

There are all kinds of lists touting places fly fishermen need to fish at least once. There are books such as *Fifty Places to Fly Fish Before You Die*. There are internet lists *ad nauseam* about the best place for trout, the best place for steelhead and the best bonefish flats in the world. However, when you talk steelheading, almost everyone can agree that Oregon's

North Umpqua is the original king of the great summer-steelhead rivers.

The North Umpqua first came to prominence in the late 1920s when a road was constructed that allowed access to the river by automobile. Prior to the road, only a rough ancient Indian trading trail existed, and very few people, other than an occasional gold prospector or elk hunter,

had ever entered the North Umpqua River Valley. With the new road came one of the area's first fly-fishing personalities.

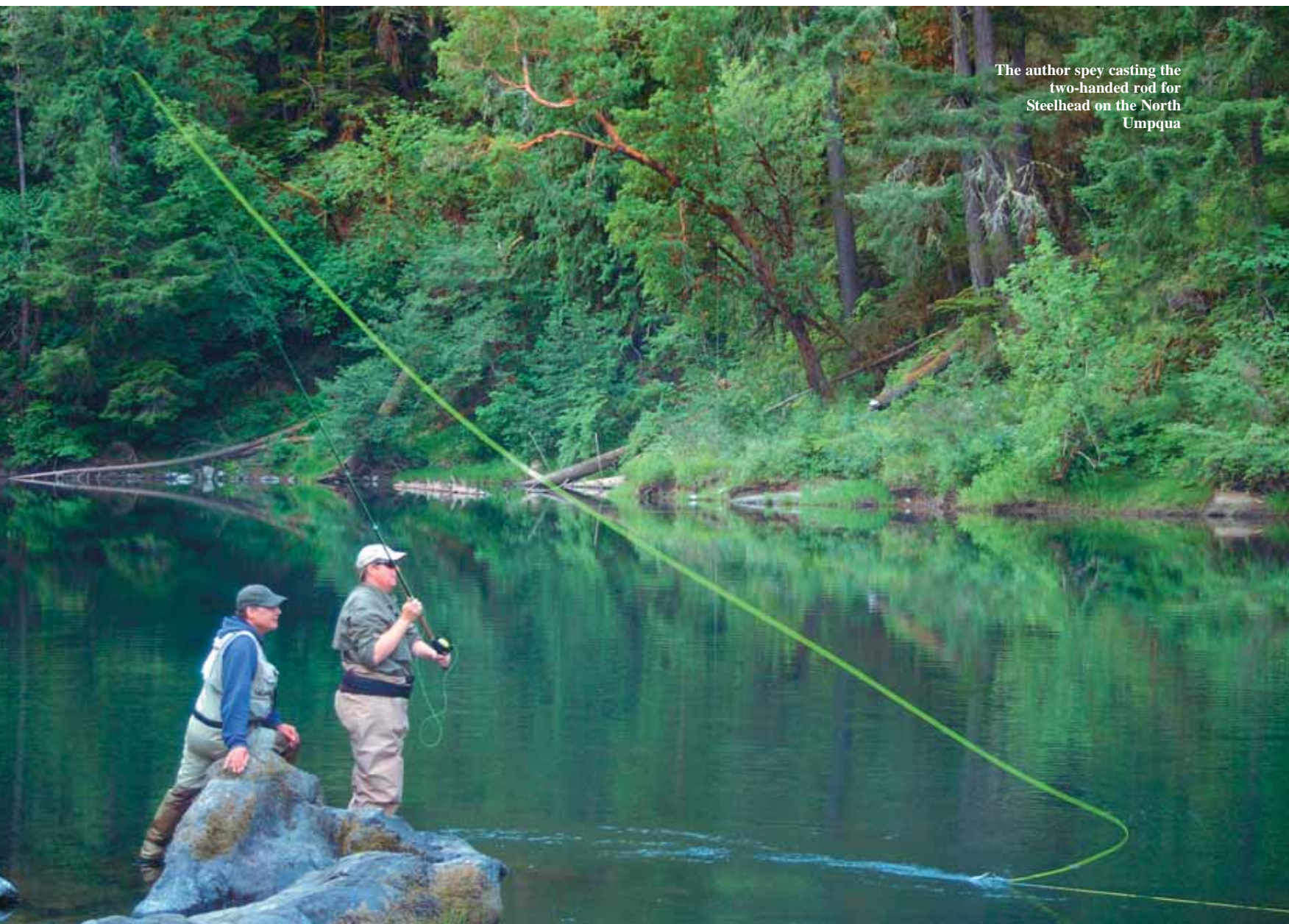
Major Lawrence Mott, scion of a wealthy New York iron family, was a Harvard graduate and served in the Signal Corps in the First World War. As a young man he left his first wife for another married woman, and his father promptly

