have much of today to myself. After returning from the inflow and sending John off down stream, my first job is to crawl out of drenched parka, waders and water-logged wading boots and to drape gear to dry around the cabin window close to our persnickety stove—waders make such lovely curtains. With clammy socks adorning clothes’ pegs and my gray wool watchman’s hat snagged above the stove on a makeshift monofilament laundry line, my house decorating is complete. Next job.

The firewood supply we have piled by the stove to dry is running low and I duck into the open woodshed to split a couple of fir rounds with maul and wedge; then to break halves to chunks that we dry stove-side. Steel tough knots running through the wood challenge my muscles as sweat pours over my body. Splitting that wood, I am struck by the thought that almost everything we do here involves a good bit of labor.

Hiking in and out with 35 to 60 pound packs is grueling work; soaking sweat, aching legs and a sore back and neck are rewards. My nickname for John is “Mule Train” because he backpacks sixty to eighty pounds with little apparent strain; still, even he admits that such loads are tough. Splitting big wet fir rounds each day challenges arms gone soft with too much help around home! Though it is a minor thing, to stoop for long periods while hand-pumping water through an absurdly small filtering device seems endless and it causes weak hands to throb, knees to quiver and my back to ache. What a weak sister!

Getting to fish is a job. To the lake’s river inflow it’s a half-mile from the cabin with the last quarter through a booby-trapped swamp. To the river’s good pocket water, you’re up and down on the trail for a mile or so with a steep hundred to two hundred foot descent through devil’s club, tempting to grasp for support but a terror on the hands, and earth-ripped gigantic blow-downs all mass and arms, reaching out like prehistoric octupi. The river’s pocket water is almost inaccessible with overgrown willow thicket banks; its streambed is slippery and skitterish with sunk rotten sneaky willow and destitute cedar—challenges to wader and haven to hooked steelhead. It’s a two-mile jaunt to the classic drift and further to the meat hole and further to good wading below it, where generally no fish are to be found! Gaining access to most fishing involves climbing and sliding, crawling and slipping, sweating and shivering and wondering what will
break first—my bones or fly rod tip! Why, I wonder is all the walking here up hill?

To bathe is to slosh in 45-degree lake water and swath on bar soap that won't lather because the water is so tannic and cold. And then there comes a dash back to the cabin’s warmth hoping you won’t shiver to death before you towel off. This is a hard place to be. But some people work hard to get here and they don’t even fish. Read on.

Each Forestry Service cabin in this area has its own government provided Journal. Visitors write in the Journal about their stay. This year I read the entry of two newlyweds who arrived on December 31, 1999 to celebrate the start of their new life and that of the new millennium. Here is a paraphrase of what was written.

The newlyweds reported they could not fly in because of lake ice. So they packed in some seven miles, breaking hard-crust foot-deep snow and fighting blustery winds. That was bad enough, but they found no wood here—none of the big fir or cedar rounds that the US Forest Service is supposed to provide as part of the cabin rental fee. By chance, there was a lady staying alone in a cabin two miles away. She, too, had come to celebrate the millennium’s onset. Indeed, the Journal reports that she had even brought a formal—a purple dress—to celebrate on New Year’s Eve—ALONE!

The Lady of the Purple Dress had wood. Big rounds. She hacked up a few rounds, piled them in her backpack and made several trips to the newlyweds—thus providing them warmth in addition to what they could generate themselves! The Journal states that the Lady of the Purple dress, the newlyweds and some folks from yet another cabin celebrated a joyous New Year’s Eve. And the lady of the newlyweds, who entered the Journal report I cite here, wrote of her husband in this way; and I paraphrase: My love, you made what I thought could not be true, come true. Though the plane could not fly, though we found snow and every hardship, not even a wood supply, you made this the most wondrous occasion of my life. You made a dream come true.

The newlyweds’ experience touched me. That is because three years earlier, Hale Bopp sailed over my friends and me each night as we crossed the pitch-black lake-face by boat after late evening fishing. To me that trailing crystal flower was a magical presence—ephemera of the Grand Artisan’s magical palette—and splendid only for its magical self and for no explicable reason. After reading the Journal entry, I knew that the newlyweds had found their magic here too, in this hard place to live.

The next chore is to stoke up our confounded wood stove. At start-up it belches as much smoke as heat. Whoever supplied the Forestry Service with this dumb iron disaster must have been Mussolini’s armorer during the Second World War. The stove is about the same quality as his tanks. No matter how you manipulate the dampers or door, the blasted thing smokes like crazy until well after it gets heated up. But in the meantime, the cabin is filled with smoke. If you open the cabin door to let the smoke out, wind blows in; if you keep the door closed then
you choke. No matter what technique I use, the cabin and everything in it is suffused with smoke. And I no doubt smell like a smoked ham!

