



SUCCESS
ON THE
STREAM

BY JIM YUSKAVITCH

DESCHUTES RIVER, OREGON

PHOTOS BY JIM YUSKAVITCH

It's been half a century since the upper basin of Oregon's famed Deschutes River saw runs of wild salmon and steelhead. For years, their way has been blocked by three hydroelectric facilities downriver. But last May, conservationists, TU members and local power company employees turned out on a small Deschutes tributary to release 210,000 steelhead fry into the water.

The fish will begin their journey to the sea in 2009, and by then a state-of-the-art fish passage facility will be in place, allowing them to return at last to the upper river basin. If all goes well, the Deschutes' wild fish may be on their way to a full recovery by 2011. Power generation will continue on the dams as well.

TU was a major player in the relicensing agreement negotiations and on-the-ground restoration that made such rosy predictions possible.

Just five decades ago, the streams of the upper Deschutes basin had runs of summer steelhead, spring Chinook

salmon and one of only two sockeye salmon runs in Oregon. But the construction of the Pelton-Round Butte Hydroelectric Project between 1958 and 1964, built by Portland General Electric and licensed to operate by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, rewrote the basin's natural history for salmon and steelhead.

Upstream and downstream fish passage was included when the dams were built, but the fish ladder never worked very well. Moreover, the water temperatures of the Deschutes, Crooked and Metolius rivers, which create Lake Billy Chinook, the project's upper reservoir, differ so widely that they create subsurface currents. The currents confuse migrating smolts, preventing them from finding the downstream passage facility at Round Butte Dam. Each year, the runs of steelhead and salmon above the dams dwindled, finally disappearing in the 1960s.

Today, Deschutes river steelhead and fall and spring Chinook salmon are restricted to the lower 100 miles of the river. The river's wild steelhead are listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. And

the sockeye are gone, replaced by a reservoir kokanee fishery.

Given this dire situation, the conservation community recognized the need to get involved in the late 1990s, when Portland General Electric began the process of applying to FERC to have its operating license renewed for an additional 50 years. TU's Scott Yates served as the initial "lead" for the conservation community in the complex negotiation process that ensued. As he recalls it, "while everyone had differences on specifics, they were all on the same page on what they wanted to accomplish"—the return of salmon and steelhead runs to the upper basin above the dams.

Even the hydro project's owner was on board. "From the beginning we made fish passage and fish reintroduction a centerpiece," says John Esler, PGE's project manager for hydro relicensing. "It was the right thing to do." He also noted the "practical pragmatism" of being proactive in helping develop a reintroduction plan rather than having one dictated to them by FERC.

The relicensing process began in 1997, culminating with signing of an agree-

ment in July 2004, followed by renewal of the utility company's FERC license in June 2005 — in partnership with the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, who are co-owners of the hydro project. All told, 22 stakeholder organizations

signed off on the agreement, including state and federal government agencies, PGE, the Tribes, Trout Unlimited, American Rivers, the Native Fish Society and Oregon Trout.

Yates credits PGE and the Tribes for commissioning solid scientific research, which, combined with consensus-building efforts, paid off with a widely praised reintroduction plan. The plan has three main elements: stocking of steelhead and salmon fry in historical upper basin spawning and rearing streams to jump start populations; development of a \$27 million mitigation fund for habitat restoration and water conservation; and

construction of a 270-foot, \$80 million underwater tower—a marvel of engineering called a Selective Water Withdrawal Facility—in Lake Billy Chinook. The tower will provide considerable "attraction flow" to help guide smolts through the reservoir's complex currents. It will also improve temperatures downstream. More than 200 additional stream miles will also be opened to anadromous fish in the upper basin.

While TU's national staff and its allies focused on reintroduction negotiations and implementation, TU's Oregon Council worked with the Deschutes Basin Land Trust to improve habitat. Council Conservation Director and Clackamas Chapter President Dick Hollenbeck contacted the land trust three years ago, offering to help with work such as pulling noxious weeds and placing juniper rip-rap. Even though

the negotiations weren't complete, the council enlisted TU volunteers from several local chapters to get the habitat in shape "to bring back steelhead to Whychus Creek and sockeye to the Metolius. That's why we're involved," says Hollenbeck. TU had completed six habitat projects as of June.

Next year will see more steelhead fry, and Chinook salmon fry, planted in the upper basin. Some of the lake's kokanee will be passed over the dam, eventually to return from the sea as sockeye.

A decade of hard work, solid science and consensus has gone into the reintroduction plan, and confidence for its success is high. "Part of our job as scientists is to re-imagine what the rivers of the West were like back when they had big runs of anadromous fish," says Jack Williams, TU's senior scientist. In Oregon's upper Deschutes River basin, imagination is well on the way to reality.

TU staff and volunteers played a lead role in a recent relicensing agreement that continues power generation on the Deschutes River while dramatically improving conditions for salmon and steelhead.

THE DESCHUTES' WILD FISH MAY BE ON THEIR WAY TO A FULL RECOVERY BY 2011.