# Summer Steelheading

## on the Famed North Umpqua

Story by Douglas M. Dear

Photos by Gene Lewis



The author spey casting the two-handed rod for Steelhead on the North Umpqua



You never get tired of the rugged yet lush North Umpqua scenery.

disinherited him. After World War I, he moved to Catalina Island with his new wife and became a major player in the then-new technology of radio and as a writer of numerous stories about marlin fishing. His focus soon turned to catching the beautiful sea-run rainbow trout, better known as steelhead, on the North Umpqua.

Mott's Camp, near Steamboat Creek, was as legendary as his angling ability. He invited many friends from California and the East Coast to fly-fish for the ultimate steelhead. Unfortunately, only a few years after finding the Umpqua, he died at the age of 50 from leukemia. Even while suffering mightily, he chose to spend his final days in 1931 fishing his beloved North Umpqua.

Major Mott left quite a legacy—there are a number of prominent runs on the river named after him, and he put the area's first outfitter in business. More importantly his writing brought another famous angler to the North Umpqua—Zane Grey.

*Fly Rod Chronicles* host Curtis Fleming with the prize



Grey was a Western novelist of high regard. In 1912 he published his first best seller, *Riders of the Purple Sage*, and by the 1930s, having published close to 100 books, he was perhaps the best-known writer and sportsman of his day. Grey traveled with an entourage that included his own chef and a personal film crew. They filmed his escapades for many shorts that

were shown before feature films in the 1930s. He caught world-record marlin around the globe and made steelhead fishing so popular that he was forced, because of the crowds, to abandon his original camp waters on the Rogue River for the Umpqua. He was also one of the first sporting conservationists. He wrote of the dangers of overfishing the steelhead waters and spoke out against commercial salmon fishing, which killed many steelhead.

So with all of this incredible history in mind, my fishing pal Curtis Fleming and I awoke at 4:30 a.m. to fish the North Umpqua with our own entourage of guides and cameramen from *The Fly Rod Chronicles*. Fleming is the host of the award-winning fly-fishing program, and I am his sometime co-host and technical consultant.

These days the fishing is still bringing sportsmen from around the globe to try their luck on the beautiful steelhead

of this wild, rugged, Oregon river. And while total catch figures are not what they were in Grey's day, the beauty and power of these sea-run rainbows have changed little. The fly-fishermen we dined with the night before at the popular steelheader's haunt, the Steamboat Inn, were quick to tell us that a couple of steelhead in a week is considered a spectacular success. We talked to a group of four experienced anglers from Colorado who had been in town fishing for a week and were still waiting for their first fish. Yet those who had caught a fish spoke of what a great fight they had experienced—even if it was only on one fish in a week. Fleming and I began to worry about what tomorrow would bring—no fish makes for a tough 30-minute show.

As we awoke looking out at the dark Oregon sky, our spirits were high. Our fishing party for the day included Dillon Renton, the 16-year-old steelheading *wunderkind* son of Deschutes River guide David Renton, along with *FRC* producer/cameraman Steve Hasty, cameraman Gene Lewis and our guide for the day, Tony Wratney.

Wratney, a San Francisco native, caught his first steelhead on the North Umpqua in 1977, and by the time he graduated from college in Bend, Oregon, he was already guiding every summer. And in 1984 he started his own business, Summer Run Guide Service ([summerrun.net](http://summerrun.net)). There is no one guiding on the North Umpqua today with more experience than Wratney.

