



Wild Works Wonders

In 1992—after more than thirty years of operation—the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife ended its winter steelhead hatchery program on the North Umpqua River. In the nearly thirty years since, that river’s winter returns have increased steadily. The latest five-year average topped 10,000 wild fish annually—numbers not seen since the middle of the twentieth century. The wild winter steelhead of the North Umpqua River are a shining example of wild abundance, and a roadmap for sustainable fishery management throughout the Pacific Northwest.

Just as steady as the winter run’s return to abundance has been the decline of the North Umpqua’s summer steelhead. The summer run is supplemented by a dubious hatchery program at Rock Creek. Since 2015, the North Umpqua has seen six straight summer runs of fewer than 2,000 fish—a heartbreakingly low bar that had only been crossed once in the previous forty-five years. Last summer, the Big Bend Pool on Steam-

boat Creek provided summertime refuge for just 59 fish—less than 20 percent of the usual total.

“[Wild steelhead] are an amazing creature. Give them half a chance and they’re going to make it.”

- FRANK MOORE

It’s time to change the way we manage North Umpqua summer steelhead. Managing the river for wild fish has worked wonders for the winter run. It can work for the summer run, too. In the coming year, we will be pressing ODFW to end its hatchery summer steelhead program on the North Umpqua River, starting with the upcoming smolt release planned for the coming spring. Let’s take our cues from the fish. Let’s set a new trend and a new trajectory for the North Umpqua and its iconic wild summer steelhead.

Stay tuned for the forthcoming NFS Campaign pressing Oregon fisheries managers to begin managing North Umpqua summer steelhead for wild fish, abundant returns, and a sustainable future!

For more information, contact NFS Southern Oregon Regional Director Kirk Blaine at kirk@nativefishsociety.org, or visit nativefishsociety.org/campaigns.



NATIVE FISH SOCIETY
813 7th St. Suite 200A
Oregon City, OR 97045

503 344 4218
nativefishsociety.org
[@nfswildfish](https://facebook.com/instagram)

STAFF

Dana Renton, Membership & Communication Outreach
J. Michelle Swope, Washington Regional Coordinator
Jennifer Fairbrother, Conservation Director
Kirk Blaine, Southern Oregon Regional Coordinator
Liz Perkin, Northern Oregon Regional Coordinator
Mark Sherwood, Executive Director
Tom Derry, Director of Wild Steelhead Funding
Tracy Buckner, Operations + Women for Wild Fish

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Paul Fortino, Chair
Doug DeRoy, Vice-Chair
Russell Loeb, Treasurer
Kirsten Kinsman, Secretary
Jeremy Hull
Justin Cetas
Kyan Bartel
Michael Dalton
Paula Stenberg
Warner Munro

STRONG RUNS

Brett Tallman, Strong Runs Writer and Editor
Always with Honor, Design and Illustration
alwayswithhonor.com @alwayswithhonor



River Stewards



Native Fish Fellows

STRONG RUNS

ISSUE NO. 15.1

WINTER 2022



An Intersection of Responsibilities

Matt Mendes knows the Deschutes River. He knows the river’s trout, what they eat, and where they go in the heat of summer. He knows the salmon and steelhead, when they arrive, and where they’re headed to spawn. He knows the plants of the watershed, which ones are traditional foods, and when to harvest them. And as an enrolled member of the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, a fishing guide, and an NFS River Steward, he knows that he has a unique intersection of responsibilities for the health of the river and its wild, native fish.

“Sometimes (my brother and I) would just put the truck in first gear and walk alongside throwing empties in the bed.”

- MATT MENDES

Each winter, once the drift boat is stored, the tackle is stowed, and the guiding season has finally come to a close, Matt spends his days restoring riparian vegetation on the tribal side of the lower

Deschutes, cleaning up streamside litter, and finding new ways to share what he knows with others. In years past, that has included the installation of several signs to inform anglers about critical spawning areas. This winter, he’s teaching children from the Warm Springs Reservation to fish. It’s a simple way to give back to his community, but the greater hope that, through fishing, they will feel a similar responsibility for the river and find their own ways to give back. Chances are, Matt’s out there now. And by securing a grant from Meyer Memorial Trust, we’ve been able to support his good work, year in and year out.

By spring, Matt will be back to guiding and teaching others what he knows from the seat of a drift boat. But for now, he is giving back—back to the river, to its wild fish, and to the tribal community that depends on both.



Learn more about the NFS River Steward Program, as well as other critical ways to support the wild fish movement at: nativefishsociety.org/get-involved.

Find Matt on Instagram at [@deschutesnative](https://instagram.com/deschutesnative), or on his website at spinthehandle.com.

Climate Change Masters

If you asked a hundred anglers to describe ideal trout habitat, each of them would probably mention cold, clean water first. They wouldn't be wrong. Cold, clean water is quintessential trout habitat, and for good reason. But native fish are dynamic creatures, uniquely adapted to a diverse mosaic of homewaters. And some of those fish inhabit places that conventional wisdom tells us they should not. But having adapted over thousands of years, these peculiar species not only survive—they thrive. The adfluvial redband trout of Oregon's Upper Klamath Lake are one such fish.

"We have to think a little more holistically about water temperature. We can't write places off just because they're too warm (for salmonids) in the summer."

