

Scottish Lakes, WA

Meaning in the Wilderness

By Rob Lyon

It was blowing like blazes when we reached Loch Eileen. White caps marched across the lake and spit in our faces. I was feeling the effect of the hike and hunkered down behind a stump, waiting for the wind to calm and my spunk to return.

It was completely uncharacteristic of me to get spanked like this, I thought with some asperity, but then, I was considerably older at 77 than the last time I'd shouldered a backpack, but I blamed an energy gel I'd taken on the trail after a hefty morning coffee; it had my heart racing and put me off my game.

Feeling guilty for not participating, I got up and helped Steve set up his pack raft. While he put on his dry suit, I unrolled his 3-pound boat. The raft is open completely on one end like a large bag, so I had only to hold the open mouth of it into the teeth of the wind to instantly inflate the craft to two-thirds full. Quickly rolling up the open end, Steve topped it off via the mouth tube and was on the water minutes later, paddling for all he was worth to make any kind of headway against the wind, and hugging the shore where there was a bit of a lee. I retreated to the backside of my stump and grazed on fat blue huckleberries fruiting on low-growing bushes.



Steve Thomsen eschews the pack raft for boots on the ground. Generally, lightweight packable boats are valuable for fishing these lakes. Hikers are treated to fantastic views. Northward from this vantage point are Donald and Julius Lakes.



STEVE THOMSEN PHOTO

STEVE WRUBLESKI PHOTO



STEVE THOMSON PHOTOS

This colorful westslope cutthroat is typical for Lake Julius. The first fish to set fin to water in Lake Julius were brought in by horse in 1941.

Dinner at the lodge included Icicle Ridge Vineyards syrah, a Romanze white wine, and a meal of fresh trout cooked to perfection.

We were hiking in the northeastern corner of the sprawling Alpine Lakes Wilderness that covers more than 400,000 acres of Washington's Cascade Range and boasts more than 700 glacier-scoured lakes, most connected via hundreds of miles of well-maintained trails. The Scottish Lakes are a trio: Lake Julius, Loch Eileen, and Lake Donald, book-ended by the Chiwaukum Mountains set in the Ewing Basin and close enough together to make fishing all three during a few days a reasonable proposition.

All told, it was enthralling being up in the high country again; most of my fishing in recent years has been in river canyons and salt water. September and October were far and away my favorite time to be afield and the high country had a show of its own. Larch needles were beginning to color up at a mile in altitude and the night air had turned crisp.

We were a crew of six from the San Juan Islands on this mid-September trek, a tripartite of two elderly dudes (hands raised, Steve and I), two well-seasoned dudes, and a couple of young bucks in their 20s (handy demographic,

as it turned out). The islands are not a bastion of sporting enthusiasts and since moving there some 30 years ago, I've noticed that my projects, trips, and expeditions increasingly involved good friends simply wanting to experience the places that were in the books to visit, carte blanche, not so much for the fishing, itself. Back in the day it was always a hardcore fly-fishing cadre with a paid cook along allowing us to get right after the fish.

To get a jump on the 3,000-foot vertical gain and the hike in from U.S. Highway 2, we'd booked three nights at Alpine Lakes High Camp, allowing us a relatively easy 6-mile round trip from our hut to the lakes each day. I'd been here 15 years earlier and caught some cutthroat trout pushing the 1-pound mark. We were hoping to find some of their descendants.

Fishing high lakes is a tough call without a boat of some kind. One well-traveled alpine lake fisherman I had read about concluded that 95 percent of the lakes require a boat to fish properly, mirroring my own, smaller sample experience. That first time, we had packed float tubes into Lake Julius, but opted for pack rafts for this venture. The tradeoff



The shallow shoals of Loch Eileen are prime feeding grounds for trout.

is utility for weight. Pack rafts are much lighter, and you don't need fins or waders. I'd brought along disc golf discs to use as hand paddles. But sitting in the pack rafts trying to maneuver and handle a fly rod quickly demonstrated why the float tube was invented.

While I lay low and grazed on blueberries, Steve bucked the wind to reach the far end of the lake, stayed close to shore, and trolled a short line with his favorite high-lakes attractor pattern, a Woolly Bugger. Eventually, he blew back ashore with five pan-size fish in the creel. We decided to make the short hike to Lake Julius to see if we could find bigger fish and maybe less wind. I was feeling better and ready to fish.

