

*Your Own Water:*

## *Yakima River, Washington.*

**T**HE YAKIMA MAY BE ACCURATELY VIEWED AS A “CONTRARY” RIVER. BUT DON’T LEAP TO THE CONCLUSION THAT “CONTRARY,” AS IT’S USED HERE, HAS A NEGATIVE CONNOTATION. IN FACT, AS REGARDS THE ANGLER, THE DEVIANT NATURE OF THE YAKIMA HAPPENS TO BE THE KITTEN’S MITTENS.

Because of accumulations of rain and snow, nearly every river in the Pacific Northwest typically flows high in the winter and low in the summer, with almost catastrophic runoff occurring (some years) in the spring. Not the Yakima. It does just about the opposite: discharging the greatest volumes of water April through August and the least amount of water November through March. The reason for the oddball flow regime is quite simple. The Yakima is, in a sense, a created river. Though its streambed is quite natural — chiseled by ice and monumental floods through layers of volcanic basalt thousands of feet thick — the water it now carries

issues from a series of reservoirs and dams, the flows closely monitored and controlled to serve the agricultural demands of the Kittitas and Yakima valleys. Rich volcanic loess. Endless sun. And water. Huge infusions of water. In short, all the ingredients necessary for a farmland cornucopia: apples, pears and peaches; potatoes, onions, carrots, corn and beans; even spices, fragrant herbs and flowers. You name it; the Yakima region grows it.

Although the main complex of dams and canals was constructed in the early 1900s, thus all but eradicating steelhead and salmon runs (no ladders for passage), prudent management in the last couple of

decades has yielded an exceptional trout fishery in approximately 70 miles of river stretching from Easton, just below Kachess Lake in the north, downstream to Roza Access at the southern verge of the Yakima Canyon. In 1983 the Washington Department of Fish and Game (WDFG) ceased planting hatchery fish and adopted a policy of natural propagation. Noting the successful in-stream recruitment of “wild” trout, in 1988 WDFG placed that section of the Yakima from Easton to Roza under Selective Fishery status: no bait, single barbless-hooks required. Then in 1990/91 WDFG designated the fishery catch-and-release, open to

angling year-round. Management by special regulations has ushered in an era of vital trout growth, both in size and numbers, and has resulted in one of the most productive and consistent fisheries in the West.

### Stream of Consciousness

One of the most logical ways to begin to comprehend the Yakima is to think in terms of approachability or, more precisely, the type of angler usability. From April through August the river is characterized by serious flows, usually 2500-4000 cubic feet per second (cfs), a rollicking, almost crazy push of water. Though some runs and riffles can be accessed by foot, by and large, and I mean large, during these months the Yakima should be regarded as a boater’s river.

In the fall, September to December, with agricultural thirst

The Yakima River is full of productive pools and fabulous tailouts. Guides like John Lease do well when nymphing the larger pools in the upper stretches of the river, which is home to lots of wild rainbows.



Above, Yakima's wild rainbows can't resist huge streamers during the times when the river runs high. Below, Blackstone Lake, a fee fishery, is located only a stone's throw from the Yakima.

slaked for the year, the irrigation system gradually shuts down and the Yakima recedes, falling from about 2000 to 1000 cfs, the lowest flows occurring in November. Then in mid-winter, January through March, the entire system begins to recharge, and the river bumps back up to 1500-2000 cfs. At 1500 cfs the Yakima can be easily negotiated on foot, with proper discretion, of course. At 1000 cfs wading anglers waltz around like they own the place.

Obviously, with the change of venue from fishing out of a moving

boat to slogging along and casting from the platform of one's feet, there's also a corresponding contrast in angling method and technique. In mid-August 2002, I journeyed to the Yakima with a hardcore angler named Derek Fergus. We met up with Steve Worley, owner/operator of the Worley-Bugger Fly Co. in Ellensburg, and two members of his guide staff, John Lease and Travis Wallace. The objective was to get a feel for the river (at high flow) by fishing different pieces of water over the course of three consecutive days. Rather

than bore you with a mind-numbing description of how many fish we caught and how much fun we had and all that yadda yadda yadda, I'll cut right to the chase, to the details that really count.

First off, it needs to be made very clear that during summer flows on the Yakima you've got to know how, or be with someone who knows how, to maneuver a boat in fast water. On this river there's no slacking off on the sticks. Whether on the woody, foothills section of the river above and adjacent to Ellensburg or drifting the canyon

below town, it's full-tilt-boogey all the way.

Though this is definitely run and gun style fishing, the beauty of August is that one has the option of either pounding the banks with a streamer, typically a Woolly Bugger or sculpin imitation, or lofting big dries, particularly "attractor" or hopper patterns, under overhanging willows and sedges. And as the water warms from mid-day to sunset, there's the chance of encountering a hatch of pale morning duns, little yellow sally stoneflies or, at dusk, tan or olive caddisflies. If





you're an entrenched nymph nazi — a style of fishing that really knows no season nor time of day — concentrate on dead-drifted a stonefly nymph, plus a petite dropper, such as a size 16-18 Bead Head Pheasant Tail or Prince Nymph, through the riffles and inside seams.

