

Running the **DEAN**

What happens when
six metalheads hit
British Columbia's
Dean River during the
best week in 10 years?



They rock 'em.

Story and photos by Greg Thomas





Last July I was angling for a flight to Bella Coola with Geoff Moore, who works for Tourism British Columbia, a query he probably gets tired of fielding. He said, “Greg, according to our records you’ve tried to get this flight and a spot on the Dean River for 15 years.”

Later, flight confirmation showed up in an e-mail with an interesting addendum. Moore, an avid angler, wrote, “I’ll give you the good news and the bad news at once. Here’s a ticket to paradise...and a return ticket home.”

A couple weeks later I was in a helicopter over British Columbia’s gnarly Coast Range with Andrew Bennett, owner of a lodge called B.C. West. We were joined by four other lucksters, including George Cook, Jeff Watt, Michael White and Gary Berenson—Dean River veterans who seemed more comfortable than me as we sliced through jagged, glaciated mountains, cutting through narrow passes that dropped, in places, 4,000 vertical feet. Ice faces and granite escarpments passed at eye level. Streams flowed through the valleys below, that water winding to the glacially influenced, turquoise saltwater of the Dean River Channel.

A couple hours later I was knee-deep in the Dean, on an incoming tide, Spey casting, working flies through a run called Upper Tidal, hoping that our week would be as productive as the previous group’s. They climbed in the helicopter as we climbed out. I asked Jeff Hickman, who’s an avid steelheader and guide from Oregon,

“How was it?” He shook his head, as if in disbelief, before saying, “You’re going to do well.”

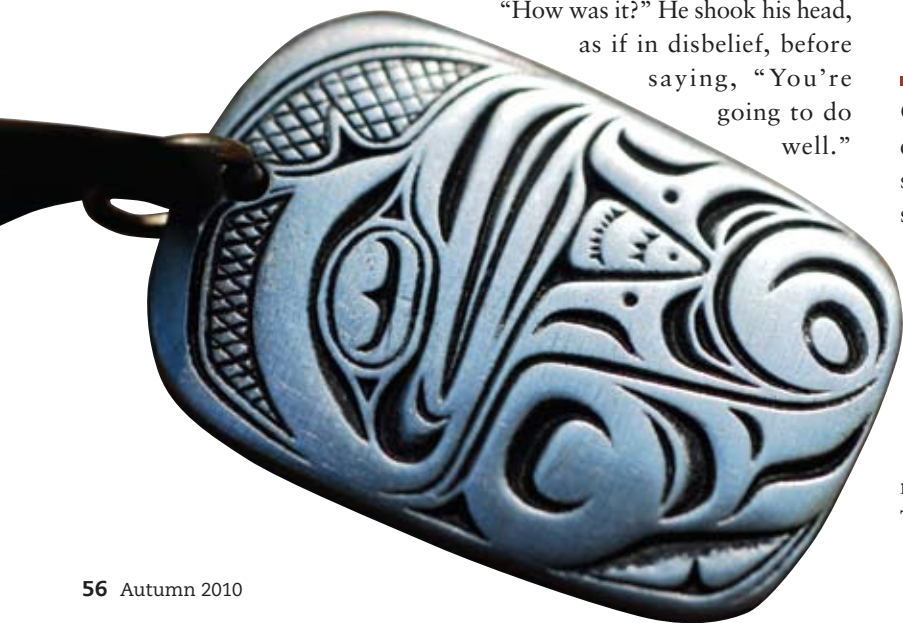
As a group, they’d hooked 78.

I wasn’t in Upper Tidal for more than 20 minutes when I got a shocking grab, as if a fish took the fly as it headed downstream. I was far into my backing in about five seconds. There was a pool below called Lower Tidal and then nothing but salt water and I honestly feared this fish might reach the channel and that I might lose all my line. But, near the tailout the fish paused, and then turned upstream. I steadily wound backing onto the reel. A few minutes later, a guide, Pauly Reid, had the fish corralled. By the time we got back to the lodge I’d beached three more, all chrome-bright, caught within 300 yards of salt water, all carrying a few sea lice, all major fighters resembling no steelhead I’d ever encountered, which is what many veteran metalheads told me to expect on the Dean.

The Dean begins on the Chilcotin Plateau of west-central British Columbia and drains the high, glaciated icepack of the Coast Range. The “holy water,” as some steelhead addicts call it, begins several miles above the Dean River Canyon, a raging chunk of rapids and drops that challenge the upstream intentions of anadromous fish. In fact, one day, while fishing a run called Ross Island, we found a beautiful buck sockeye floating downstream, just a half-mile or so from the canyon, its head having cracked on a rock as it tested the canyon’s whitewater. The very lower Dean, including runs called Eagle’s Nest, Bills, Cutbank, Tony’s and Archeological, among others, provide fish moving in on the tides, literally, minutes or only hours out of the salt.

