



The river with no name

Text & Photos: Hannah Belford

The Balsam has such a rich and powerful history. For centuries indigenous (Nisga'a and Gitksan) people have been walking the valley, traveling up the White Wolf river, then up the Balsam, through adjoining drainages, and down the Skeena to the closest communities. Families lived in the meadow at the end of Balsam Lake, right up until 1960. They would hike up for a week to the closest town (generally Kispiox village) for supplies, then return to their families. We have hosted the last member of the tribe to live in the meadow, and he stated that it took three days to hike to town with an empty pack, and seven days to hike back with supplies. This amazes me, as it is roughly 70-80 miles each way. There are three hand-built cabins, hand-made fish traps and three grave houses in the meadow, where elder members of the Blackwater family (Gitksan tribe) are buried.

Through the years we have found old blazes in trees with pencil writings, from the 1930's and 1940's, of aboriginal families traveling up the river, to stay at the lake, in the old Telegraph trail cabin, on their way towards the Skeena, where they would meet up with other members of their tribes, eventually traveling down the Skeena towards Kispiox village.

In 1977, my parents, Alice and Ken arrived at Balsam Lake searching for a different way of life, and that's exactly what they found. Originally, they bought the guide outfitting certificate for the area with the intent to homestead and run hunting trips. But after a couple years of doing so, they stumbled upon Steelhead. And from an impromptu, exploratory fishing trip one afternoon to the headwaters of the Balsam River, decades of world class Steelheading unfolded.

So, Steelhead came to us unexpectedly, as if in answer to some dream, or an unspoken vision. Looking back on it now, we are slightly stunned as to how it all came about. In those days, even the governmental fish and wildlife authorities were ignorant to the world-class run of trophy Steelhead

we had stumbled across in this exceedingly remote corner of British Columbia.

After discovering and catching Steelhead, we contacted Frank Amato, of Frank Amato Publications, who came and did an exploratory trip to teach us about Steelhead, our river, and techniques used for not only catching Steelhead, but also for the resident Bull, Rainbow and Cutbow trout, and the runs of salmon (Chinook, Coho and Sockeye) that migrated up the river in the summer months.

We have always been fiercely protective of the river and valley and we were especially so in the very beginning of our exploration of the river, so

due to that when we had the first article printed, in the February - March, 1979 issue of Salmon Trout Steelheader magazine, we referred to the river as the Balsam River. It is a fictitious name, but in order to keep our anonymity we felt it was legitimate. As a homage to Frank Amato, who I feel was the one who was instrumental in spearheading our operation, and was also my childhood fishing mentor,

I am going to refer to my home rivers as the Balsam and White Wolf for this article.

It the beginning, we knew nothing about the species - how they lived, when they migrated, and spawned. Over time, we learned the hard way. We built up our knowledge base by trial and error. We watched, fished, guided, experimented, and listened. Today, we are one of the world's most distinctive fly-fishing destinations for Steelhead and Rainbow trout. We are certainly among the most unique, as we now know this river and its fish intimately, having lived and fished in this remote wilderness valley continuously for the past forty years.

Everything at Balsam is old school, as this valley started off as a home, not as a business. For both ourselves and our guests, we like to try and keep it that way. Although we now have many modern amenities, we still rely on the old way of life, and since we are so remote, there often is no other choice. We embrace this lifestyle, as it keeps us grounded. Being here teaches us to appreciate the simple things in life.

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Photo: Craig Derby



Marc Bale, still faithful to single handers, but that doesn't stop him from consistently achieving double digit fish days.



A double hook up for Chas and guide Tristan at 'Dream', while heli fishing on the White Wolf.



A young, healthy Grizzly curiously pondering us while we are cautiously pondering him.

Photo: Craig Derby

We cherish our opportunity to be here, and each day is a gift, as Balsam is not only our business, but first and foremost, our home.

In the early 2000's my mother and I bought out my father and now my mother Alice, and I, own and operate our family lodge. My mother is the hostess, a certified healing touch practitioner, and a watercolor artist. I am the head guide, the webmaster, an interior designer, and a graphic artist.

My mother has guided on this river for almost 35 years, and I for 25. Between the two of us we have tailed thousands of Steelhead, and countless numbers of other species. We absolutely love our jobs and careers and would not consider doing anything other than what we do, as for us, this is the best lifestyle imaginable.

Steelhead

The Steelhead of the Balsam are 100% wild, and very similar in size, strength and appearance to the Steelhead of all the famed Steelhead rivers in British Columbia. Genetically, the Steelhead of the Balsam river have proven to be closer to Skeena Steelhead than those of other watersheds in Northern British Columbia.

