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THE QUIET SEASON

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CAMP SHERMAN, OR

Words: Glenn Zinkus

A monochromatic blue-toned photograph of a forest basin. The scene is dominated by tall, slender ponderosa pines that rise from a valley floor. A dirt road or path winds through the lower part of the frame, leading the eye into the distance. The air is thick with mist or fog, which obscures the background and creates a sense of depth and atmosphere. The overall mood is quiet and ethereal.

◀ HERE ▶

"Oregon's Metolius River sits in a basin surrounded by Black Butte, Green Ridge and distant mountains. On this cold January morning the fog was sitting so low that the tops of the towering ponderosa pines were poking through. The fish weren't going anywhere, but the fog was, and a quick flight with a drone allowed me to capture the moment and set the mood for the fishing ahead."
Photo: Toby Nolan



IFIRST MET CHUCK, the fishing specialist behind the counter at Anderson's Sporting Goods in Corvallis, OR, on a sunny March day nearly 30 years ago. Chuck was part of the red-plaid world—he lived hunting and fishing, and he was as traditional as it got. He had the right look, athletic and outdoorsy, with a trim mustache and a slight tan even in early spring. Behind the counter, sleeves rolled up, reading glasses balanced near the end of his nose, he fiddled with a reel.

"Hiya, can I help you?" he asked. Instead of the usual "just looking," I piped right up, "I'm looking for a good all-around rod for the trout around here, and some flies."

Chuck pointed me in the right direction. Going a bit further, I went on, "I'm here on a six-month temporary transfer. Is there good fishing nearby?"

He sat back, pondered a few seconds, and then asked, "Only six months?"

"Yes. But I'm already thinking it may become permanent."

I'd fallen in love with the Pacific Northwest as soon as I'd stepped off the plane. Chuck took out a pad and pen and said, "This is a list of waters you need to see and fish before you leave Oregon, just in case this transfer really is only six months."

The list read:

- #1 Deschutes River
- #2 Metolius River
- #3 North Umpqua River
- #4 Crane Prairie and Davis Lake
- #5 Diamond Lake

I geared up. I tied flies and studied the *Oregon Gazetteer* to plan each weekend on the water. My new Oregon-based girlfriend and I started weekend road trips to each water on "the list." By mid-June, I'd made my first foray to the Metolius and was gobsmacked by the clear waters, big ponderosas and the quaint little wide spot in the road called Camp Sherman.

As we drove into the Metolius Basin and set about checking out campgrounds along the upper river, we decided Gorge campground looked about right—a little smaller than the others, but with bigger ponderosas and an intriguing name. We hiked into the gorge, where the valley narrows to a lava chasm channeling the placid upper Metolius into runs and deep pools. We watched unimaginably big fish fin in the vivid turquoise water. We decided that weekend the Metolius was the most beautiful water we'd ever seen. But the fish didn't come easy.

◀ LEFT ▶

On the Metolius River in winter, it's warmer in the water than out. Paul Snowbeck makes his way around snow-covered logs and drop-offs to catch that clockwork afternoon hatch. Photo: Arian Stevens



◀ LEFT TO RIGHT ▶

A young fisherman on the Metolius River near Allingham Bridge, circa 1930. Photo: L.D. Bailey, courtesy U.S. Forest Service Pacific Northwest Region

While fishing the Metolius you are cocooned by ponderosa pines. Occasional bends in the river allow views beyond the forest, and one of the most prominent landmarks is Black Butte. Standing 6,436 feet high it towers over the “Head of the Metolius,” the springs that give birth to the legendary river. A cabin flown to the top by helicopter for fire service staff is long gone, but the old outhouse remains—a true “loo with a view.” Photo: Toby Nolan