All Pacific steelhead are strong and worth admiration; those sea-run rainbows are born in freshwater and then head to the Pacific Ocean to feed on nutritious items, such as Atka mackerel, stickleback, lantern fish and, especially, armhook squid and gonatid squid. If they make it past the orcas, sharks, seals and commercial nets, they may return to natal streams as many as five times, making them, in my mind, five times more impressive than any Pacific salmon, which spawn once and die. I’ve caught inland steelhead on Idaho’s Salmon River, 500 miles from saltwater, that nearly spooled me, which demonstrates the fishes’ resolve no matter where it is found.

But the Dean River fish are different and that’s been noted by many steelhead gurus and angling authors. Their strength, determination, leaping ability (one of my





fish made eight major leaps before I subdued it) and stunning takes are attributed to genetic wiring that prepares them to negotiate those massive canyon falls. But there may be more to it than that. Trey Combs put it best when, in his fantastic book *Steelhead Fly Fishing*, he wrote, “The majority of Dean steelhead, as well as those steelhead that enter the Kispiox, Sustut, Babine and Bulkley rivers, enter fresh water at approximately the same time....The major difference, of course, is the distance the steelhead must travel before reaching water that can be fished with a fly. Dean fish are immediately available to anglers and their condition is superb...Bucks in the upstream tributaries of the Skeena are typically highly colored, and are often sluggish, despite their great size and strength.”

After our first afternoon on the water, George Cook, a mega-personality who owns Angler’s Rendezvous and reps for Sage, Redington and Rio said, “Well G, what do you think about these Dean River steelhead?” I said, “It seems like they take while headed full-speed downstream.” The veterans, most of whom hooked fish that first afternoon, nodded and said, “Yep, that’s the thing about the Dean.” Cook, who’s the creator of the Popsicle, the Dean River Tiger and the Blue Moon, and is widely regarded as one of the world’s top speycasters and steelhead gurus, drew a blank that first afternoon, something that foreshadowed the next few days, a condition that steelheaders often struggle with, no matter their skill level and experience.

On the second day Bennett and I drove upriver on quads (I can’t even accurately describe what a blast it is to drive those meaty rigs through

the forest where any turn might provide a glimpse of a grizzly, which locals call G-Bear) and we parked near a run called Totem, named for an angling group that camps at that location each year.

I know steelhead. You may catch three or four one day and get blanked the rest of the week or an entire year. It’s all timing, luck and some skill. I’d arrived on the Dean hoping to catch, at least, a single fish. I’d done that times four on the first afternoon and I didn’t want that karma to change. This may sound crazy, but I started acting superstitious, not unlike a coach who subscribes to insanely repetitive quirks. Take John Wooden for example. Prior to each game he would tap his assistant coach twice on a shoulder, twice on an arm and twice on a leg. And he would always, always clutch a rolled-up program during a game. Thad Motta, current basketball coach at The Ohio State University, takes it even further. He always chews a piece of Juicy Fruit or Orbit gum before a game and he has to unwrap it himself, wad the paper and fire it into a trashcan behind the bench.

Being a coach is a difficult occupation. Catching steelhead is often impossible. Both endeavors offer a minimum of sway between depression and success. When it’s going right we don’t change a thing. Case in point, I hadn’t changed my underwear from the day prior. In addition, I wore the same socks, shirt and hat. And before stepping into Totem, just as the day prior at Upper Tidal, I tied on an orange Pick-Yer-Pocket and rubbed a coastal native art pendant that I’d purchased in Bella Coola.

About halfway down Totem the mid-river current turns into a luscious roll and the inside seam just shouts





metal, the kind of place that most runs offer, a spot where you might not get a grab if you're two feet beyond the prime water or three feet this side of it. That's steelhead and madness wrapped into a river. Fortunately, I hit that zone and got the grab, a fish that raced across the river, leaped and broke my knot, a perfection loop. I regained composure and, not 20 yards downstream, hooked another rocket. Only problem? Massive cluster in my running line. Ping! Another steelhead gone.

No worries, another 15 yards downstream, while I'm turned upstream telling Bennett my new tagline for the smallest Pacific salmon—pinkie likes it on the hangdown—the rod is almost ripped from my grasp, another chrome-bright Dean River steelie making me wonder if it ate while swimming full speed. A few minutes later Bennett and I are laughing and snapping shots of a 15 or 16-pound buck. A little later we're doing it again, this time documenting a hen that took in the skinny taylor. As she swims back to the main flow I turn to Bennett and say, "I've caught a hundred or more steelhead in my life and right now I feel like I didn't even know steelhead before I got here."

He smiles, says, "Right on. Right on Greg. That's really cool." He owns a lodge on the Dean, you know. He's heard it all before. I don't change a thing, including those underwear. By the end of the fourth day I'm a little itchy, but I've beached 15 and lost some bruise, more than adequate tradeoff, nothing that a dusting of Gold Bond can't correct.