The average Balsam buck is 32 - 36 inches, 15 lbs, strong and aggressive. 18 - 22+ lb. bucks are not uncommon, and are caught on a regular basis, and a few exceeding 25 pounds are caught each season. The biggest buck we have measured is 44 inches, but we've probably seen some even larger.

The great hens are the special fish. Most of them are lost within seconds, knots pulling open, lines breaking.

So ready and used to the average, we simply aren't ready for the great ones and they are lost more often than not. The average hen is 30 - 35 inches, 13 lbs, bright, acrobatic and fierce. 15 - 19 lb. hens are not at all uncommon, and quite a few are hooked each season.

Our river is rather unique, as not only do we regularly sight-fish to all species, the water is very intimate and usually gin-clear, allowing for exceptional dry line and dry fly fishing for Steelhead throughout the entire season. When fishing for Steelhead, sparse damp flies and other Spey inspired patterns have a higher success rate over large or bushy patterns. We implement many aspects of trout fishing into our Steelhead fishing, as they will lay under brush, behind rocks, and in small pockets, as well as all the other classic lies. Steelhead over

twenty pounds have been successfully hooked and landed by our clients on flies as small as a #8.

Trout fishing the way it used to be. A watershed never logged. A wilderness untouched. A natural abundance of 100% wild, native, exquisite Rainbows, Cutbows and Bull Trout reside the Balsam and its tributaries. The Balsam is pristine - a stunningly fertile breeding ground, and home to a truly unspoiled, world-class trout fishery.

The Trout fishing in the Balsam is exquisite, especially in the headwaters. They are well-marked, deep, healthy and powerful fish, reaching up to 3 lbs. Seasonal movements of all of the trout species in the Balsam are mysterious, resulting in variance in size and numbers of fish in the water at any one time.

For our Rainbow and other trout

fishing, our preferred approach is with an upstream dry, matching the hatch, to rising fish. We also use nymphs, with or without an indicator, and sometimes, swung flies such as leeches and streamers.

Beginning troutiers will see immediate results, even on upstream dries, and short casts are often enough. The more experienced may choose a sharper challenge, going fine and far off without indicators on upstream nymphs. Whatever the level or method chosen, the rewards and pleasures are as rich.

Bears & Wildlife

The Balsam Valley is home to very healthy populations of both Grizzly and Black bears. For many of our guests, seeing a bear in its natural habitat is a definite highlight of

their visit. The opportunity to watch these animals in close range as they fish and go about their lives in their natural home is truly a rare privilege, and each encounter we have results in a powerfully memorable experience.

At the outlet of Balsam Lake is where the bears most like to live and feast. This valley is heavily treed on one side of old growth forest, towering Cottonwoods and historic meadow where the Gitksan lived on the other, is simply delicious in its intimacy and abundance.

The Balsam and joining watershed are the major Grizzly bear corridor in the immediate area. The two drainages are linked as Grizzly bear home ranges. The two systems hold salmon at different times, extending the period of time that Grizzly bears can feed on salmon.



Left pic: Barrie bombing out a perfect cast on a unnamed run on the lower White Wolf. Right pic: Our hand milled and built main lodge and cook house. Rough lumber on the outside, yet inside it is modern, cozy, and even has wireless internet.



Yvan netting Nelson's fish, at 'Piper Cub', named because a fellow outfitter landed his plane on it in the very early days.

Photo: Matt Engene

We have peacefully co-existed with these awe-inspiring animals for forty years and have never had a “bad” bear encounter. All of our guides and staff are knowledgeable in bear safety measures, and personal safety is always our top priority.

In the spring, Moose with new calves are visible on the shoreline. In the fall the best of the bulls can be seen with the females. Good numbers of Moose calve in the flooded willow swamps between the Balsam and its sister lakes. Moose winter along the entire Balsam valley.

Wolves can be seen or heard from time to time; traveling up and down the valley, eating dead salmon and trailing Moose. We hear their astonishing songs and howls in the mountains of the Balsam and it speaks to us of wilderness. Wolverines, some upwards of 60 lbs. are spotted infrequently.

Although the wildlife is abundant,

it is at the same time vulnerable. We choose through our activities to respect and protect these lands and the creatures on it. We celebrate our opportunities to be here, to show this remarkable valley to our guests and to learn from it. This is an intact old growth ecosystem undisturbed by road or industry.

