

Finding the needle on the **Kitimat**

Text: Peter McMullan | **Photos:** Gill McKean and Peter McMullan

A young moose browsing fearlessly in a leaf-bare thicket beside the highway that runs 45 miles (73 km) between the communities of Terrace and Kitimat; thrusting through crunching, waist-deep snow to reach the river's bank; a bronze-backed fish surging to the surface to snatch fiercely at a swinging intruder pattern. Three vivid and typical memories from days spent in pursuit of spring-run steelhead in northwestern British Columbia.

IN THIS PART of the world, on Canada's far western coast, we tend to pigeonhole our precious steelhead under two predictable headings, summer-run and winter-run. The summers start to appear in late June and July, whether it be to the rivers on the west coast of Vancouver Island or the into the tributaries of the rightly world-renowned Skeena and Nass systems, hundreds of miles to the north, not forgetting a multitude of

other rivers between those far-apart locations. How fortunate we are who live and play in B.C.

The winters begin to arrive in late November and keep hardy Vancouver Island and Lower Mainland fishermen happy until the calendar comes round to spawning time in March and April. Further north, at least on the mainland, snow, ice, sub-zero temperatures and well-defined close seasons see even the most determined fishermen



not too far from the comforts of home.

Then there are the true spring-run steelhead of March and April that are drawing increasing numbers of fishermen to rivers like the Kitimat and the Copper *aka* Zymoetz, the Zymacord, the Ishkheenickh *aka* Ksi Higinx, the Kitsumkalum *aka* Kalum, the Dala and the Lachmach along with an impressive number of other watersheds in the huge Skeena Region of British Columbia, a province with nine distinct fishery areas, from the Skeena and the Peace in the north to Vancouver Island, in the south west, and Kootenay, in the south east. Incidentally many of the Skeena Region names reflect the area's historic First Nations' traditions.

The main stem of the Skeena, a massive but rewarding challenge in itself, can fish exceptionally well in



March and April for both steelhead and early chinook with upwards of 50 miles (80 km) of water available to anglers between Copper River and China Bar. However, fishing opportunities are always dependent on the timing of the break-up of the winter ice floes. Further upstream the various Skeena tributaries with such world-famous names as the Bulkley and the Kispiox, the Babine and the Morice, are off-limits between January 1 and June 15. That still



leaves lots of choices for the spring steelheader in other parts of the sprawling, lightly populated region.

It was in 1996 that guide and lifelong outdoorsman Gill McKean came to learn his trade in Terrace, 842 miles (1355 km) north of Vancouver and in the very heart of Skeena country. He and his complement of six guest fishermen are located within easy reach of the Skeena itself, as it runs majestically towards the North Pacific minutes from his front door, and of more than a dozen large and small Skeena and Nass watershed

ivers. It's a richness of opportunity that can be overwhelming to the visitor unfamiliar with the sports fishing scene in Canada's most westerly province.

Without a guide it's all a bit of a 'needle in a haystack' situation although, in this the age of the Internet and its multiple search engines, even the complete stranger can very quickly amass enough information to guarantee at least some reasonable hope of success. Fish, as I did for four days, with Gill and his team of brother Gord "you



THE RANGE OF fresh water fishing available in B.C. to local and visiting anglers alike, even in these days of ever-increasing demands and expectations, is far beyond the scope of this piece. It would take a book, and a big one at that, to do justice to the year round prospects. Sufficient to say you are seldom that far from a river or a lake in a province that sprawls just over 800 miles (1300 km) north to south and 434 miles (700 km) east to west, a landmass quadruple that of Great Britain. Vast is a word that cannot do justice to the sheer size of the place, to the magnificence of the scenery, the variations in climate, the immensity of the fisherman's horizons.

Spring steelhead are worthy adversaries and I faced the challenge on the Kitimat with a double handed Sage 8126 Z-Axis rod and a reel loaded with one of the impressive new Scientific Anglers Skagit Extreme lines, the one that integrates running line, 23ft head and a 12ft, 560 grain sink tip. Leaders were a simple four or five feet of 15lb Maxima Ultragreen. For the much smaller Zymacord River I switched to an Airflo Skagit head with lighter tips. Flies, in the main, were intruder patterns in a range of bright colours armed with a single barbless hook as required by law.

