

## The Bell Irving, October 2004

Omens for the fall steelhead season on the Bell had not been propitious. The sudden climatic changes for which British Columbia is well known had thrown up some fiendish weather during the early weeks, forcing the 'pioneers' to explore smaller lake fed streams in order to find fishing opportunities.

However, conditions had improved during the last week of September, and it was with renewed optimism and the habitual 'delirium tremens' that I arrived at the lodge at around midnight on the 1<sup>st</sup> October.

The moon glinted enticingly through straggly cloud and there was no hint of impending rain over the mountains. The calm was disturbed only by broken laughter of a few late night revellers wallowing in the hot tub, attempting to shake off the effects of too many Kootenays. As I was still on Atlantic time metal fatigue began to set in, and a deep sleep swiftly ensued.

At 7'o'clock next morning the grey dawn began to recede, giving way to a clear sky. The urge to get to the 'launch' immediately was barely mitigated by the usual breakfast special, combining fresh fruit salad with copious quantities of French toast, bacon, sausage, hash browns and eggs to order.

Then down to the drying room, with the habitual layer amassing session designed to maintain body heat and rebut rain. A cursory check on choice of fly, an even smarter round of introductions to fellow anglers, and we were off, with our guides the indomitable Joseph and irrepressible J.C. at the helm.

Down at the launch, the Bell Irving flirted irresistibly, its smooth even flow and slightly milky complexion at the right consistency to engender confidence in both angler and steelhead alike. The air was crisp and cold, just enough to suggest stability. First stop was 'Far Side', a short way up river, opposite the influx of Skowill Creek. Within a few minutes I had landed a char. Barely had the spey casts begun to find some fluency when I felt the unmistakable take of a steelhead, hooked momentarily on the 'dangle', before shaking off its unwelcome attachment. The mood was tantalising.

Downriver undaunted, and the slow, deep, pocket water at the neck of 'Franks' soon provided reward with two hook-ups and one landed, a feisty hen of about 8 or 9 pounds. At the tail of the pool I landed another hen of similar size. More action in a single session than one could often hope for in several days.

The beauty of the Bell Irving lies partly in the river itself, and partly in the magnificent coastal mountains through which it carves its unerring course, past Bowser Lake, down to its confluence with the Nass. At no time is this more spectacular than at the beginning of October, when the cottonwoods and alders play chameleon, turning overnight into their striking autumn

colours. A few days later they shed their skins altogether, and the final dress rehearsal before winter is all but completed.

This is where the trouble starts. As an avid nature enthusiast, I love the fall colours. However, once the leaves start to drop, they can and often will upset the resident fish, perhaps confused by too much swirl and flash in the river. So it proved, as after a sensational 'streamside' lunch the wind blew emphatically upstream, and only one further 'hook-up' ensued, lost due to the fish's uncannily perceptive decision to swim directly towards rather than away from the resistant pressure. Neither manic reeling nor rapid withdrawal to the bank were of any avail, and the temporary sense of loss was worsened by chiding from J.C., laughing at my discomfort like a demented chipmunk.

Still, it was a vintage opening, and my fishing companion Steve had similar success, all with his own flies. Steve had already caught all five species of Pacific salmon, but steelhead were essentially a new challenge. He was simply delighted to be here, away from the unwanted attentions of both his ex-wife and the Inland Revenue. Which was the greater of the two evils I could not be certain. Back at the lodge, sipping an excellent malt and watching the sharp blue sky gradually darken, I'm not sure that either of us really cared anyway.

The second day followed a similar pattern, with all the action taking place in the cold morning fog. Three hook ups in an hour and a half, with the second one landed being a twenty pound buck. However, it is the vision of the first fish that continues to haunt me. Almost on the dangle, a strong surge, three jumps and seventy yards downstream, into the backing and almost into Lower Skowill. I had just begun to regain some control, J.C. had leapt into the boat to bring assistance, when the line slackened. A sharp curse echoed up and down the river. Through the mist, Steve had seen the fish jump. So too had 'Mac', the chain smoking droll republican, migrating south from Alaska to warmer winter climes in Texas, who proved more adept in spey casting in one morning than many with years of experience.

