

Conservation

Whychus Canyon: Bringing Steelhead Home/By Brad Chalfant



PHOTO BY JAY MATHER

Most people tie flies with the simple hope that they'll attract a fish, but a recent creation from noted Sisters, Oregon, fly tier Sherry Steele is also trying to tell a story. She originally tied her Whychus Canyon steelhead fly to celebrate the protection of the Whychus Canyon Preserve, but it helps spread the story of a community-based effort to bring salmon and steelhead back to central Oregon's high desert.

The upper Deschutes Basin—once home to salmon and steelhead—has been inaccessible to anadromous fish for nearly 50 years. Since 1967, when ineffective passage facilities were abandoned in lieu of fish hatcheries, fish passage has been blocked by three large dams. But in 2004, a partnership between Portland General Electric and the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs led to a historic commitment to restore fish passage. Anticipating that commitment, in 1997 the Deschutes Land Trust began strategically acquiring spawning and rearing habitat for steelhead in the form of wildlife



PHOTO BY JAY MATHER

preserves. The goal was to create the critical mass of habitat needed to support the historic return of salmon and steelhead, with a focus on restoring steelhead to Whychus Creek as a stronghold for the upper basin's steelhead runs.

Whychus Creek once provided half of the upper basin's steelhead production but lost much of its habitat to years of floodplain development,

channelization, and irrigation diversions that dried up the creek. Through a quiet, voluntary approach, the Deschutes Land Trust and its partners worked with the city of Sisters to begin protecting and restoring Whychus Creek, and gradually attitudes shifted. In 2000 the Land Trust protected the 145-acre Camp Polk Meadow Preserve, with its 2 miles of steelhead habitat on Whychus Creek. Subsequent Land Trust acquisitions, including Whychus Canyon Preserve in 2010, have protected another 4 miles of Whychus Creek.

Today the Deschutes Land Trust (land acquisition), the Upper Deschutes Watershed Council (restoration), Deschutes River Conservancy (water acquisition), and Crooked River Watershed Council (restoration) are partnering to protect and restore habitat for salmon and



PHOTO BY SHERRY STEELE

steelhead in the upper Deschutes basin. Together, they've successfully removed passage impediments on a remarkable scale, restored stream flow, and acquired, protected, and begun restoring critical stream reaches.

The 2012 "re-meandering" of Whychus Creek through the Land Trust's Camp Polk Meadow Preserve has become a centerpiece of this integrated, multidimensional effort—and the community has taken notice. Today Whychus Creek runs year-round and provides healthier fish habitat than existed a century ago, and the return of steelhead is being celebrated by the community. Fly tiers like Steele jumped in because they value the work that's been done and acknowledge that much work remains to rebuild the basin's wild steelhead runs. Count on the Deschutes Land Trust to keep swinging the creek's namesake new fly and sharing a great story. Visit the trust at www.deschuteslandtrust.org.