Birds & Waterfowl

Resident Bald Eagles nest and raise their young in the valley. Golden Eagles frequent the valley in high numbers during the spawning seasons. Loons nest on the island in the lake. Songbirds live in the brush in intense numbers. Many wild Swans and Geese visit in the spring, and in the fall with their young.

Dippers and kingfishers will keep you company on the river. Blue Jays and Whiskey Jacks will show up during lunch. Spruce, Blue and Ruffed Grouse live here. Ptarmigan show up

when the snow flies. In the spring, Hawks and Falcons are seen cruising the hillsides. Owls are plentiful. Ospreys are spotted frequently. Mallards live in the headwaters. Merganser families are seen through the whole valley.

High numbers of waterfowl use the open waters of the Balsam in their migrations when other lakes in the region are frozen.

The Lodges

Located 3 miles downstream from the lake, Cottonwood Creek camp sits on a bank overlooking an oxbow of prime Steelhead water. Many evenings are spent with anglers and guides sharing a cocktail by the fire pit, watching a lone figure casting methodically in the receding daylight.

The home pool located directly out front of the camp is without a doubt one of the finest home pools in the world of fly fishing, as anglers can

Located 3 miles downstream from the lake, Cottonwood Creek camp sits on a bank overlooking an oxbow of prime Steelhead water.

simply hop over the bank mere steps from their tents and begin fishing in a highly productive pool. Often, our guides will stay up high on the bank there, sight fishing guests to Steelhead.

In addition, some of the most productive pools and runs in this part of the river lie within a 15-minute walk up or down from this camp. Places like the “Corner Pool”, “Rose”, “Old Camp Run” and “The Hitching Post” have made countless “memories of a lifetime” for our many guests over the years.

Anglers double up in 12 x 14 wall tent cabins built on wooden decks, with rustic furnishings, quality wood stoves and solar electric lighting. Each tent has a 4’ porch and casual seating area for socializing and enjoying the evening festivities. Anglers and staff share meals in a beautiful hand built 16 x 24 cabin, enjoying the warmth of the wood cook stove on chilly evenings, and the savory aromas of meals being prepared over

balsam and spruce coals. A cozy shower building offers on demand hot water and wood heat, and after a hard day on the river, it can quickly make you appreciate the simpler things in life.

Moss Creek camp is located three miles downriver from Cottonwood Creek, and six miles from the lake. It sits on our old camp site from 20 years ago, on a bank set back from the river, looking out onto a grove of alders, a beautifully braided section of river, and a breathtaking view of the alpine meadows on the ridge directly across. At this point, the river has dropped roughly 200 feet in elevation since Cottonwood Creek, and about 400 feet from the lake. As a slightly higher gradient section of the river, the pools are more defined, as one drops into the next. Here the river wanders through a changing valley, past impressive rock walls, logjams and high banks before opening once again closer to its confluence with the White Wolf river.



Photo: Nick Zoll

During a guide 'fish off' one afternoon, I got rewarded by this amazing Buck. One of the best fish I have ever had the privilege to hook.

Directly across the river from the camp is "Fishbowl", arguably one of the best runs on the whole river, and definitely worth going through at least twice. It is a classic pool on a slight right-hand bend with a riffled head, deep bucket and glassy tailout, perfect for dry fly and sight fishing opportunities. And, just a 5-minute walk downstream, there are new pools and old alike, including trusty standbys such as "The Rock" and "Trifecta", and many others yet unnamed.

Anglers and staff share meals in a charming, rustic 14 x 22 cabin. Anglers have very similar lodging as in Cottonwood, staying two to a 12 x 14 metal framed wall tent, with wooden floors, rustic furnishings, wood stoves and kerosene lighting.

Our Vision

Due to the remoteness of our location, Balsam will always remain a wild, pure, and intense experience. We take pride in the fact that we are a small, rustic fly fishing only lodge. The payoff for not having many modern amenities is that we are located on one of the world's finest Rainbow and Steelhead rivers, one which is still as it was 100 years ago... unlogged, 100% wild runs of fish, and accessible only by air.

As we hold the exclusive angling rights, it is a premium, world-class, limited access fly fishing experience in a highly remote wilderness setting. We are very interested in preserving Balsam, operating with a "no trace"

policy, and leaving as little of a footprint as possible. Our goal is to protect this watershed, and by fishing in a safe and educated manner, we achieve this goal.

We realize that we have a unique and precious fishery and opportunity, and it is an incredibly special environment and location and because of all the aforementioned points, it needs to be protected. We have made it our life goal to do so. ■

** The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author, for educational and entertainment purposes, and only to give you general information and a general understanding of the Balsam valley, not to provide specific scientific data or facts. **



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