When the sun sets and the canyon becomes shrouded in shadow, the larger rainbows, feeling safe from predators in the low light, will often move into the shallow tailouts and back channels to feed, particularly on emerging caddis. This is an opportune time to cover the water with a bushy dry, such as an Elk Hair Caddis, and a size 14-16 olive or tan caddis pupa fished as a dropper 18-24 inches behind the dry fly.

Note: You might have noticed that I've been sparing regarding specific choices of fly patterns. There's a reason for that, which will be addressed further along in the text.

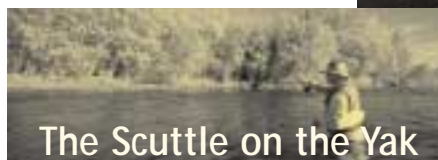
#### Gaudy and Gorgeous

On the last stretch of river we drifted, the upper canyon from Ringer to Umptanum, Derek Fergus and I encountered a period when the fish refused to look up. Although dependable hatches occur eight months of the year, the canyon qualifying as a dry fly Shangri-la, for some reason on this day it just wasn't happening. While Travis Wallace bent to the oars in one boat and Steve Worley, an ex-iron worker, effortlessly defied the current in the other boat, Fergus and I stood in the bow of each vessel and throttled the banks and riprap with a maddening array of streamers.

When the locals claim that Yakima trout can be highly selective, they "aint a'whistling Dixie." Such tried and true generic streamers as the Black Marabou Leech, Olive Zonker and Muddler often fail to impress the cranky trout on this river. But Worley's fly shop isn't named the Worley-Bugger for nothing. Worley dug into one of his many mega-boxes and came up with a

handful of personalized streamer patterns: considerably arcane and not a little gaudy concoctions, gorgeous monstrosities accented with tufts of bright plumage, wiggly rubber legs and shimmering swags of tinsel.

We tried the big stuff first: bunny-fur style streamers that splatted on the water and pulsed on the retrieve. Strips of tenderloin undulating in the current. They looked damned good to us but, apparently, not to the trout. Having started with the largest ordnance available, we then ratcheted down the selection process, switching to smaller and smaller streamers until finally finding a pattern — a size 8, weighted, copper and yellow-marabou Bead Head Woolly Bugger which, when mend-



### The Scuttle on the Yak

**F**ly Connection: It's hard to imagine a more organized, more completely stocked fly shop than the Worley-Bugger Fly Co., (888) 950-3474. They've got everything worth having, plus a few items you need but don't even know it yet. And the Worley-Bugger web site ranks among the most comprehensive and sophisticated to be found anywhere in the outdoor sporting world: [www.worleybuggerflyco.com](http://www.worleybuggerflyco.com).

Marching Orders: Don't start the day without a side trip to Winegar's, 608 N. Main St.; (509) 933-1821. This mom and pop coffee house makes Italian-style espresso guaranteed to iron the kinks out of brain cells, if not fly lines. Not to mention hand-crafted scones right out of a Scottish folktale and (for later) real, home-churned, deep-sledding ice cream.

Info Center: For information regarding lodging, restaurants, fly shops, guides, and activities and events in the area, contact the Ellensburg Chamber of Commerce, (509) 925-2002; [info@ellensburg-chamber.com](mailto:info@ellensburg-chamber.com).

Further Reading: No doubt the single most handy volume concerning this watershed is the softbound titled *Yakima River* by Steve Probasco, Frank Amato Publications, (800) 541-9498; [www.amatobooks.com](http://www.amatobooks.com). History, lore, hatches, maps and fly patterns, plus a fine array of color photos.



Blackstone Lake is a rewarding fallback option to consider when Yakima River's wild rainbows prove hard to get. Here's a gorgeous example of a Blackstone rainbow that couldn't resist a well-placed fly.



ed and allowed to sink, then merely twitched on the retrieve, elicited almost alarmingly violent takes. For the next two hours we showed a number of gullible trout that man is, basically, evil. With fish all but throwing themselves at us, we were seduced into a smug and self-congratulatory fog. But not for long, as the bite, for whatever reason, suddenly skidded to a stop.



Philosopher C. G. Jung once observed, "Every victory contains the germ of future defeat." So it goes on the Yakima, a river where one should never become too complacent, too enamored of any one fly pattern, or technique, or even type of water where one presumes the fish are holding.

