

# Family Day on the Clackamas

Dan Drazan

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*Christine Drazan holding the results of a Corky and E-Z Eggs side drifted through prime holding water on the Clackamas River.*

*Christine, Izaak, Christian and Ava Drazan displaying Christine's first steelhead after an epic battle on the Clackamas River between Barton and Carver.*



“Hey, why’s my line going back upstream?” my wife Christine calmly asked as we were leisurely drifting down the Clackamas River on a warm May afternoon with our two sons, Izaak (11) and Christian (9), and daughter Ava (5). Assuming she was snagged on the cobblestone riverbed, I slowly turned around to take a look and figure out how to salvage her tackle. Before my eyes could finish tracing her line to its intersection with the water’s surface, I realized this was no ordinary hang-up—it was fish on!

“Set the hook, set the hook,” I suggested with a sense of urgency. The events that unfolded over the next fifteen minutes or so have become one of my fondest memories.

That afternoon was planned as a family float with an agenda of playing in the water, skipping rocks, a streamside lunch, and absorbing some long-overdue Willamette Valley sunshine. With a family of five in a drift boat, taking the time to pull plugs or anchor up and float or drift fish several miles of river can lead to mutiny. Finding something enjoyable for the entire crew is key. However, while steelhead fishing was not the primary purpose of the adventure that day, the thought of passing over some of the Clack’s premium holding water during optimal water conditions

was unthinkable. I just couldn’t do it. So, I made some room in the boat for a couple side-drifting rods and a minimal amount of essential tackle, including a variety of slinkies, leader material, hooks, corkies, yarn and scents. I’m no expert, but I gave a brief explanation of the principles of side drifting on our drive to Barton Park and assured them it would be a fun way to pass the time between our other activities.

I have to give some credit for the success of this endeavor, and many more like it, to the Association of Northwest Steelheaders, or simply “Steelheaders” as I often refer to the group. I have been involved in a handful of outdoor organizations over the years, but Steelheaders is a favorite. What sets Steelheaders apart? In my experience, its membership is composed of good-natured fishermen and women with a healthy sense of adventure and a passion for the steelhead and salmon species we pursue. More specifically, the fish-a-longs are a blast. They provide some hands-on recreation and the opportunity to learn new skills and build relationships. I’ve expanded my herring trolling knowledge participating in the Steelheaders’ annual Salmon Quest, and I’ve enjoyed opening seats in my drift boat to fellow Steelheaders. Always a good time.

Back to the Clackamas... Christine leapt from her seat, leaned back with the rod like a pro, and I could see from the expression on her face that she was feeling the unmistakable connection to a powerful fish on the end of her line for the first time. She was playing it cool, but her slight grin gave it away—this was something special. Once the hook was firmly embedded in the fish’s jaw, it erupted from the main channel of the river revealing its identity as a chrome-bright summer steelhead. My blood pressure spiked and my mind was flooded with concern for river obstacles, drag settings, knot strength and other issues that may arise and how to mitigate them if needed, all with the sole objective of landing that fish.

The kids also sprang into action. As if we had rehearsed this drill, Izaak extended the net, Christian located the Lamiglas forget-me stick, and Ava cheered for mom. While Christine was retrieving as much line as the fish would allow, and hanging on through some vicious, line-peeling downstream runs, I slowly positioned the Clacka-Max closer to shore and dropped anchor. As the fish began to tire it finally allowed itself to be brought alongside the boat. We all leaned over the gunnel and made eye contact. Pleased to see it was of hatchery origin, I swept it into the net and brought



it aboard. Christian proceeded to bonk it with confidence and the team assembled for a victory photo. What a day! That memory will remain etched in my mind for the remainder of my days and come alive again each time the story is told.

Steelheaders has also provided an excellent platform for my kids to develop an interest in fishing and habitat conservation. Both of my sons have participated in the Steelheaders' "eggs to fry" salmon-rearing program in their elementary school, culminating in a field trip to release fingerlings at Carver Park on the Clackamas River. In the next few years, we hope to encounter them on their return route. My kids also attend many of the Sandy River Chapter's monthly meetings. Perhaps it's the engaging speakers sharing tips and techniques, the encouraging words from fellow Steelheaders, their uncanny ability to routinely possess a winning door prize ticket, or the ability to stay up past their bedtime on a school night. Hard to say, but their enjoyment is genuine. My kids are now asking me to go steelhead fishing. This role reversal warms my heart and foreshadows a lifetime of memories to be made.



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