The majority of steelhead caught in the Kitimat River are of wild stock but there are also some hatchery-raised fish which can be kept. Between 2000 and 2008, the last year for which angler-based returns are available, the total catch ranged between 3646 (2000-2001) and 460 (2006-07). The hatchery count for these two years was 1415

(517 retained) in 2000-01 and 145 (49 retained) in 2006-07. The total catch in 2003-04 was 3047 while in 2007-08 it was 1848. The number of anglers fishing the Kitimat through the year was always under 1000 between 2000-01 and 2007-08. The most fishermen (986) came in 2000-01 and the fewest (221) in 2003-04 when they still reported catching 3047 fish, 2690 of which were released including 840 of hatchery origin.

Before taxes an eight-day steelhead licence costs a B.C. resident \$20 or \$36 for a full year, which starts April 1. A resident of another Canadian province or territory pays \$36 for eight consecutive days or \$55 for a year. In the case of the overseas visitor, quaintly and officially described as a non-resident alien (NRA), the charges are \$50 (eight days) and \$80 (annual). There is also a one-day licence in all three categories priced at \$10 (resident) and \$20 (non-resident). In addition there is a \$20 (resident) and \$60 (non-resident) conservation surcharge payable by anyone intending to fish for steelhead anywhere in B.C. There are further fees for fishing on top quality rivers carrying either a Class One or Class Two designation. For the resident the annual fee is \$15; the out-of-province visitor pays a daily fee is \$40 (Class One waters) and \$20 (Class Two). There are a number of Class One and Class Two waters in the Skeena Region, and elsewhere in the province, with full details available on-line (www.env.gov.bc.ca) in the synopsis of the 2011-2013 B.C. Freshwater Fishing Regulations. ■

don't leave fish to chase fish" and Darren Wright, who also happens to be an expert hand on both the Babine and Alberta's Bow River, and action, often lots of action, is almost a certainty.

By the time winter's icy grip begins to ease across B.C., and it's obviously later in the north than the south, the summer and winter-run steelhead have spent many months in fresh water, waiting for their time to spawn and losing the early brilliance in appearance that is the hallmark of a fish fresh from the ocean. By contrast the spring-run members of the clan are often bright as a newly minted coin and bursting with energy. Hook one and see what it means to be in touch with one of the fly-fishing world's most exciting challenges.

That's the life enjoyed by Gill and his team at Westcoast Fishing Adventures, a family owned and operated business based on his large and comfortable Terrace home.

The welcome is warm and the rooms spotless with experienced chef Larry Hartwell in charge of a more than adequate kitchen and larder. Fishermen are hearty eaters and the dawn to dusk catering is such that even the most demanding appetites are satisfied at the end of the day.

And they are demanding days, especially for the guides as they move their fishermen from river to river and from pool to pool using an extraordinary range of transport, one that includes a couple of high end trucks, three drift boats, two jet sleds and two large inflatable rafts together with a couple of snowmobiles and an all terrain vehicle, commonly known as a 'quad'. It adds up to a very substantial investment, one that