With nothing doing on the comparatively dainty copper-yellow Woolly Bugger, we went back to the heaviest, most flamboyant streamer in Worley's arsenal, a pattern which looked both absurd and vaguely mammalian—a drowned rodent wearing a multi-hued party dress. And once again, after suf-

fering a complete and humbling flame-out, we were back in the driver's seat, the trout lunging at this grotesquery as if it were drenched in milk gravy.

The On Off-Season

During fall and winter the Yakima changes character, in Worley's words "flip flops," becoming an entirely different river. At the lower flow regimes the angler may entertain options previously unavailable. If one has a notion to float the river there's sufficient flow at his disposal. On the other hand, you can walk and wade nearly every margin of the river and cross many tailouts at will.

The third week of October I returned to the Yakima, accom-

Above, the Yakima River is located in south central Washington state. It is accessible from many highways. Below, Diana Roberts works a fly through a glide on one of the Yakima's extremely long tailouts.

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panied by my wife, Diana. We linked up with guide John Lease at the Worley-Bugger in Ellensburg and drove to the edge of town, pulling off into a farm field virtually within a “two-base line drive” of the city limits. Since the hatch wouldn’t likely start until high noon — when the water warmed sufficiently to kick-start insect activity — we lingered at Blackstone Lake, an impoundment created in the 1970s when gravel, for highway construction, was quarried from glacial deposits in the Yakima floodplain. Both springs and seepage from the river keep Blackstone charged with water, thus providing habitat suited to the cultivation of exceptionally deep-bodied trout. Blackstone is operated as a managed, private



fishery (daily rod fee required) where the prospects are bright for hooking some real toads; better yet, it’s only a couple hundred yards or so from one of the best runs on the upper river.

After amusing ourselves with the nearly always ungrudging Blackstone rainbows, we strolled over to the river, in anticipation of the daily debut of pale morning duns. Lease commented



Clockwise from left, Yakima rainbows are considered wild because plants ceased in 1983. Derek Fergus caught this specimen on a streamer. Guide Travis Wallace guided Fergus while manning the driftboat oars.

**TOYS TO OTHERS. TOOLS TO YOU.**

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that in the fall he always advises anglers to be on the river by 12:30. Because of the frosty nights one should plan to fish when and where the sun hits the river and surrounding rocks. "The hatch will last anywhere from 40 minutes to a few hours," said Lease. "And when it's done it's done."

Then again, there are days when the hatch is done before it gets started (a fact I've validated on just about every celebrated river in the

Northwest). Despite resorting to nymphs and indicators, and every other trick in the book short of gelignite in my wading boot, we couldn't coax more than a piddling of sullen trout from their lairs. We were faced with a choice: we could carry on, doubling and redoubling our efforts, until the river gods relented; or, we could sidle back to Blackstone and flatter ourselves with the succor of rapacious reservoir fish. Guess which option we took.

Technicolor Terra Firma  
Usually during early October sere, cold nights bring hot colors to the Yakima River corridor. As the chlorophyll drains from the leaves of cottonwoods, alder, willow, locust and sumac, an infusion of bright, primary hues daubs the landscape, heralding the approach of winter. Red, yellow, ochre, orange. And deep blue skies above.

For many anglers, fall is the epitome — the cat's meow in the Yakima Canyon. Steve Worley agrees: "The month of October is really what fly fishing is all about: change. The Yakima takes on a whole new shape and feel . . . Aquatic insects that hatch in the fall are delicate, graceful insects with a purpose. In the fall as water flows drop, a finer line must be walked. Accurate, delicate, drag free presentations during hatches of caddis, blue-winged olives, mahogany duns and light cahill must be attained. Sloppy, lackluster casts will be ignored and most likely spook fish."

Obviously, this is not a river where one can show up with a few scruffy Black Gnats and a bedraggled Woolly Worm or two and expect to clean house. It won't happen. The Yakima is way too insect specific for that. As noted earlier in this article, fly selection can be a daunting task. Oh sure, I could launch into a rant about aquatic insect hatches and the myriad fly patterns that match this procession of critters, but I'll refrain. Instead, here's the best counsel I can offer: Don't listen to me, or to anyone else who can't see the Yakima from his back door. Go to the river with an open mind, not to mention an open wallet. Now don't get alarmed; I'm not suggesting the Rockefeller approach to fly fishing. Just the opposite. I would argue that it's more prudent and economical to purchase flies on site — the right pattern at the right moment — than laying out a small fortune for a guess-work arsenal ahead of time.

With 4500 fly patterns in inventory, the Worley-Bugger Fly Co. clearly takes fly selection seriously. (As something of a semi-ardent fly tier, I found myself scanning the fly displays — row upon row of partitioned drawers containing an astonishing variety of pattern permutations — for inspiration. Translation: stealing ideas.) Furthermore, a realm in the Worley-Bugger web site is entirely devoted to Yakima River hatches, providing a detailed month by month profile of the significant insects — essentially, everything you always wanted to know about bugs but were afraid to ask. **WO**

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