METOLIUS—from the Sahaptin language spoken by the Warm Springs tribe, the original inhabitants of the region—translates as “white fish,” in reference to light or white-colored Chinook salmon. Most likely it’s a description of Chinook who’ve spent time swimming, spawning and dying in the river, and coloring up with a white fungus that is highly visible in the crystalline waters. Those waters begin high in central Oregon’s Cascades in swampy meadows west of a mountain formation named the Three Sisters. The waters flow through underground fissures beneath a perfectly formed cinder cone named Black Butte, where the river emerges from a hillside at a year-round chilly 48 degrees, forming the headwaters. From there, it meanders through a narrow graben between the Cascades to the west and Green Ridge on the east. The upper stretches are placid, a spring-fed river flowing beside picturesque meadows, forests of big cinnamon-colored ponderosa pines and the hamlet of Camp Sherman, all the while growing from a series of tributary streams and natural springs along the banks. About 12 miles farther on, where the Metolius passes under Bridge 99, the river enters its Wild and Scenic

designated run, with increased velocity and flow from additional tributaries, ending more than 30 miles from, and 1,000 feet below, its origin before emptying into the Metolius arm of the high desert impoundment Lake Billy Chinook.

The only semblance of a town in the basin is the hamlet of Camp Sherman. It is a place that evokes summer memories of my 1970s youth. Although my family vacations were along rivers and lakes in northern New England, Camp Sherman harbors a certain nostalgia—big trees, vintage cabins along the banks and a general store that sells a little bit of everything. It is the quintessential escape from the city.

In 1906, two Sherman County, OR wheat farmers, Judge William Henrichs and Lonnie Belshe, rode horses along what would become the Skyline Trail on an exploratory trip through Oregon’s high Cascades, dropping elevation just north of Three Fingered Jack, a distinctive Cascade peak. The pair descended into an evergreen valley, finding a land of meadows, towering ponderosa pines and the crystalline waters of the Metolius. The Metolius Basin, with a temperate climate and plentiful shade, was a welcome reprieve



from the scorching summer temperatures at their Columbia Basin farms nearly 80 miles away. In 1908, they returned with their families just after the annual harvest. Thus began an annual summer tradition.

The farmers nailed up a sign—made from a wooden shoe box top—with an arrow pointing the way to the place they called “Camp Sherman.” They steered wagons along the primitive roads and rutted tracks through the wild canyons and grasslands of Central Oregon, roads that were little more than wagon trails. If a wagon axle broke, the entire train stopped, everyone pitched in to make the repair and then they journeyed on.

Though some intrepid homesteaders had filed Homestead Act claims for land along the banks of the Metolius—establishing limited private land holdings on the river that exist to this day—any opportunity to stake a claim in the basin ended when President Grover Cleveland established the area as a federal forest preserve in 1893. By 1917, a growing number of families regularly traveled and vacationed in Camp Sherman, traveling with horse and wagon over Green Ridge. They built summer cabins along the river,

some on private land that was purchased, others on Forest Service land with USFS permission.

The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), formed in 1933 to provide employment during the height of the Great Depression, was a cornerstone of President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal. Their legacy in Central Oregon and along the Metolius includes picnic structures, roads, trails and lodges. A favorite of many are the picnic structures in the Camp Sherman, Pine Rest and Pioneer Ford campgrounds, complete with stone fireplaces and cast-iron stovetops that would be perfect for making outdoor wood-fired pizzas.

While there are still a few magnificent residences in the area built on the original private land holdings by business magnates from another time, many cabins along the river are simple and completely original. Most of them are built on USFS land and hold long-term leases, with covenants imposed by the Forest Service restricting expansions and changes in architecture. These restrictions, together with the Wild and Scenic designation and the more recent 2009 Metolius Protection Act, limit commercial activity in the Metolius Basin to just the Camp Sherman Store.



