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A Journey of Fly Fishing and Photography

by Kirk Werner



Bio:

Kirk Werner is a freelance graphic artist, keeper of the Unaccomplished Angler blog and author of a series of children's fly fishing books: Olive the Little Woolly Bugger, Olive and The Big Stream, and Olive Goes for a Wild Ride

Type of fishing:

Trout and steelhead in moving water

Location:

Wet side of Washington (the state)

Contact:

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Just before dusk on his first trip to Montana in 1984, Rich Schaaff found himself sprinting downstream along the banks of the Madison River. A widening grin spread across his face as he fought to keep his line tight with one hand while trying to prevent his waders from falling around his ankles with the other. Increasingly farther downstream a big rainbow continued to rip line from his reel.

The scene played out within view of Three Dollar Bridge, and Schaaff can still hear the echo of uncontrollable laughter from his fishing buddy as the trout attempted to make short work of the man on the other end of the line. That night as the two compadres reclined on the grass next to the river, looking up at stars he never knew existed, Schaaff acknowledged, "It doesn't get any better than this." When he returned to his home in Chicago, Schaaff knew that there was something very special about the West. He knew that he would come back again some day.

A fly fisherman for most of his life, Rich grew up in Chicago and chased trout on small streams in Michigan and Wisconsin. He fondly recalls the day from his childhood when he caught his first fish on a fly: it was in ankle deep water on a small spring creek, and the brown trout wasn't much bigger than the fly it had inhaled. "I went running down the bank with that poor little fish squeezed tightly in my hand, screaming to

my brother," Schaaff recalls. He still feels a twinge of guilt that the little brown "sacrificed its own life in order to bring me such fulfillment." In addition to fishing closer to home, Rich would often make the 11 hour, non-stop drive to the White River in Arkansas with his brother, who had previously worked there as a fly fishing guide. His brother knew the river well, and the two regularly fished for long weekends. Though the White was teeming with trout, Schaaff acknowledges that after the '84 trip to Montana everything else paled by comparison. "It was the West that I longed for." His trip to Montana had apparently ruined him.

While he grew up fishing, photography was a hobby that didn't come along until Schaaff moved to New York City in 1994. To hear Rich tell it, "God only knows why I ever moved to NYC in the first place." As he reflects back on that period of his life, however, it becomes obvious that his years spent living in Manhattan were good for something. Mesmerized by the lifestyle and architecture that surrounded him, Schaaff purchased a Nikon camera and spent his

days off “schlepping around the streets of Manhattan shooting roll after roll of black and white film.” The dramatic urban settings provided endless opportunities to study composition and the play of light. He didn’t realize it at the time, but the Manhattan project was preparing Rich for what lie ahead, further to the West.

Schaaff refers to his time spent in NYC as “the lost years of fly fishing.” He regrets that probably one of the biggest mistakes while living in Manhattan was not taking advantage of the great Eastern fisheries. “I think I was too busy trying to absorb and balance all the craziness of that lifestyle,” he says. In 1999 he snapped back to his senses.

“Go West, young man.”

Such was the advice of an Indiana newspaper writer by the name of John Soule, who in 1851 wrote the words that would become a mantra for nineteenth century Americans pursuing their dreams of a new life in a new, unsettled territory. 148 years after those words were first published, Rich Schaaff answered that call to action and headed about as far West as he possible could, settling in the Pacific Northwest near Portland, Oregon. Rich admits that he’d grown weary of wading in a mass of humanity and left New York City “to avoid seeing people talking to themselves on the streets.” He still wades, but now he does so amongst rocks and water. He still sees people talking to themselves on occasion, but the difference is that now these people are usually harmless fly anglers, blurting out a few choice words when a fish throws their hook.

The slower pace of life on the West coast suited Schaaff perfectly and allowed him to fully immerse himself in two of his



Photo by Richard Schaaff

passions: fly fishing and photography. Exactly when the two hit head-on isn’t clear, but one thing is: “When they came together, I knew I was a goner.” He also knew he was a goner when he met “a wonderful Oregonian gal named Julie” who would become his better half.

There was plenty of fishing to be done out West, and those fishing trips soon included a camera as part of the requisite tackle. “I began spending more time taking photos than actually fishing,” Schaaff says without a hint of remorse. He began to see fly fishing differently through the camera’s lens, and a good fishing trip began to be measured not in the number of fish caught, but in how many quality shots he was able to capture. “Two good shots make the trip,” he adds.