-JONNY ARMSTRONG, PROFESSOR OF FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE AT OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY

During the ice age, much of what is now southeast Oregon was covered by massive lakes. As the climate changed the lakes receded, leaving behind vast marshes and shallow lakes fed by a complex network of underground seeps and springs. Alongside the changing landscape, the native trout adapted to take advantage of new and unusual habitats.

Today, summertime water temperatures in Upper Klamath Lake regularly reach 80 degrees Fahrenheit. The pH levels can climb as high as 10, making the lake productive well beyond the upper limit for other trout. The fish solve this problem by moving constantly and moving fast. They take advantage of the lake's richness by gorging themselves on minnows and leeches in spring and fall. With the arrival of summer heat, redbands vacate the lake and take refuge in the cold springs that feed it. By doing so, they reach prolific sizes in a body of water that would be toxic to most fish.

No other salmonid can survive in Upper Klamath Lake because no other salmonid can do what upper Klamath Lake redbands do. In fact, a recently published study from Oregon State University shows that the redbands are genetically distinct from other rainbow trout, even within the Klamath Basin. Thanks to the legacy of relentless adaptation under harsh and ever-changing conditions, the peculiar life history of this special native fish has been

perfectly honed to beat the heat, master changing climates, and thrive within its natal homewaters.

Thank you goes out to ODFW Biologist Bill Tinniswood for sharing his unique depth of knowledge on Upper Klamath Lake and the native redband trout that call it home. To learn more about these special fish, check out the Beaver State Podcast Episode 55: Klamath Lake Redband Trout.

Visit nativefishsociety.org/science to learn more about the impacts of climate change on native fish and our efforts to protect them!



The Crooked Path to Sustainability

In December, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife Commission voted to approve the Rogue-South Coast Multi-Species Conservation and Management Plan. In spite of the uproar from conservation-minded anglers everywhere, the RSP will allow anglers to continue harvesting wild winter steelhead from most southern Oregon coastal streams. In light of the Commission's short-sighted decision, it is more important now than ever to hold fisheries managers accountable for the wellbeing of the wild fish they manage.

"Stewardship of wild fish takes vigilance. Going forward, it is critical that all of the passionate advocates who spoke up for southern Oregon's wild steelhead stay involved — that, together, we hold ODFW accountable for the wellbeing of these special fish."

- NFS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR MARK SHERWOOD

Catch-and-release regulations would have been a straightforward path to sustainable wild steelhead fisheries in southern Oregon. But it's still possible to achieve our core goal. In order to do so,

ODFW will have to diligently collect data on southern Oregon's wild steelhead runs, rigorously analyze the data sets, and present them to the public. Going forward, data must dictate winter steelhead fishing seasons to ensure that angling impacts are not exceeded.

For our part, NFS Staff and River Stewards will continue to work closely with fisheries managers and stakeholders in southern Oregon through the ongoing NFS Wild Steelhead Release Campaign. Now is a time to stay engaged, both in southern Oregon and throughout the Pacific Northwest. Now is the time to double down on accountability. Now is the time to press for sustainability and scientifically-sound management of southern Oregon's legendary steelhead.

With Clear Eyes

The wild steelhead of the Columbia Basin are in crisis. With fewer than 72,000 steelhead—wild or hatchery—returning to a watershed that drains nearly 260,000 square miles, the 2021 run went down as the weakest ever recorded. That's just 34% of the ten-year average, which is, itself, the lowest ten-year average in decades. Those fish that did return migrated through water that regularly reached 73 degrees Fahrenheit, nearly ten degrees hotter than the upper limit for coldwater fish.

"This decision should not rest on our shoulders. It is the job of the managers to tell anglers when it is safe and responsible to fish."

-JEFF HICKMAN, DESCHUTES RIVER STEELHEAD GUIDE AND NFS RIVER STEWARD

While Columbia Basin steelhead slipped toward extinction, Pacific Northwest fisheries managers remained silent. We pressed the Fish and Wildlife Commissions of Washington and Oregon to adopt emergency rules that might protect the few wild steelhead that had returned. We urged the governors of both states to step in. It is true that our asks were not small. But aside from short-lived closures to sport fishing on Oregon's Columbia tributaries, nothing was done.

To see the state of steelhead on the Columbia as a crisis is to see their predicament with clear eyes. If the status quo is maintained, we risk losing these remarkable fish. Their fate, however, is not a forgone conclusion. We can protect and restore wild steelhead on the Columbia, step by step. But the time to act is now. New rules

that prioritize conservation will need to be written and adopted before the coming summer. Stay tuned for more on the upcoming NFS Campaign to protect the Columbia's wild steelhead and ways that you can get involved.

Stay in the loop! Sign up to receive NFS Action Alerts in your inbox at: nativefishsociety.org/action-alerts.

Step By Step

01. Designate thermal sanctuaries and coldwater refugia throughout the Columbia Basin.
02. Extend Oregon's protections for cold water refugia until October 31, and expand the fish sanctuary at the junction of the Deschutes and Columbia rivers.
03. Establish river-specific closure policies for high water temperatures and low flows.



This winter, you can help wild steelhead by simply getting out in your homewaters, taking photos, and sharing them with us using [#wildsteelheadstory](https://twitter.com/wildsteelheadstory)!

Whether it's a grab on a swung fly, a swipe at a spinner, a glimpse of holding fish from a streamside trail, or an up-close encounter through the mask of a snorkel, we want to know what's going on in southern Oregon and throughout the Pacific Northwest!

Together, we can paint a picture of our iconic wild steelhead populations and stay vigilant on their behalf!