By the time we arrived, the wind had all but evaporated. I inflated my boat, rigged up a little tenkara rod that weighs just over 2 ounces (and fits in a 14-inch tube), and paddled out. Tenkara rods are sublime for small streams. I had hoped to make it over McCue Ridge and down to Chiwaukum Lake to fish the outlet stream there, where the lightweight rod would have been right at home, but sitting in a tiny boat at water level just didn't work.

Problem was I had 6 feet of line including leader and tippet. For all the vaunted simplicity and elegance of this approach, the issue of landing a fish is highly problematic. Either you have a line short enough to raise the rod skyward and swing your fish right to net or hand or you tuck the rod under your arm and yard the fish in by hand. Tenkara was a skookum technique on the upper tributaries of Idaho's Owyhee River, where some years earlier I had waded midstream in a foot of water and fished the rod to good effect, but not so much sitting at water level in a boat. I had no luck trolling with it at Eileen that day in any case, and switched to conventional fly tackle.

As for fly selection in these alpine lakes, the Madison it is not. Most of the fish we caught had pink flesh, meaning they were feeding on crustaceans, likely copepods or scuds. Mostly we fished wet flies (Carey Special and Woolly Buggers) with sinking-tip lines, often trolling, all the while keeping an opportunistic eye out for a hatch. I like to cruise just off structure, especially reed beds while casting right to the edge. If I would ever happen to be at those lakes during a damselfly hatch, I'd look for nearby shallows and settle in for some fun.

Several of us took turns in the boat, a first for one of the bucks. It was a wonderfully warm and sunny afternoon in the mountains and by day's end we had done well enough at Eileen to ensure that night's meal. We

bundled our catch in with wet ferns and packed the fish back to camp with an eye for king boletes along the way. The young guys—Galen, a semipro soccer player, and Quinn, budding sound engineer—put on their sherpa hats and packed out my raft.

We gathered in the community room/kitchen where Scott and Steven did their cooking bit just as they had done on the Owyhee not long ago. Steven's area of expertise is native plants, and he'd brought a cooler full of fresh local greens from his massive garden. Scott was a masterly, eclectic cook, a gastronome, I'd have to call him. Those two had cooked on other outings and are a lock at the position. Everyone else joined in to clean up.

A big wood stove warmed the room. The camp is well off grid and headlamps augmented several propane lamps. We ate our catch, pan-fried to perfection, drank wine, and played poker, then hit the sauna until Scott dumped an entire bucket of water on the rocks and emptied the room in a heartbeat.

We headed out again the next day, climbing high up onto McCue Ridge and hiking the hogback with an eye-popping view to north and south. We were done fishing. Eileen and Julius had provided just enough—this day was all about the higher surround, pure mountain hiking, no boats or bother, just the essentials for the trail.

We were 1,500 feet above the valleys below and would hold that elevation pretty much throughout the day. Ewing Basin yawned below, with the blue wink of Eileen in a cirque basin, the colorful hanging gardens, blanket of dark green conifers, golden vine maple, and just a hint of color to the larch trees. The Chiwaukum Mountains rose up, a granite wall to the north.

From McCue Ridge, anglers get great views of Lake Donald (foreground) and Loch Eileen. The Scott Lakes—Lake Julius, Lake Donald, Lake Ethel, and Loch Eileen—were named for family members and friends by Albert Sylvester, a topographer conducting a geological survey in 1900.

Fish History

A week later after returning home, I contacted Brian Curtis, a longtime member of the Washington Trail Blazers, who gave me the dope on the legendary volunteer club that does stocking work with the high-lake trout.