The more Rich fished, the more photos he took as he immersed himself in his passions. Soon it became clear that his photography hobby deserved an identity, and thus was born East Fork Fly Photography. In order to share his work with friends and

“I began spending more time taking photos than actually fishing”

—Rich Schaaff

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fishing buddies, Schaaff created a website and began uploading images from his memory cards. Upon viewing his work, it's obvious that what Rich captures with his lens goes well beyond the average 'fish porn' shots. "I try to avoid the typical grip and grin," he adds, "But I'll go there if it's my fish!"

During the winter months when he wasn't standing knee deep in a steelhead river, Rich began experimenting with a light box – a portable device that provides even, diffused lighting for shooting small objects. He saw the amazing artistry in flies tied by his friend Rocky Maley and sought to capture the beauty of the flies by showcasing them with other items of fishing gear as props. His background in interior design helped when it came to staging the shots.

Due to his keen ability to capture the subtleties associated with all aspects of fly-fishing, after a couple of years, Schaaff's work began to get noticed. Marshall Cutchin of Midcurrent.com invited Schaaff to be featured in the photography section of the popular fly fishing website. The talent already assembled on Midcurrent was impressive, and Schaaff was humbled by the invitation. Up to this point photography had been simply a personal endeavor.

With increased exposure came residual interest in Schaaff's photography, and his work caught the attention of Korkers, the Portland, Oregon-based footwear manufacturer. The day after a brief phone call to see if Schaaff was interested in shooting

some possible catalog work for their 2011 season (he was interested, by the way), a pair of wading boots showed up on his doorstep and Schaaff got busy with his camera. The folks at Korkers apparently liked what they saw in his proofs and hired him for the shoot. Since then, Schaaff has also done work for Slate Creek Fly Rod Company and Umpqua Feather Merchants. He's come a long way since schlepping the streets of Manhattan on his days off, shooting rolls of black and white film.

As for the big rainbow on the Madison River near Three Dollar Bridge, it's hard to get a straight answer from Rich as to how that scene finally played out. Without photographic proof we are simply left to wonder.

Rich Schaaff lives along the banks of the east fork of the Lewis River in Washington state where he spends the winter months fishing for the elusive steelhead. He's also been known to chase reddsides Rainbow trout on the Deschutes River in Oregon, and on summer evenings he waits for the "blessed hex hatch" on an undisclosed small lake not far from his home. Rich's work can be seen on his website, www.eastforkfly.com.

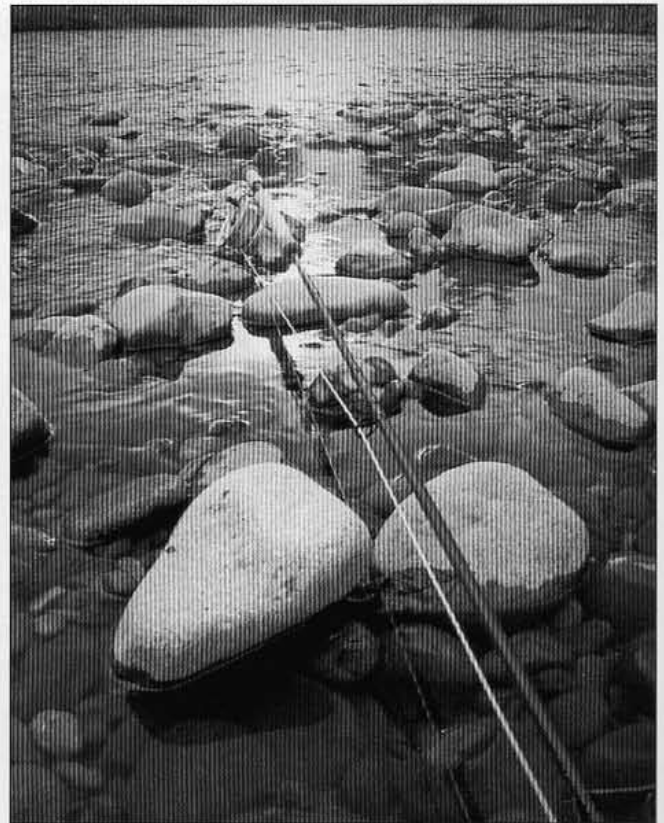


Photo by Richard Schaaff

After this article was written, sadly, Rich Schaaff passed away on November 2nd after a brief bout with cancer. The love of his life, Julie Schaaff wrote these beautiful words, which are a fitting epitaph for her husband:

"During the last few months of Rich's life, so many things had come together in a positive way. He was able to leave a job that was no longer satisfying to him and his photography was becoming something that he could make a living doing. He lived in a place he loved, where he could be lulled to sleep by the sound of the river. We shared a deep and intimate love that gave our life meaning. He wanted to live!! But it became apparent that God had other plans for Rich." -Julie Schaaff.

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