They are never as big as they seem, the fish that torture you with their 'long distance release'. Even so, a few years earlier I had caught steelhead on the Sustut to 23lbs, and seen one taken on the same river of nearly 30lbs. Certainly that buck was a large one, and gave me reason to reflect on the quality of the fish running the Bell. What is it with size anyway? I was reminded of that famous Elizabeth Taylor quip, when asked what Richard Burton was like. 'Like the inside of a packet of Rothmans', she replied. If you open a packet of these cigarettes you will find the following words embossed on the inside: 'Filter tip. Doubly smooth. Plus the extra length'...

The following day promised new territory. Geoff, the Lodge manager, had organised some heli-fishing on the Nass. Geoff is a steelhead devotee and superb fisherman, blending his considerable knowledge and enthusiasm with realism. He was accompanied this trip by his delightful wife Sonia and young son Benjamin, who undoubtedly will soon be seeking to establish his own fishing credentials.

The helicopter had developed a technical hitch, but after a slight delay we were off down towards the Nass valley, accompanied by Vern, a larger-than-life former American footballer. Whether he played in 'offence' or 'defence' I can't rightly recall but it was clear that long after his playing days he still cut a formidable figure. In fact he reminded me of Raymond Chandler's description of Moose Malloy in 'Farewell My Lovely', who was 'about as inconspicuous as a tarantula on a slice of angel food'. Vern found that installing central heating systems near Seattle was seriously eating into his fishing calendar, but with two trips planned in the fall he was taking the appropriate steps to correct the situation.

After a brief lunch 'on the hoof', we set off on the raft, fishing several promising pools, but rewarded only by the odd rainbow and the occasional 'tap tap' of those frustrating river dwellers unwilling to disclose their true identity. Vern's casting was extremely impressive, as he himself admitted his greatest strength and weakness, distance not always being the necessary objective. It was easy to understand why he wanted to extend his experience to Atlantic salmon, as with his physique and technique he would excel on the rivers in Norway and on the Kola.

Due to time constraints Geoff encouraged us to fish a pool quickly, four steps between casts, and then move on, so as to cover as much water as possible. Finally, his tactics paid off, and in a pool which had hitherto yielded nothing except char, we had a nine pound hen.

Then it was that our afternoon took a somewhat unexpected turn, for the next pool happened to be within a few yards of a recent moose fight, with fatal consequences for the loser. Alighting to have a glimpse of the fallen bull we were surprised to find that we had company, in the form of almost 1000lbs of aggressive grizzly. Determined not to be deprived of his pre-hibernation feast, the bear retreated momentarily, then started towards us. Knowing that these animals can outrun a racehorse over short distances we wasted no time in rejoining our craft and heading off downstream, learning only later that his charge had been a 'spoof'. Our bluff had been called.

The remainder of the day passed in relatively uneventful fashion, coho and char proving the only prizes. Then it was back to the lodge, courtesy of Matt, our helicopter pilot, who at 28 had a maturity and competence that belied his years. As we journeyed back along the Nass valley it was striking to see how slender the pine trees appeared from above, as if we were flying over a myriad of green stalagmites.

Weather, like women, is notoriously unpredictable, especially in the wilds of British Columbia, and so it proved. An adverse 'front' came in, and those of us fishing the Bell were limited to a half day. The Nass team were somewhat more fortunate, such can be the incredibly localised nature of the rain.

Cometh the hour, cometh the Lodge Manager, and the following day Geoff drove us down to fish the Meziadin, a short river with few pools but running

clear as it is lake fed. We had been joined by Graeme, an Australian businessman, Alaskan fanatic and former 'wallaby'. I fished with Torsten, a delightful Swede who had arrived late due to missing his connection from Frankfurt. This was Torsten's second trip and it was clear immediately (and by repute) that he was a dedicated and extremely competent fisherman. From our discussions he revealed that he fished the Gaula in Norway every year as well as the Spey in Scotland. Thus his salmon and steelhead expertise was well established.