My work is done, I have split the wood, stacked a drying pile, including some sweet smelling cedar, by the stove, pumped purified water into which I have deposited enough purification pills to yellow it, eaten some of my dwindling supply of oatmeal cookies and am eyeing water forty feet from our front porch where trout are rising. Every afternoon they show up with one particularly large fish moving closer and closer to shore on each occasion—almost as if to say, “Come and get me, Dummy!” Could those fish be taking dry flies? Chironomids? Next time I should bring along some lake flies. Starting to rain again—soft, persistent, soaking. And here I sit alone on puddling front deck. Haven’t worked so hard or felt so energized and at peace in ages. Haven’t seen a soul other than my partner for a week. Feels good to be alone and quiet watching trout dance in the rain. There is more to fishing than the fishing.

I ponder the whole business of being here and wonder if I will return. It’s a quick trip for sure. Only a half-day’s travel from home by jet and floatplane to Upper Lake. But then come the questions: Will the fish be active? Will there be ice on the lake? Will it be possible to land? Will there be so much snow on the trail that packing down from Upper Lake to Pothole will be impossibly difficult and very dangerous. Will there be firewood at the Pothole Lake cabin or will the Forestry Service have neglected that and thus created a challenging situation? If one were to be hurt or become ill here, there is no feasible way to seek medical help without a seven-mile hike out. What if bad weather prohibits the floatplane from returning on schedule? The uncertainty of certainty fascinates and draws me to this place. But there is more.

Pothole Lake in late April is compelling because it is a world in grand transformation—passing from winter to spring, and including myriad minor transformations. Winter’s edge is melting with snow remnants retreating before dazzlingly yellow skunk cabbage blooms—spring’s vanguard. Faint pinks and greens of new growth are beginning to show among river willows. Lake and river temperatures are rising ever so slightly, but enough to cause salmon alevin and smolts to migrate seaward under cover of darkness—prey of voracious rainbow trout, dollies and char. Steelhead are returning to their native places. And I have even seen bear scat though no bears along the muddy river trail. Nature’s cycle repeats itself in all these familiar transformations. But there is one transformation among all the others that impresses me most.

I speak here of ever changing weather patterns: from blowing water-heavy snow, to sailing fluffy snow feathers, to brilliant dazzling sun in a cloudless sky, to mist that becomes soaking rain, and then the world becomes black and white with lowering clouds and fog hugging shadowy, indistinct fir hills and mountains that seem imaginary in their vagueness. Watching the world from this cabin deck is like peering through an ever-turning kaleidoscope—appealing, yet unnerving.
Appealing because weather is its own creator—creator of compelling, novel, exquisite artforms; unnerving because its artforms have potential for danger and treachery—present always in our world but so deceptive in the wilderness. Still, that is nature's way and we are nature's creatures—who seek purposely to draw close to its precarious edges. To imbibe of capricious spring at Pothole Lake seems reason enough to make the journey.

So it is that I return to a favored fishing destination not just for the fishing but for the place itself and in anticipation of its uncertainties—to see and hear and smell and sense a place and condition that is so compelling that there is no adequate explanation for its attraction. It is what it is; that is its secret; and that is enough—the poetry of place. I return because I must.

Pothole Lake, way-station for an estuary-bound little river, is a study in monochromatic silhouettes this afternoon—charcoal sketch of the Grand Artisan. Cross-lake from me smoke-wisps drift above our log cabin's soot-fouled aluminum chimney and meander down lake midst cedar and fir shadows—an airborne stream. Lake and river are shrouded in dense low clouds smudged and sticky against darkling hillsides with vague white snowcaps. Oily slick river-flow sweeps past me—its currents and rips ungentling a becalmed, leadened lake face. I am a shadowy figure wading ankle-deep and mid-stream out into the lake on a gravel finger that abuts slots and pockets where steelhead rest before continuing their upstream run. My world is black and white—bereft of color, nature's tintype.
Not all is calm or at rest. Whisper-soft river music playing over willow boughs and cedar announces the little river's travels over upstream falls and log-jammed riffles. Two big beavers live hereabouts, and *caracks* from their tails snap like pistol shots. A loon wails occasionally and two mergansers patrol pond shallows in search of a meal. And the fish....

I am wading down stream deeper into the lake. And casting, always casting—upstream and let that fly on the long leader probe pothole bottoms at the river's inflow. A good strike—feels like a steelhead, but there is no long run. Just steady yanking and thrashing. What a surprise! A beautifully marked cuttbow, big as a small steelhead, comes to hand—dark red cheeks and black crosses along its flanks melting to a yellow cream belly—progeny of this tannic water—a gorgeous work of art that has not been to sea, at least not lately. Who would ever dream that such a fish could be here?