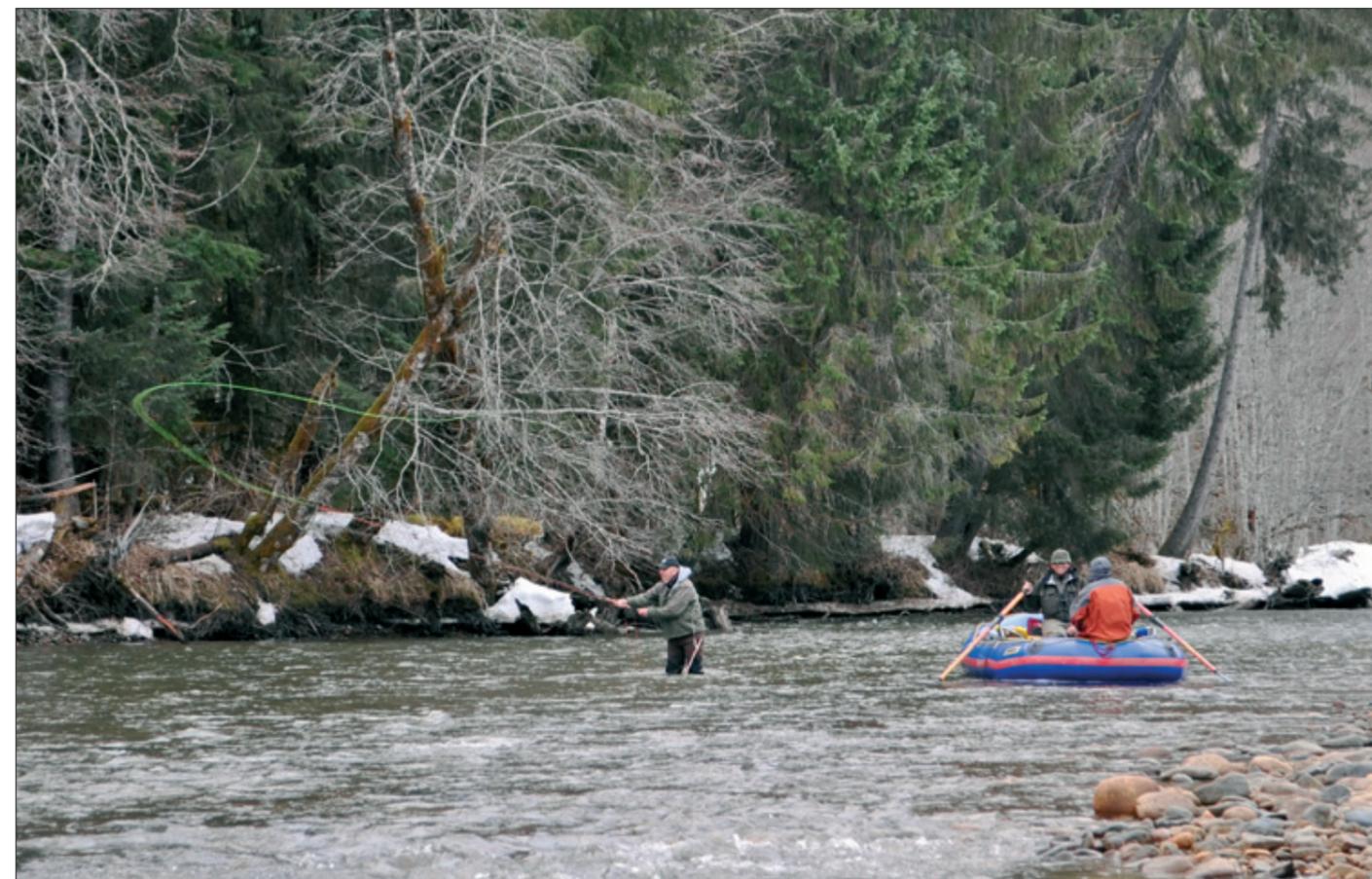
ensures the fishermen who come to fish with Gill, Gord and Darren have the best possible chance of being in the right place at the right time.

As the year progresses they will target not only spring and summer-run steelhead but also three of the five species of Pacific salmon, chinook, coho and chum. It's the chinook that attract the most attention for the Kitimat River produces some absolutely huge fish in the early summer months, monsters that can weigh 50 pounds and often a lot more. Their size is such that, while they can be hooked on the fly, landing them in a fairly large river is another matter altogether so it's more usual to rely on altogether sturdier tackle, lures with strong hooks, multiplier reels and powerful rods that would not be out of place on the ocean.



All that's for another time, perhaps for those who have yet to be tempted by the prospect of a spring-run steelhead, not long from the sea and willing to engage with the angler wielding his double handed fly rod. The Kitimat River was our principal destination on this trip, one undertaken during a later than usual spring that made access to most of the other local rivers seriously difficult if not impossible on account of the yet-to-thaw deep snow.

Even on the middle reaches of the Kitimat we had to make our way through a couple of feet of snow as we hiked down from the main highway and along Humphrys Creek on our way to a stretch of water that, on the day, failed to live up to its visual promise. Not to worry, there were plenty more places to try.





That's one of the great attractions to river fishing in British Columbia. For the most part it's readily available to all holders of the appropriate licence. The Kitimat is a good example and, while the boat angler enjoys countless opportunities over mile after mile of prime steelhead and salmon water, there is also lots of room for the bank fisherman, who knows the access points to the trails leading from the main road. On our travels, and in excellent weather and water conditions, we encountered only very occasional walk and wade anglers



and then in places where it was easy to give them lots of room to fish as we continued with our drift, always anticipating the scope of what was to come around the next bend.

