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12-14-2020

Fishing through the Pandemic

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Recommended Citation

Hughes, Henry, "Fishing through the Pandemic" (2020). *Personal Stories*. 3.
https://digitalcommons.wou.edu/covidwou_stories/3

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Fishing Through the Pandemic

When our department meeting at Western Oregon University was canceled on March 12, 2020, over concerns of COVID-19, I figured it was a good excuse to go fishing.

There were few known cases of the virus in Oregon at that point. We thought the cancellation was just a precaution.

I emailed my colleague, Jackson Stalley:

“Fishing?” I asked.

“Yes, indeed!” he replied.

We met that afternoon with a hug before heading to a Willamette Valley pond to catch stocked rainbow trout waking up after a winter slumber. Jackson caught a 25-inch, 8-pound rainbow, and we shared a flask of bourbon to celebrate.

It was the last time fishing would feel normal.

I began Oregon’s spring fishing season when COVID-19 was just a whisper. A few weeks later, fishing had become a completely different experience, one in which social distancing was required for a pastime that could be outlawed at any moment—as it was in Washington State.

As most of Oregon’s parks and public lands closed down to recreation, fishing remained open and viable except on parts of the Columbia River. But it has required getting used to — the rules changing by the day. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife advised fishing in small groups, or solo, keeping at least six feet from each other and staying close to home.

Two weeks after our department meeting was cancelled, Jackson emailed and suggested we return to the same trout pond. This time we took separate cars and boats. We didn’t hug, and any toasting over big fish would be done remotely. With Jackson paddling on the other side of the pond, I drifted quietly, casting a streamer. Although I enjoy fishing with others, there’s also something meditative and soothing about angling alone. A muskrat swam within inches of my boat, and I paid closer attention to the redwing blackbirds singing in the cattails, and the osprey diving to seize a hapless trout.

Back in the real world, things got worse. There were several cases of COVID-19 in Polk County by March 25. People we knew had symptoms, a student at WOU tested positive. Almost 20,000 had died worldwide.

My friend, Mark Van Steeter, texted me: “Steelhead tomorrow? Water looks right.”

Mark, a geography professor, knows a lot about world health issues. He's also a great steelhead angler, and when he says the conditions are right, I pay attention. This winter run was also a short distance from our homes.

We drove separately and met on a pullout above a Coast Range river. There was no greeting hug or exchange of gear. Mark's daughter baked a cupcake for me, and he set it down in a plastic cup on the gravel between us. "Please thank her," I said, picking up my treat.

The river was low, but recent showers had imparted a slight green cloudiness that makes these fish less wary and more aggressive. I flipped a copper spoon into a deep cut and instantly got a strike. "They're in here," I smiled. A few casts later, I was hooked to a bright steelhead that blasted downriver. After some astonishing leaps and runs, it was ready to land.

Even with an extended net, Mark was about to violate the six-foot rule. ODFW created a helpful chart reminding anglers to stay "one mature white sturgeon length apart." We'd been good about "sturgeon distancing" all day, but before netting this fish, we pulled bandanas up over our faces.

Mark and I caught several steelhead that afternoon, including three fin-clipped fish we harvested. Fishing has always helped me connect with the life and death realities of nature. In some ways, so has this pandemic. Nature humbles us, reminding humans that we are also fragile creatures.

With deep sadness for the loss of human life, and with high hopes in the science and social practices that will halt this disease, I keep fishing—alone, now, wading, walking the bank, or drifting in my float tube, watching for rises and casting to a brighter future.



