

FishWatch Caretaker Lee Spencer Protects Migrating Steelhead

Lee Spencer, the FishWatch caretaker at the Big Bend Pool of Steamboat Creek, is not an easy man to get ahold of when he's on duty. From May to December he watches over the remote pool and the summer steelhead that gather there, living on site in a trailer provided by the North Umpqua Foundation. He has no phone and no email or internet access, but occasionally drives back to civilization for supplies, stopping by the (relatively) nearby Steamboat Inn to check his messages.

As a summer employee for the Umpqua National Forest in southwestern Oregon, I was assigned to interview Lee about his work because it's funded by Title II of the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act, which aims to strengthen regional economies by hiring local people for projects that improve public lands. Understandably, arranging this meeting required extra time and patience. At first I thought it must be hard for Lee to live that way, so cut off from other people. Some might even call it crazy.



Steelhead gather in Big Bend Pool by the hundreds to rest and wait for the right time to spawn.

But when I pulled up to the peaceful site on a beautiful June day, my first thought was that I was the crazy one for not choosing that lifestyle.

And, contrary to my initial assumptions, Lee wasn't cut off from humanity at all. In fact, when I walked down the short path to his tarp-covered observation area above the pool, I found him talking to a group of four very enthusiastic tourists. They were recreational fishermen, and they listened with bright eyes and rapt attention as Lee chatted about the migrating steelhead and shared secrets about the best places to find them where angling was allowed.



Steelhead trout in Steamboat Creek, near the Big Bend Pool; photo by Mark Conlin.

Lee's work as caretaker for the Big Bend Pool was featured in a 2008 segment of the PBS series **Oregon Field Guide** called "Umpqua Fish Watcher." It is posted on the PBS website at <http://www.opb.org/programs/ofg/segments/view/1681> and is available for public viewing.

Lee's field notes are posted on the **North Umpqua Foundation** website at <http://northumpqua.org/> and provide a detailed diary of his observations.



Lee Spencer (right) talks to visitors under the tarp of his observation area at Big Bend Pool.

Though they had all lived and fished in Oregon for many years, this was the first time the visitors had seen the fish's impressive migration behaviors, thanks to tips from locals like Lee. They had just observed steelhead jumping a nearby waterfall, and their passion had clearly been freshly renewed.

Visitor Michael Eschete shared his excitement at watching the spectacle of steelhead migrating up the North Umpqua River and its tributaries: "It's a treasure," he said. "It's something you'd expect to see in Alaska, not your own backyard."

Indeed, 22 fish had gathered in the pool when I arrived. "That's the most I've seen all week," Lee said. Then he surprised me by saying that it was still early in the season for them, and there would soon be hundreds crowding into the pool.

Lee explained that the pool served as a "thermal refuge" for the fish. Steelhead are comfortable in temperatures at or below 57 degrees Fahrenheit, and Big Bend Creek is the coldest tributary of the Steamboat basin. The fish gather in the pool because it's a haven of water that's both cool and deep.

However, that sanctuary can become a trap if poachers use it to their advantage. Unfortunately, the pool has had a long history of such abuses, and poachers will sometimes use extreme methods such as bleach and even dynamite to kill or maim

Living at the pool for so many years has given Lee the chance to study the fish and other wild animals that come there. In addition to his duties of educating visitors and deterring would-be poachers, he takes careful notes about his observations for field research, which are often used by biologists and employees of the Forest Service and Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Lee has come to appreciate the steelhead as creatures that are more sensitive and inquisitive than they are usually credited. He explained that he believes in the "curiosity theory" of a fly fisherman and outdoor writer named Enos Bradner, who asserted that the reason fish bite lures is out of sheer curiosity, and not because they mistake them for food. In fact, steelhead do not need to eat at all during their migration, an adaptation for travelling in the clear but nutritionally poor streams.

Because the fish do not need to eat and can spend months in the pool waiting for the right time to spawn, they usually conserve energy by resting almost motionless or meandering lazily around. But they regularly display energetic bursts of athleticism by jumping out of the water, often catching several feet of air. Lee surmises that they do this to look around for predators. He has observed that they're very sensitive animals that spook easily, especially at people and dogs, which they can smell from across the surface of the pool.

The approximately 1,000 annual visitors to the pool can therefore be something of a mixed blessing. While it helps raise public awareness about the steelhead and their important role in the Umpqua's ecology, Lee worries that it can also disturb the fish and make them nervous. He asks his guests to be respectful and sit quietly in the observation area, and not approach the water.

hundreds of fish at once. Depending on how many steelhead have gathered in the pool, a major poaching incident can wipe out a large percentage of the yearly spawning population before they reproduce.

Although the pool is in a somewhat remote location, it's also fairly accessible. Route 38 winds up Steamboat Creek, carrying droves of tourists right past it in summer when the steelhead are gathering. For some of these that notice all the big fish in the pool near the road, the temptation to try to catch a few is too great, even though the entire Steamboat basin has been closed to fishing since the 1930's to allow the fish to finish their long migration and spawn without disturbance.



Lee shares a snack with his blue healer, Maggie.

In response to this ongoing poaching threat, the North Umpqua FishWatch was formed. The Forest Service partners with the North Umpqua Foundation as well as the Steamboaters and Pacific Rivers Council and other state and national agencies in a collaborative effort of poaching deterrence and public outreach and education. At first, volunteers monitored the pool and surrounding areas sporadically, but Lee was eventually flagged for the dedicated caretaker position in order to provide more consistent supervision.

Now in his 14th year of service, Lee looks back over his efforts with contentment, though his modest words downplay the strong passion he obviously feels: "It's nice to be participating in a program that's so straightforward and so positive in its effects on populations of wild summer steelhead that use the Steamboat basin as their home. It's nice to give something back."



Steelhead trout aren't the only ones who make use of the pool. A beautiful mother merganser paddles upstream with her adorable ducklings.

Since Lee was instated as caretaker, poaching incidents at the Big Bend Pool have been reduced to almost zero. Jon Kurtz, president of the North Umpqua Foundation, feels certain that poachers would return to their bold methods without a caretaker there to deter them. He emphasizes that the pool shelters the majority of the area's steelhead population, so "it's imperative that we keep [the FishWatch program] going."

When he's on duty, Lee lives in a trailer loaned from the North Umpqua Foundation. He also receives a modest stipend from Title II funds that pays for expenses like food, gas, solar cells, and a generator. "The Forest Service has been a great partner and neighbor," he says.

“I’ve been blessed with the ability to pay attention to the pool and not the necessities of life.” Though he lives simply, he is clearly content with his reclusive station.

Then again, maybe Lee’s lifestyle isn’t so reclusive after all. As I bid him a grateful goodbye to return to my own duties, I felt that I could hardly tear myself away from the peaceful pool that he was fortunate to call home. And Lee was already turning to welcome his next visitors coming down the path.



Lee’s trailer at Big Bend Pool, loaned from the NUF.

Project Stats: North Umpqua Fishwatch

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Total Title II funding:	\$121,521
Employs:	Lee Spencer
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Partners:	North Umpqua Foundation OR State Police OR Dept. of Fish & Wildlife US Fish & Wildlife NOAA BLM Pacific Rivers Council Steamboaters

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