There is a year-round ban on the use of powered boats on the Kitimat so drift boats and inflatable rafts are the usual means of transport with the rafts easily launched where the Terrace-Kitimat road runs close to the river. As it happened my first spring steelhead came not far from our starting point on the second day, from a tail-out fished carefully without success the previous morning. The

A logger's guiding dream

GILL MCKEAN, now in his late 30s, has come a long way from his boyhood days when, as a 10-year old, he lived for the moment when he could slip away from home to fish for rainbow trout in Nanaimo's urban Millstone River.

Later the boy who started fishing with a branch of alder tree as a rod, and green wool as a lure, went on to survive two serious accidents while working as a tree faller in the notoriously dangerous forest industry. He could just as easily have been killed when he was hit by a flying log leaving him in hospital with a fractured skull, broken ribs and a broken shoulder. Three years later another injury ended his career in the woods.

"When I was working in the forests, everywhere I went I saw rivers. They were my passion and I could never fill my craving for fishing", he recalls.

In 1996 he decided to move to the town of Terrace "to get my feet wet guiding and to learn my trade. I bought an old truck with a camper for \$400 and lived in that and went to the laundromat for a shower."

Today he has his own busy guiding business and reckons he spends between 220 and 230 days a year on the water. He remembers going float fishing with his father as a boy but now he places his greatest emphasis on meeting the needs of his fly-fishing clients, making the most of the many exciting opportunities available to Skeena Region locals and visitors alike.

For Gill, his partner Mandi McDougall and their children Austin (12), Koltyn (6) and Maci (18 months), fishing is a way of life with their spacious home, Mountainside Guest House, its focal point. For the fishermen, who they know as both clients and guests, he comments: "We live in a perfect place as far as the fishing is concerned and our spring steelhead are really special, big, strong and beautiful." It's no surprise his business slogan is: "Fishing is our Addiction, Guiding is our Passion, Adventure is in our Blood! Tight Lines..." ■

contact came in mid-river minutes after a tentative pull had straightened the line for an instant. This time the hook hold was good and the resistance strong, providing a most satisfactory start to the day.

That mid-teens fish, quickly released as all wild steelhead have to be in B.C., was the first of three of a similar size I encountered on the Kitimat with the other two, one

landed and one lost, coming later in the day from a broad, boulder-strewn stream that lies between where the Big and Little Wedene Rivers join the main flow from the right. Again the takes were powerful, one just below the surface with the fish showing for a heart-stopping moment as it turned, in much the same way as a summer-run steelhead will come to a waking dry fly.

Later, in a pool further downstream so wide it had all the appearance of a small lake, guide Darren Wright was able to sight fish for one of two steelhead that he spotted holding in shallow water close to the right hand bank. It was a typical single cast opportunity and he was on the mark. 'Fish on' was the call and in short order it was played, landed and released, confirmation that swinging intruder patterns on a sink tip is not the only way to approach these Kitimat steelhead. That said it's probably the best way to cover as much water as possible on a river where the fly fisherman works hard for every chance that comes his way.

With time a constraint and the more distant rivers difficult to access

on account of the lingering and heavy snow pack, it was decided to spend another day drifting the Zymacord, a smaller river than the Kitimat and a tributary of the Skeena, which it meets not far from downtown Terrace. There was still deep snow here too and, while we struggled through it to reach the water's edge after truck and trailer had been parked on an adjacent and well-used logging road, Gill and Darren had their work cut out dragging the raft to the river. You had to admire their energy and determination.

From there on the day, while fishless, was an absolute delight with the river, which could well have been approached with a single handed rod, winding through a heavily forested



valley between banks still blanketed with snow. The raft made it easy for us to move from pool to pool and to cover all the likely holding water with only one half hearted take and a couple of handsome cutthroat trout to show for our efforts. But the wild and majestic scenery more than made up for our lack of success.

The Kitimat, by contrast, is a very different river flowing, as it does, through a wide, glaciated valley that has been heavily logged in the past. This makes for an ever-changing watercourse, one that sees pools and runs altered significantly year by year

during periods of high water. At the same time the removal of the ancient, old growth forest has opened up a succession of vistas that were totally magnificent on a bright spring day. Not a true wilderness river by any means but one well worth a visit by fly fishermen anxious to add spring-run steelhead to their fishing diaries.

The writer fished as a guest of Gill McKean and Westcoast Fishing Adventures, Terrace, B.C. (www.westcoastfishing.ca). ■