All of the flies that Wratney uses are tied by him. They are so coveted that our young guest Renton made a point of telling us to please take any fly that was offered so he could use it later in the season. We thought this was funny and brought it up with Wratney—he did not laugh. He has developed his special patterns through years of what-works research. An odd quirk of the North Umpqua is that you may not use any weight on your fly other than the hook itself. Split shot is also illegal.



**While the water looks shallow, it can be very deceiving and slippery. Steel-spiked boots are a must on the Umpqua.**

The North Umpqua is a big river, and the only way to properly cover the water is with 10- to 14-foot, 8-weight, one- or (preferably) two-handed rod, utilizing the spey-casting method. For those unfamiliar with spey casting, its origins stem from the Spey River in Scotland. Spey casting is a fancy form of the traditional roll cast. It is probably the most efficient and systematic way to cover larger areas of water at long distances.

Wratney's preferred technique is the floating line, skate-and-bump method with either a streamer or a dry fly. Starting with about 40 feet of line and casting straight across the river, you proceed to bounce your rod tip and skate the fly until it

is directly downstream from you. You then strip off *exactly* two feet of line (no kidding – he has it marked on the rod) and repeat this process over and over until you either hook up or reach the end of your casting ability. Then, based on the size of the run, you either reposition within the pool or move on to new water.

My pal Fleming drew the lucky straw and was first up for the morning. He, like I, had never really spey casted before. Fortunately Wratney was a good instructor and we were pretty quick studies. After 45 minutes of casting, Wratney moved Fleming to the lower section of our run to try new water. Renton figured he would teach me a few aspects of spey casting as

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Fleming stayed 200 yards downstream. On Renton's second demonstration cast, he hooked up with a fine five-pound youngster steelie. We started laughing as he landed the fish and released it—teasing Fleming that Renton had caught the fish in his already-fished water. Before the laughs got too loud, Fleming was into a monster. With Wratney whispering instructions to let the fish run, more line ran off the reel. And then the backing. And then Wratney told Fleming it was time to follow the fish downstream. "Faster!" as the whisper gave way to a bark.

Fleming attempted to negotiate the rocks and stumps along the slippery river bank. Fortunately all the high school and college football practice paid off for Fleming. He managed to jump the stumps and rocks while keeping his balance, running several hundred yards downstream, all the while gaining line on the sea-run beauty. By the time he had the fish to hand, we were all crowded on the bank to

see him release the 12-pound prize. And it was just 6:45 in the morning!

But this is the part of the story that every serious modern-day steelhead fisherman knows only too well: two fish in 20 minutes and not another fish for the rest of the day. Wratney worked with me for the next four hours until my back ached and my arms were working on instinct rather than mind control. Fleming threw another 500 or 1,000 casts as well. Nothing. Even Wratney's young protégé Renton was unable to coax up so much as a bump.

We broke for a late breakfast of pancakes with skillet of potatoes and eggs at The Steamboat. We spoke to fisherman from all over the country and even a few from Europe. The stories were all the same about the "fish of a thousand casts"—and what an incredible feeling that pull was when you finally hooked up. During breakfast Wratney let it slip that for the last three weeks all of the fish his clients had landed were caught before 7 a.m.. We still fished the afternoon, but we did not break the three-week streak. My first hook-up would have to wait for our next visit. And yes, like a Redskins fan looking for a Super Bowl appearance, just wait until next year!

*Fly Rod Chronicles* is seen nationally every week on the Sportsman Channel and in Virginia on several local network affiliates. Please go to [www.flyrodchronicles.net](http://www.flyrodchronicles.net) for more information.

Douglas Dear is the owner of Rose River Farm ([www.rosriverfarm.com](http://www.rosriverfarm.com)), a popular trophy-trout fly-fishing destination located on the Rose River in Madison County, Virginia. He also serves as chairman of the board of Project Healing Waters, a nonprofit organization dedicated to healing wounded veterans through fly fishing, [www.projecthealingwaters.org](http://www.projecthealingwaters.org).

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