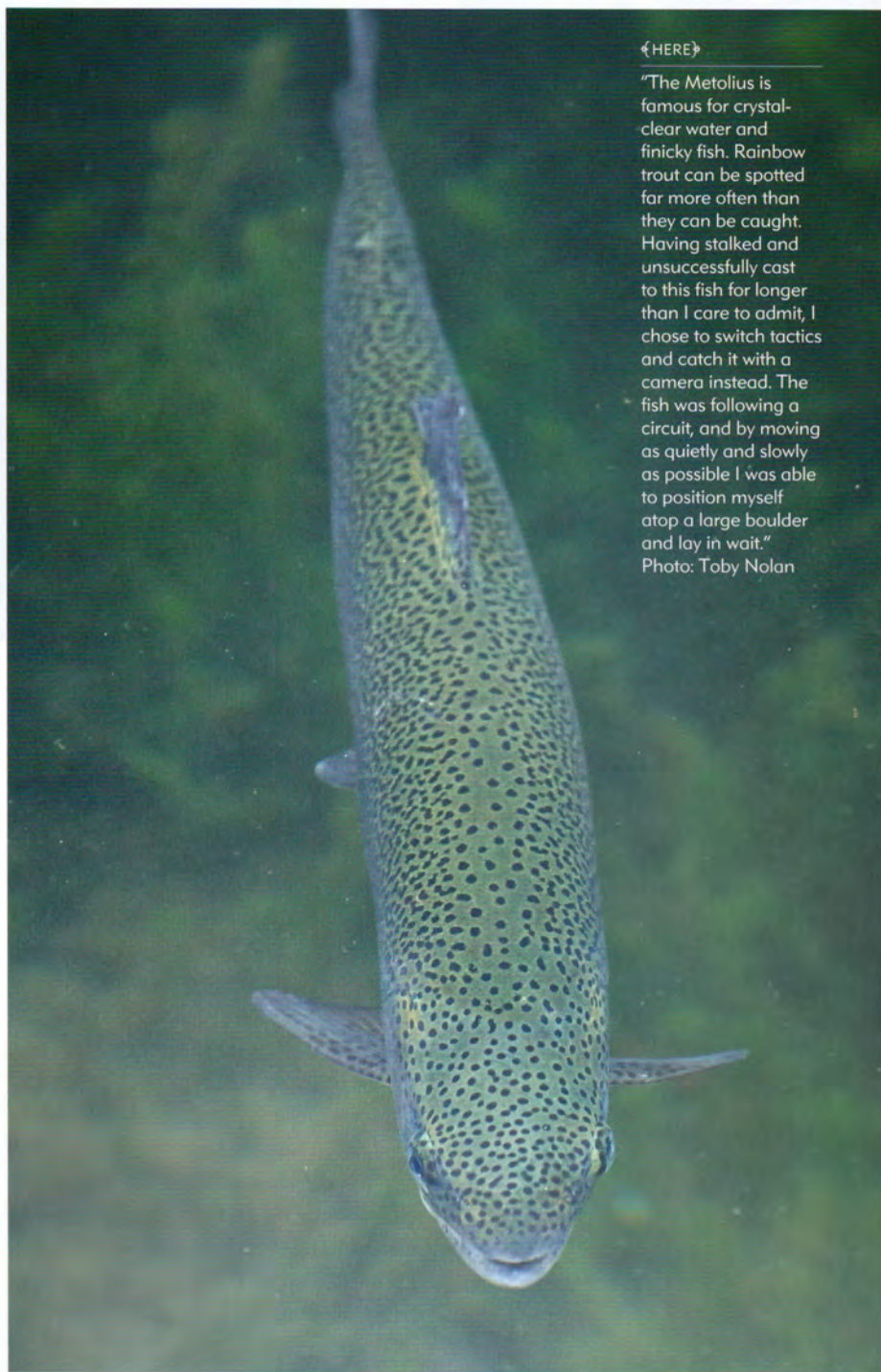
◀ ABOVE ▶

Established in 1918 by farmers from Sherman County, OR, the Camp Sherman Store provides fresh lunches, cold drinks and the latest fishing reports just feet from the Metolius.
Photo: Ryan Brennecke

THANKS IN PART to Chuck's friendly welcome, I stayed in Oregon and now fish the Metolius regularly. I make a prerequisite stop at the Camp Sherman Store whenever I first arrive at the river. The store, at the center of "town," is an old-fashioned affair: part sundries, part market, part souvenir shop and part U.S. Post Office—and, perhaps most importantly, part fly shop. Walking past a "Fly Fishing Only" sign and a life-size wooden bear standing guard near the front door is like stepping into any number of trading posts in northern New England. The Camp Sherman Store has always been and still is a gathering place where folks share the latest news.

Built in 1917, the general store is the heart of local life on the Metolius. The fly shop in the back has a nice selection of bamboo rods and a few Hardy reels set aside for anyone who wants to look. Whether it's the height of tourist season, or a midwinter weekend, the guys in the shop help reveal the secrets of the river, secrets that include redbreasted rainbows, mountain whitefish, bull trout and, in September, kokanee—and now small runs of anadromous fish that are returning to the river once again.