To Geoff's eternal credit everyone caught a steelhead, mine more to luck than judgement, as a poorly executed longer cast (at his suggestion) resulted in a fish that I could not even feel until I reeled in yards of slack line. The fish slashed at the fly, inhaling it at the second attempt, clearly desperate for the 'egg sucking bitch' in front of it, despite my best efforts. Perhaps it was payback time, as we speculated on the countless occasions that a steelhead might ingest a fly and then release it, without the fisherman being aware of any activity. A salutary lesson in ensuring good presentation, no slack line, and a constant 'feel' to register the subtlest of 'takes'.

Graeme and Steve were even more fortunate, as they were fishing the run down from the lake, and in addition to steelhead had numerous coho and pinks.

The following day confirmed what we already knew, namely that the main river systems were still blown out. Undeterred, we set off on an expedition to the Damdochax, another crystal clear stream which being lake fed is generally unperturbed by adverse weather. The previous day had produced results, but for us one solitary fish to Graeme's rod encompassed our efforts. The Damdochax had risen a foot and was generally fast flowing, with perhaps a little too much pace. The secret, according to the guru (Geoff), is to find some slow moving or slack water adjacent to the main current, or next to a 'root wad' in a back eddy. The fish might lie very close to you, and distance casting was an irrelevance. The highlight of the day was seeing a bull moose and cow standing in the river as we came in to land.

From that point on, the weather began to gradually stabilise, though it proved to be a 'false dawn'. However, we managed an extra day on the Bell, which brought a fish for the rejuvenated Mac, who had spent several days in his trailer recovering from something akin to pneumonia.

Other, taps, tugs and pulls focused the mind but brought no trophies.

Then, with many regrets and some trepidation, it was time to say 'au revoir' and head down towards Terrace, a three hour drive south, where the weather reports had been dire. Incredibly, at Kitwanga the Skeena was running clean, and as we drove over the Copper in the dim twilight, that too, was clearing. Unbeknown to me, the next two days would be amongst the most memorable of my short steelhead career.....

The Bell II Lodge has many attractions. Originally built for heliskiing it was substantially refurbished in recent years and is now a fabulous lodge. To be

in the middle of nowhere, with the luxury of saunas and Jacuzzi, may be 'de rigueur' for skiers, but it is a real bonus for the steelhead fraternity.

The rivers, especially the Bell Irving and its mother river the Nass, offer superb fly fishing, ideally suited for speycasters. If and when systems do 'blow out' there is productive back up fishing on the smaller streams which means 'early baths' and armchair fishing are restricted to a minimum.

Then of course there are the guides. Do you opt for the Rolls Royce, in the real life form of Joseph, or do you go for the 'souped-up' Ford Capri, in the shape of J.C., hazard lights flashing and smoke billowing from every orifice? The former, wise epitome of patience, smoothly ironing out the creases in your 'snap T', tactfully overlooking the fact that your spey casting has begun to take on a 'spaghetti junction' formation. The latter, whose only break in conversation is to light another cigarette, constantly admonishing, forever light heartedly kicking your butt. It makes for an irresistible team, as Joseph and J.C. have are also great humorists, and both are gifted with an innate ability to improve your fishing skills and understanding. They have an excellent knowledge of the Bell, and their expertise and encouragement do much to increase the chances of success. I am indebted to them.

The essence of the Bell Irving 'experience', in addition to the wildlife encounters and the new friends to be made, is an appreciation of the rivers and the fish. This trip highlighted the importance of smaller spey rods in sensing a 'take'. A 15' Loomis is terrific for distance, but even on the Nass it is not always a prerequisite to cover a large expanse of water. As an equal devotee of Atlantic salmon it is necessary to constantly remind oneself that steelhead like to lie in seams off the main current, like a good look at the fly, and that one must set the hook on feeling a take. Perhaps next time that buck might not be so lucky...