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Getting "Tanky" on British Columbia's Bulkley

By Chris Santella | August 2021



A couple years ago, one of my steelheading friends turned 60. Given his youthful indiscretions, this was a milestone to be celebrated; when asked what he'd like to do, he didn't hesitate—fish northern British Columbia's Bulkley River, renowned for its free-rising steelhead, ever eager to grab a skated offering.

After months of planning, packing lists, one cancelling angler, revised planning, and more fine-tuned packing, we were off on a 950-mile drive from Portland, Oregon to the village of Telkwa, on the banks of the Bulkley.

I am not known for my detailed pre-trip planning, but took special pains to be ready for this adventure. Several nights before leaving, I assembled all of my skating/dry steelhead flies on the dining room table, pinched the barbs, and sorted them in the one fly box I planned to bring along. I also added a few smaller hair-wing patterns so I could come back to those fish that had revealed themselves to my skater and pick them up with the wet.

("Just one fly box?" you might say. As a seasoned Atlantic salmon/steelhead angler once told me,

you only need two flies for success with anadromous fish: one is called "Confidence," the other is called "Doesn't Matter.")

But, the night before our departure, I dropped a Skagit head and a few sink-tips into my dry bag, as well as a wallet of winter patterns. It's always good to be prepared.

When we arrived at the Walcott put-in on a Monday morning, the Bulkley was brilliantly clear and seemingly well-suited to the surface presentations we'd envisioned for the last nine months. However, it seemed a bit cold. Undeterred, I

tied on a Strung-Out Skater, a pattern that proved very reliable on Oregon's Deschutes, and began quartering casts downstream at the first run below the Walcott Bridge. No takers. This was the case as we fished several more promising runs that morning. When my raft passed our co-conspirators, Tim, the birthday boy, said he'd measured the water temperature at 44 degrees. (It had been 55 the previous week, before 10 inches of snow fell in the surrounding mountains!) A little further along, we floated alongside an amiable solo angler with a thick Quebecois accent, two bamboo spey rods, and a handsome white dog. My raft-mate, Mike, commented on the water clarity. "Yes," the stranger replied. "It helps you see the deep spots in this low, cold water."

Deep spots? Low, cold water?

We passed this angler several times that day as he fished rather nondescript water—not the typical tops of runs we fixated on. On several occasions he was playing fish. Beyond one fish that took my fly as it dangled below me near a ledge, then spun the reel several revolutions and came unbuttoned, we had no encounters. Passing us toward the end of the day, our fellow angler casually mentioned that he'd hooked eight fish.

I was left thinking that his dog likely

out-fished us as well.

That night, we compared notes. Three anglers in raft #2 had done slightly better than us, with one angler—who'd swapped his floating line for a 10-foot T-8 tip by mid-day—hooking two fish and landing one. Not a terrible day by Lower-48 standards, but we were five decent rods fishing the Bulkley, one of the jewels of British Columbia's Skeena River system. Summer-run fish should be more aggressive, I figured. Five visiting anglers should have at least reached half the output of one local angler.

The French-accented fisherman's words drifted back over dinner. The water was low and cold. Deep water, it had been implied, was good. These were conditions we'd experienced on more than a few occasions on the John Day and Grande Ronde rivers back in eastern Oregon, when balmy early fall conditions suddenly gave way to wintry weather.

It was time for tanks—slower, deeper water that we'd skip during warmer, higher water conditions, but where steelhead seemed to feel comfortable when the water and temperatures were low.

Floating from the Quick put-in on Tuesday, we bypassed several riffle runs, scouting for the "tanky"

water where we suspected fish would hold. We soon came upon such a spot, and a few minutes in, Mike's Hardy reel was screaming with the first of two fish that came to a red tube fly on a T-8 tip. It was a broad-shouldered buck that we estimated at 12 pounds, a true test on Mike's 7-weight. We were on to something.

For the next three days, as we floated different sections of the Bulkley and Morice, we focused exclusively on deeper, slower water. We'd float over the most promising sections to see if meaningful structure was present; where we found slow-moving water six-to eight feet deep and either boulders or ledges, we were almost sure to encounter fish. Those without structure tended not to produce. My Strung-Out Skater was swapped out for a T-10 tip and an unweighted purple Hobo Spey. Mike and I cast out at almost 90 degrees to get our flies a bit deeper. It was winter-style fishing in fall, not as aesthetically pleasing as throwing a dry line.

But the violent grabs of those Morice fish more than compensated for any stylistic compromises. By the end of the week, Mike had hooked 15 fish; I'd hooked 12; the last two days, we each hooked nine. Our companions in raft #2 did not fare quite so well. It may

well have been luck, but I sensed they weren't fishing deep enough or slow enough.

On the last day of our trip, we pulled into a tank that had proven fruitful the previous day. Our French-accented friend was across the river, and came up empty while Mike hooked and landed another bright buck that cleared the river three times, the crash of its riverine return resounding against the far bank. Later, our friend passed us and called out, "Who got the big one?"

If it hadn't been for his advice, it likely wouldn't have been either of us.

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www.flyfishinginternational.com

info@flyfishinginternational.com

North America: +1 (888)-304-4334

International: +1 (647)-268-6008

2345 Yonge Street, Suite 802 Toronto, ON, M4P 2E5, Canada.
(By Appointment Only)

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Chris Santella is the author of numerous books, including the best-selling [Fifty Places To Fly Fish Before You Die](#), and carries frequent bylines in the [Washington Post](#) and [The New York Times](#). When not writing, Santella creates and plays music, or chases steelhead from his home base in Portland, Oregon.