That seems to be my bit of luck this afternoon. Steelhead are resting along the slot below me. One fish is no more than twenty feet away—showing nose and tail—black on silver in this low light—up and over, up and over unconcerned about my presence. Occasionally a smaller fish, probably a rainbow or char slashes surface to take a smolt, though the smolt massacre won't occur until dusk and into the night. Try as I may, there is nothing in my fly box to entice a steelhead and the little guys will have nothing to do with me.

An exceptionally large fish, its head the size of a seal’s or so it seems, moves just at the edge of my casting range. The casting angle is such that I can get no more than twenty percent of a normal drift to the fly. Nevertheless I make my best cast landing a black marabou leech just up current from where the fish bulged. As fly touches water a great head appears and sinks, followed by a foot-wide tail that breaks surface straight up like an exclamation mark and disappears in a boiling geyser. That black marabou couldn’t have sunk an inch before the fish struck. It is as if an outfielder were waiting for a fly ball! Battle is joined with a bulling, deliberate run well into my backing—a black form washing white froth against the dead still of Pothole Lake in the dark of this day.

Runs without jumps cause me to think this is a buck—and it's a big one. He is crafty, hanging in the current and then plunging deep—working his nose on the bottom. My fingers, tight on the rod butt, feel leader slipping and catching and vibrating as it passes among barkless slippery dead snags whose limbs have more than once sent me skidding. I sense the texture of river bottom as Leviathan seeks a snag to snub the leader. “Hang on,” I think. “Just hang on. Keep the pressure on. Keep him up off those snags.”

Finally the buck comes to hand, midstream where I must land him. A ruddy swab paints him from cheeks all along his sides. He is so thick that I am barely able to tail him. Even at that, he is so large and strong that I cannot move him
against my rod for measurement. “Fish of a lifetime I sigh—well at least of the past ten years. How utterly amazing to find a fish like this in these little waters!” At a twist of the barbless hook, the enormous fish is free—gone with a powerful thrust of that never-to be forgotten black tail—a gift returned to the Grand Artisan.

While having a snack prior to evening fishing, I relate my tale to John who has returned from down river. “I’m telling you, my friend, get out there now. There are more big fish in that slot. Go get them.” His look is skeptical as we wade into evening drizzle to test the river just once more before breaking camp next morning. “You go first, John, and I’ll fish behind you. Course you shouldn’t let me catch another fish behind you! And skip the first twenty yards of the run. Fish will be holding below just on the break. You’ll not get much drift.” He glances over his shoulder at me like my English setter used to when I said or did something exceptionally stupid. After all he is fifteen years my junior and all that much wiser!

I have barely settled in a log saddle from which to watch him cast when John hits a hot fish. Big hen. Jumping, jumping so many times; and John using a 6-weight. The fish is into riverbank dead logs and branches. John stumbles after it—guiding, hauling, pulling; his face crimsons with exertion and frustration. I can read pleading in his eyes, “Please, Lord, let me have this fish.” And at last the hen comes for a quick photo and release.

Now, deep dusk has fallen and we skitter smolt flies atop the surface to be ambushed by marauding rainbows and char. “World class fishing,” I yell. And my pal responds, “This is better than world class fishing.” I can’t help myself, “Well then what would you call it? Extraterrestrial fishing?”

Swirling winds churn Pothole Lake this morning as we load backpacks and stuff garbage into a large black plastic bag for me to carry out. We salute bountiful waters and good times and then head up trail to meet the Otter we hope will land on Upper Lake. The trek is not unpleasant because heavy cedar and fir shelter us from the worst of blustery rain squalls. Still, we arrive swimming in perspiration, hoping for better weather here. But that is not to be. Fierce winds blow the lake to whitecaps. The plane is late. We mutter to each other, “Well if it doesn’t come, at least we can hole up. There’s plenty of firewood.” But then low droning announces the plane’s arrival—a flyover to check for floating debris and then it’s taxiing to us, but is blown to a very inconvenient place for loading. I’m already wondering about the pilot. To keep the plane from sailing away, I hold tight to its tail while John and the pilot load. Entering the plane, I study the pilot for a moment—nice to know who’s in the left hand seat. He’s pasty-white and appears nervous.

We taxi into powerful, capricious headwinds and are airborne, clawing slowly up over a rounded, wooded hillside. I ask why we are headed north instead of
the correct direction, which is southwest, and as the pilot turns to answer, we are caught in a downdraft—and fall almost into clutching treetops. The pilot is shaken and the plane is shaking but we regain altitude in corkscrew winds. My question is not answered and hardly another word is spoken until our pilot announces. “We’ll take a pass on the airport today. Too much turbulence. We’ll land on the sheltered channel and taxi the rest of the way to the airport.” So we do and without incident.

Later that morning, sitting aboard a 737 waiting for takeoff, I feel the plane shuddering on the tarmac as near gale force winds rock it. There is no small plane traffic. The little guys are closed out for the day. This is a hard place to be. Yet where would I be without it?