Whitefish in the Crooked River

by Scott_Staats

As the strike indicator went down, the angler raised the tip of his fly rod to set the hook. It appeared, by the bend of the rod and the fight in the fish that he hooked into something pretty nice. After a minute or two, he hoisted an 18-inch whitefish from the chilly water.

But getting a whitefish instead of a redband was no disappointment for Mike Lunn. As a matter of fact, this day, like many others, he often heads to the Crooked River to target the not-so-elusive mountain whitefish.

Lunn hauls in an 18 inch whitefish. Photo by Scott Staats. â€œA lot of times Iâ€™ll go just so I can get enough to put in the smoker,â€• the Prineville resident said. He prefers filleting the bigger fish for smoking, those at least 16 inches. He leaves the skin on the fillets, laying the skin-side down on the rack. The smaller fish dry out when smoked, he said.

The bone structure of whitefish is just about the same as trout. Lunn thinks that many other anglers treat these fish like suckers because of their small mouth but he said they feed more like trout. Their long, slim body resembles a sucker but these fish are actually in the same family as trout. Many purist trout anglers look at whitefish as a â€œtrash fish,â€• Lunn said, since they donâ€™t look like a trout.

â€œI just like to go out and catch fish and some of these whitefish fight as good as any trout,â€• he said. â€œThe whitefish make really strong runs compared with the high-speed run of a trout.â€•

Even though whitefish can be found just about everywhere in the section of river below Bowman Dam, Lunn prefers targeting them at the head and tailout of pools. He noted that he hasnâ€™t found as many whitefish in riffles.

He likes to fish the slower water and get the fly down near the bottom. Flies such as beadhead nymphs in copper or reddish color in size 14 to 18 hooks work best for him. â€œSometimes you can catch them on just about anything, including emergers,â€• he added.

Mike Lunn tries for whitefish at Crooked River. Photo by Scott Staats. On one outing, Lunn wanted to see how many whitefish he could catch. â€œIt was one of those days when the fish were striking on almost every cast and I worked one small stretch of river and caught 100.â€• Heâ€™s caught several fish over 18 inches in the past including a few 20 inchers.

â€œI havenâ€™t had a bad day on whitefish yet,â€• Lunn said. â€œWhen I start targeting them, I can almost always catch them.â€•

As for the meat, Lunn describes it as a white meat and oily like that of a trout. Thatâ€™s one reason they smoke up so well because theyâ€™re oily, he said. Heâ€™s breaded and fried them like bass but prefers smoking them. The meat is not flaky like a bass, he noted.

Lunn is a believer that a good day of whitefish fishing sure beats a bad day of trout fishing. â€œWhen youâ€™re not catching trout, it sure is nice to have a tug on the end of your line,â€• he said. â€œI canâ€™t

always rely on the trout, but I can almost always go someplace in the river and catch whitefish.â€•

The Crooked River is well known for its redband trout fishery, but the mountain whitefish are pretty much overlooked by most anglers, according to Brett Hodgson, fish biologist with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife in Prineville. He said he often has a hard time convincing anglers of that, however.

â€œItâ€™s an untapped population with a huge abundance available for both recreational and consumptive purposes,â€• Hogdson said. â€œItâ€™s obviously one of the densest populations of fish in Central Oregon.â€•

Thereâ€™s definitely no shortage of whitefish in the Crooked River. The latest numbers on redband trout are about 4,000 per mile and Hodgson said that a conservative estimate from everyone involved in the surveys put whitefish at about a 10:1ratio to redbands. That brings the whitefish population to about 30,000 to 40,000 fish per mile. â€œThatâ€™s a lot of fish,â€• Hodgson said.

These numbers, however, donâ€™t reflect historic numbers of whitefish or redbands in the 8-mile stretch of the river below Bowman Dam. The flow releases from Prineville Reservoir keep the river temperature at about 50 degrees most of the year since the releases come from the bottom of the reservoir. Prior to the construction of the reservoir, water temperature in the summer would have been in the 70â€™s.

â€œIn that short stretch of river, weâ€™ve created an artificially favorable habitat for both species,â€• Hodgson explained.

Even though the fish share similar genetics, they somewhat partition their habitat, Hodgson said. â€œThe larger concentrations of whitefish will be found in the slower, deeper water while the redbands tend to occupy the boulder-riffle runs.â€• He noted that whitefish also tend to stay in the lower half of the water column while trout occupy the top half.

Hodgson said that an 18-inch fish will weigh about three pounds. He believes itâ€™s possible that a state record whitefish could be in the Crooked River but given the density of fish and available habitat, especially in the winter, he doubts the growth conditions exist for many fish over four pounds. The current state record whitefish came out of Crane Prairie Reservoir in 1994 and weighed 4 pounds 14 ounces.

Reducing the numbers of whitefish would be beneficial to the redband population but Hodgson cautions that whitefish are a game species and catching them and tossing them up on the bank would be considered waste of a game fish, resulting in a citation. There is no limit on size and number of whitefish caught.

The section of river below Bowman Dam is an extremely productive stretch of river with an incredible food source to support the number of trout and whitefish. Most anglers that Hodgson has talked with said they do far better catching whitefish on flies rather than bait or lures. Whitefish will feed on scuds, caddisflies, mayflies and stoneflies -- just like trout.

â€œWe encourage anglers to keep more whitefish,â€• said Hodgson. â€œWe try to promote the whitefish population and the quality of meat.â€•

Whitefish in the Crooked River by Scott_Staats