Collared Harbuzzer



Hook: 2XL or 3XL wet fly hook, sizes 4–8

Head: Gold metal bead

Tail: Olive marabou and pearl Krystal Flash

Body: Olive sparkle dubbing

Hackle: Soft grizzly or partridge

Collar: Light olive dubbing

STEVE THOMSEN PHOTO

“Trail Blazers’ primary mission is to volunteer for Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) carrying fry into high lakes,” he told me. “High lakes are defined as lakes above 2,500 feet west of the Cascades and lakes over 3,500 feet on the east side of the Cascades. The club typically stocks around 125 lakes a year, but that total can vary either up or down depending on the year. In the past 20 years, we’ve stocked a high of 158 lakes and a low of 97 lakes. The normal species/subspecies that we stock are rainbow trout, coastal cutthroat trout, westslope cutthroat trout, and golden trout. Lakes stocked range from easy, short trail hikes to the most difficult to reach off-trail lakes in the state.”

the fish for Eileen in ’37, but we don’t have any records of it. The lakes were overstocked via horse through the 1940s. In those days, lakes were typically stocked way too heavily and it would have been difficult to tell if the fish were stunted from overstocking or from natural reproduction. By the 1950s, the Game Department started using aircraft to stock those lakes. As they started to realize there was natural reproduction in the lakes, stocking was curtailed. Julius was last stocked in 1967. Loch Eileen was last stocked in 1979.”

The future of high-lakes fishing remains in doubt. The National Park Service does not permit stocking lakes within national parks. Stocking of wilderness area lakes, managed

STEVE THOMSEN PHOTO



Well-established trails penetrate the wilderness. Some paths are more demanding than others, of course.

Stocking fish in these historically fishless lakes was originally an effort by people working in the area—loggers, miners, and trappers who had brought the first fish in as a source of food and sport. Then the Washington Department of Game (precursor to the WDFW) began stocking fish in high lakes.

“The earliest known stocking record for Loch Eileen is 1937,” Curtis says. “The fish were brought in by horseback. The earliest known stocking record for Julius was 1941, again with horse. It stands to reason that Julius either already had fish or would have been stocked when they brought

by the U.S. Forest Service, is continually evaluated with the best available science. Curtis explains, “When fish are able to reproduce on their own in high lakes, it almost always leads to overpopulation problems. There are too many fish for the food supply and once they reach sexual maturity (normally age three), energy they consume goes toward producing gametes and spawning before it goes to growth, and the lake ends up with stunted fish. This is not only bad for the fish, but it is bad for the lake’s ecosystem. With periodic stocking...the fish can grow better and they don’t threaten native species in the lakes.”

Cutthroat trout and brook trout are the most common species that have established self-sustaining populations in some lakes, but in some lakes, rainbows and even golden trout reproduce. “The likelihood of rainbow reproducing depends on the stock being used,” explains Curtis. “They tried Kamloops ’bows back in the 50s and they were often able to reproduce. The hatchery stock WDFW uses [now] for high lakes is not prone to reproducing naturally. But we are taking things one step further and are stocking a lot of lakes with triploid rainbow, which have done well with good returns to creel so that program has been steadily expanding. Where we do stock other species (coastal cutts, westslope cutts, golden trout, for the most part), it is in lakes where they have a history of not being able to reproduce.”

So, what about anglers looking to avoid a lake with a stunted fishery and find one instead with mature fish? Was there some kind of algorithm to help achieve that? There are links at WDFW (www.wdfw.wa.gov) providing intel about overpopulated lakes where trout numbers really need thinning, but what about a plan to track down big fish in the Alpine Lakes Wilderness?

Finding Big Fish

I reached out to Travis Maitland, WDFW district biologist in the Wenatchee office, about this quest for a cheat code. “Well, besides the High Lakes info section on the WDFW fishing page, there really isn’t an ‘algorithm’ per se,” he says, continuing, “I think if anglers would like more info about stocking or possibilities of larger fish in a given lake or lakes, that would be when they would want to contact the respective district fish biologist for a given county. I have anglers contact me every year to discuss these very things.”

Because of the sheer number of wilderness lakes, Maitland encourages anglers to create a list of potential lakes, or decide on target species, or at least narrow things down to a general area before contacting a biologist. He adds, “Anglers who reach out and do their own research will have potentially narrowed down their search and can take satisfaction in finding a quality fishery as seen in their eyes. It can be a rewarding effort!”

That had me thinking: if an angler was really a trophy hunter, he or she might do better looking in habitat conducive to breeding mature fish, such as fertile lowland lakes. In high-altitude lakes, fish have a short growing season. They seldom grow quickly or particularly large in Washington alpine lakes. That said, there is something uniquely satisfying about a successful fishing foray into the highlands, no matter the size of your catch.