Things aren't going so well over in George's corner. He's super-competitive. He specifically hunts big-game animals that qualify for the Boone-and-Crockett records. He attempts to cast farther with a Spey rod than anyone on earth. He tries to catch more steelhead than his campmates. Most telling, one day he challenged me to a quick, friendly game of washers before he and his fishing and hunting partner, Watt, whom George calls The Mayor, headed out on quads. We shot and he quickly put five disks in the hole. He walked away, turned to The Mayor and said, "Me. Five-to-one."

This is okay. I'm hoping George's luck 180s because, right now, his cutman is administering the frozen metal and a manager is looking for the white towel. Here's why he's on the ropes, a sequence of downfalls that has George fending off the eight-count:

- ❖ George forgot the majority of his Spey rods in Seattle.
- ❖ George forgot to pay for parking at the Vancouver airport and may head home from this trip to find his vehicle impounded.
- ❖ George went first through Totem (the hottest run on the river) and didn't touch a fish. The Mayor walked right in behind him and hooked three off his heels. As they prepared to cross the river in a hefty pontoon boat George slipped and The Mayor



ran the boat right over his head. George came up gasping between The Mayor's legs while The Mayor was saying, "George? Where'd you go?" Once across the river, the two men climbed on their quads. The Mayor took off through the trees like a shot leaving George, literally, in a cloud of dust. George, trying to keep up, negotiated all of 12 yards before catching a fender on a tree which rolled his four-wheeler. He managed the quad onto four tires and drove back to camp picking cottonwood leaves, spider webs and dust out of his eyes, nose, ears and hair. When he reached camp and we saw his expression, nobody asked if he's auditioning for a role as bigfoot or if he's been in a brawl with G-Bear.

❖ George fished the lower river and got nailed by a swarm of horseflies, unlike any he's ever dealt with. Squadrons attacked his lips and tried to wrestle into his mouth. He cast between swats and spits and finally quit. Alas, no fish. Said the afternoon was ruined by savages.

❖ George, in a desperate act, built a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich and headed out for the day, passing on that pan-seared pork and Rioja. Ten hours later he rolled into camp. I was hoping for a smile but those eyebrows are too narrow. George walked by, pinched his

thumb and finger to sign zero and said, "Worst day ever on the Dean."

Then he's off to fish the Cutbank run for more pain. He gets back at dark, goose-egged again. None of us offer numbers: This day Whitey, who I'm



now calling Half-Whitey because he wades so deep all you ever see is his chest, arms and head, goes seven-for-eight; I go five-for-seven; Andrew goes three-for-four; Gary does one-for-three with one fish taken off his line by a seal. Gary is pissed, but not like George.

If you fish steelhead, even if only on the Dean, sooner or later you'll wear George's shoes. And if you stick with steelhead, as George has, you'll come out of that rut. For what reason (alignment of the stars?) nobody knows. But, it's interesting to consider this: one evening George looked past the barbecue hamburgers, the potato salad and the apple pie (which is saying something for a man with the nickname Dump Bear) and sank his teeth into, perhaps, six or seven ears of corn, the residue resembling pale, stacked cordwood on his plate. The next day he returned to camp looking 10 years younger and wearing a smile—"four hooked, three landed." He's broken the curse! That night he asks the chef, "You got more corn on the cob?" I wonder, is he hungry or superstitious? I know one thing: I don't want to see his underwear tomorrow because he ain't changing them!

Fortunately, great fishing continues. Whitey sweeps up the sea on his way to a 28-fish trip; George stays hot, hammers a few more fish; I go dry line on Berenson's urging and raise two takers to a skated fly at Totem; lodge owner Andrew gets six grabs in one run; Berenson, who we've nicknamed The Glacier for the way he meticulously fishes a run, continues to admonish seals while setting into a couple more 12-pounders; The Mayor is too busy laughing at George to worry about numbers, but he is bragging about the 17-pounder he released.

Our story isn't unique. After being discovered in the 1960s the Dean booted out insane numbers of steelhead. Unfortunately, Dean River steelhead runs are cyclical. To anglers' despair, that cycle tanked during the past decade. Fortunately everyone who fished the Dean in 2010 saw catch rates that resembled the glory



years and we flew away saying the Dean River might be the world's best steelhead fishery. Because trends in steelhead abundance often stretch for several years, the outlook for 2011 and beyond is great. Unfortunately, that means some anglers may book set dates for several years, prohibiting late-decidors an opportunity to fish the river. If you want to fish the Dean next year or in future years, I would suggest getting on the phone.

Speaking of that, on the last day of the trip, as we waited for the helicopter, I chatted with George about his love of steelhead and steelhead rivers. While doing so he was writing a deposit check to Mr. Andrew, booking the same week for July 2011. "You in G?" he asked and I barked, "Yep." And why wouldn't we all be? As a six-person group, for the week, we hooked 128 steelhead and landed 77.

As I climbed into the helicopter and answered the arrivals with, "You'll do well," I remembered Geoff Moore's e-mail. He's the tourism guy who wrote, "Here's a ticket to paradise...." It took me 15 years to put my boots in the Dean and only six days to understand how prophetic that statement would be.