Late that first night in camp, happily wrung out from hiking, a sauna, and a delicious dinner, I lay in bed not quite ready to sleep and asked myself what exactly it was that I’d

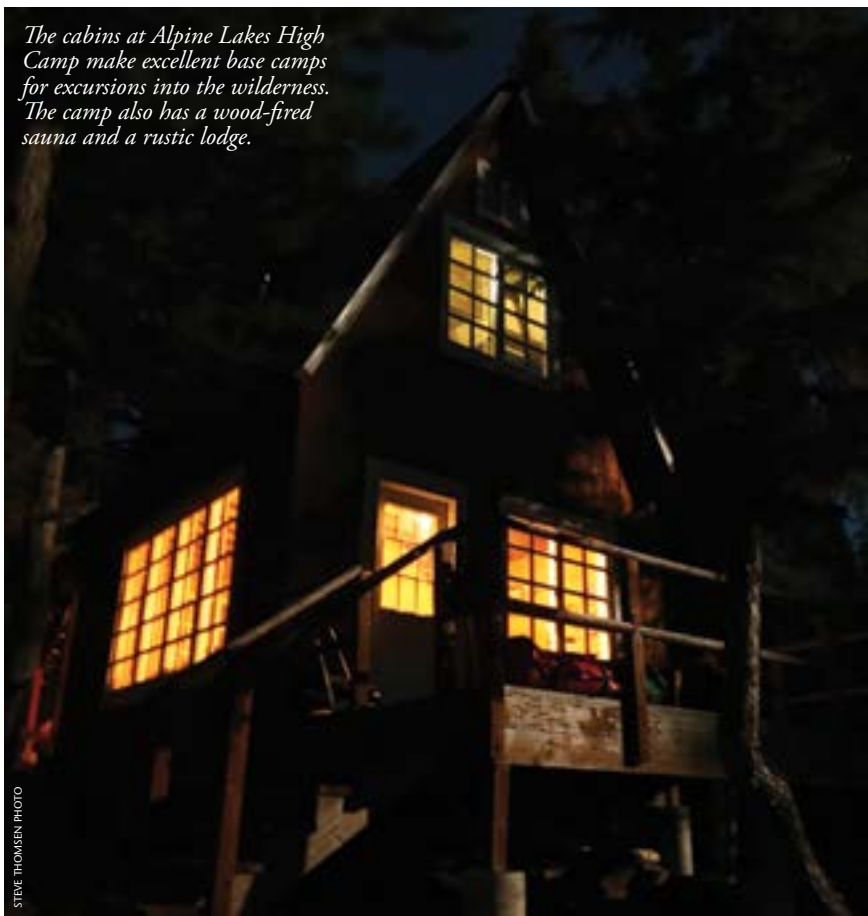
been looking for, not just at the Scottish Lakes, but throughout my high-lake (albeit limited) fishing history. I suspected another motivation beyond simply the fishing. And after drilling down, I found the “Jack and the Beanstalk” story.

Jack, you say? How so?

The fable is metaphorically rich and my take away is both superficial and obvious, but meaningful, I think, all the same. Jack climbs a beanstalk leading into a magical kingdom where he encounters mysterious locals and returns with a prize. Magical kingdom is the alpine habitat and trout are both the mysterious denizens and the prize. High-lake fishing for me is not so much about fishing, per se, as a chance to enter a remote and rarefied environment and return with a prize, often a pan-fried trout served with wine and wild mushrooms.

Case in high point is Little Jack Mountain, albeit it involves a shotgun instead of a fly rod.

The cabins at Alpine Lakes High Camp make excellent base camps for excursions into the wilderness. The camp also has a wood-fired sauna and a rustic lodge.



STEVE THOMSEN PHOTO

This mountain sits near the Canadian border, perhaps 100 miles as a crow flies from the Alpine Lakes Wilderness. For several years at Halloween, Steve Thomsen and I would boat across Ross Lake and make the climb up the peak. We’d reach snow at about the 3.5 mile mark, where it felt like we were jumping a season ahead, entering another world of gray rock, green spruce, and winter white.

We carried small gauge, double-barrel shotguns on our backs. We were hunting blue grouse, which had ascended the mountain months ahead of us to prepare for winter.

They were either out foraging in the blueberries or tucked into the dense spruce. We followed their fresh tracks leading into cover where they exploded in a flurry of wings. There was something acutely unique and satisfying about hunting like this and I had a similar feeling when we returned to camp that afternoon from the Scottish Lakes with a mess of fresh caught trout.

Curious as to how it played with Steve, I had asked. Steve, the engineer, told me it was about the practical challenge of planning, gearing up properly, and executing, but Steve, the well-rounded man I knew so well, went on to say it was also about the excitement of “slipping into a cold mountain lake and floating in that peaceful mountain setting highlighted with some fresh scrappy trout.” And that it was also about the joy of discovery, something we shared in spades: “Maybe even some new outdoor venue that has yet to be discovered.”

Our last day in the mountains, we were packed up and waiting for our shuttle driver to make it up the grueling 6-mile track heading up from where we had parked our vehicles along Highway 2. We broke out our paddles cum discs and played as we headed down the road. One guy volunteered to hustle ahead to help spot errant

throws and mitigate lost discs owing to dense forest that crowded the narrow dirt grade. We had a blast before the yeoman Rover appeared and we climbed in to leave the high country.

The Trail Blazers formed in 1933 with a generational membership. I can well imagine the camaraderie from humping a kettle of little fish into the alpine with your buddies, spilling the little fish into their new home, and watching them swim off into the lake, then maybe the group sat around a small fire later that night and enjoyed a mess of tasty trout, like someone’s father and his father’s father had done before that. Curtis explains what it means to him, saying, “There is so much! I enjoy the camaraderie, the challenges (both mental and physical), the scenery, the education, the fishing, and the feeling I get when I think about the long history of people I am joining who have given so much to this activity. But what I enjoy most of all is hearing from someone who is excited about catching fish that I stocked. Even better if they caught a big one. I get way more pleasure from that than catching one myself.”

Washington-state-based writer Rob Lyon is a longtime contributor to American Fly Fishing magazine.

This larger-than-average cutthroat came from Lake Julius. In these stocked hike-in lakes, anglers needn't feel guilty for keeping a few fish for dinner.



Packed in like sardines for the rugged 8-mile drive up to Alpine Lakes High Camp, the author (center) and his crew would soon launch into high-lakes fly-fishing adventures in the 394,000-acre Alpine Lakes Wilderness.



STEVE THOMSEN PHOTOS



Scottish Lakes NOTEBOOK



When: Mid-July through mid- or late September. During autumn, both mosquitoes and other people are much sparser in the wilderness area.

Where: Scottish Lakes are in the Ewing Basin, just one of numerous lake basins in the Alpine Lakes Wilderness.

Headquarters: Alpine Lakes High Camp, www.alpinelakeshighcamp.com, is a great, conveniently located base for hiking into the lakes. The town of Leavenworth, 18 mi. south of Alpine Lakes High Camp via Hwy. 2, offers all services. **Information:** Leavenworth Chamber of Commerce, (509) 548-5807, www.leavenworth.org.

Access: High-altitude trail hiking to reach mountain lakes.

Appropriate gear: 3- to 6-wt. rods, floating and sinking or sinking-tip lines, 4X–6X tippets.

Useful fly patterns: Soft hackles, Woolly Buggers, Thin Mint Leech, BH Prince Nymph, scud patterns, black ant patterns, Parachute Adams, Chironomid patterns.

Necessary accessories: Backpacking raft (e.g., Rapid Raft) and oars/paddle, or float tube (with waders/fins); polarized sunglasses, insect repellent, hiking/backpacking gear.

Nonresident license: \$28.95/2 days, \$35.55/3 days, \$84.50/annual.

Guides: Although pack animals are not allowed in the Scottish Lakes area (hikers only), Icicle Outfitters & Guides, (509) 784-1145, www.icicleoutfitters.com, offers trips to many lakes and lake basins within the Alpine Lakes Wilderness; their popular “drop camps” use packhorses to haul in camp gear and clients in one day, and then pick them up at a prearranged time, allowing anglers to stay for as many days as they want.

Books/maps: *Alpine Lakes Wilderness: The Complete Hiking Guide* by Nathan Barnes and Jeremy Barnes. *Alpine Lakes Wilderness* map by National Geographic.