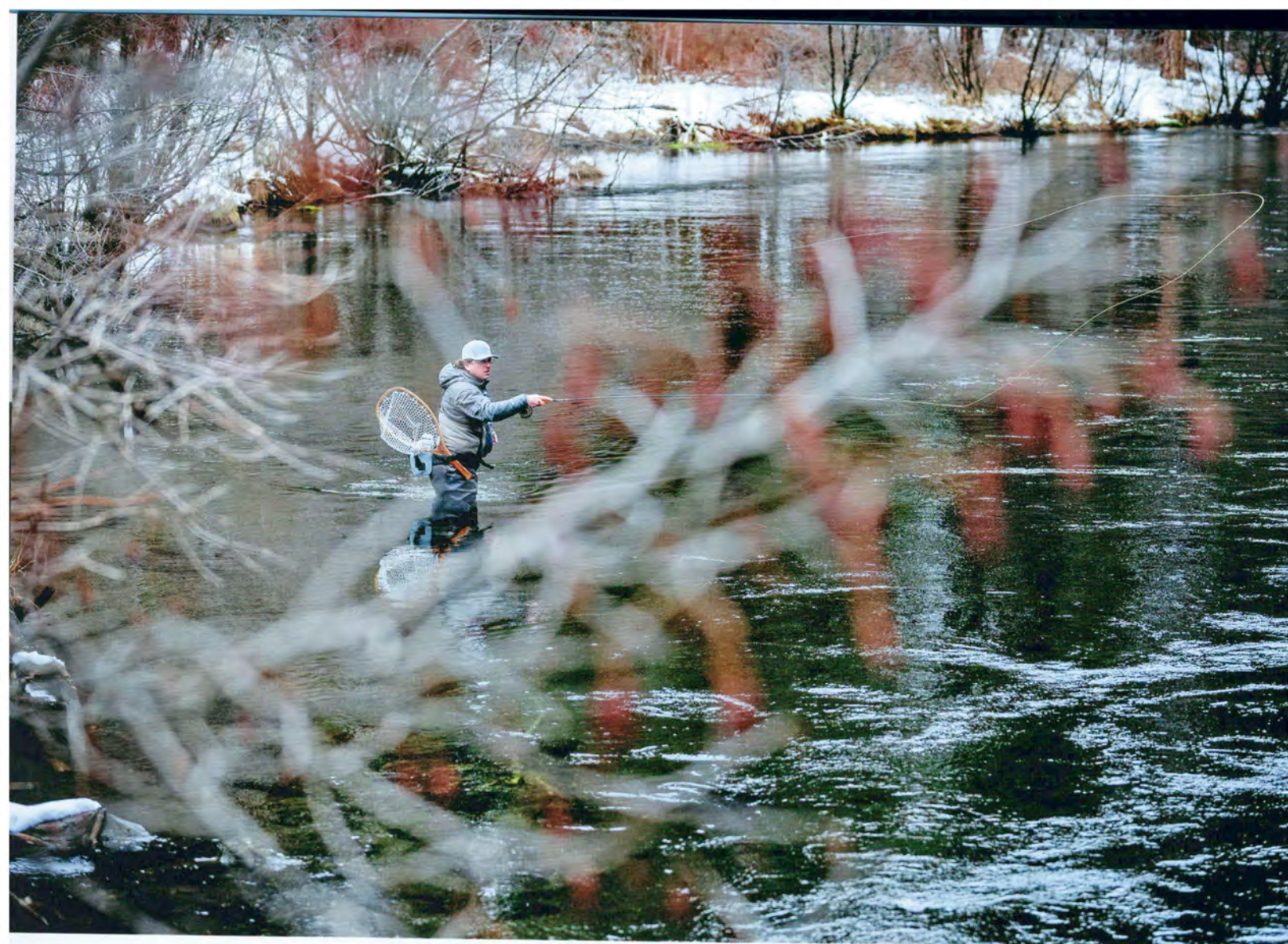
The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife stopped trout-stocking the river in the 1990s. It is flyfishing-only from the upper river down to Bridge 99, also known as Lower Bridge. Below Lower Bridge, lures and spinners are allowed, but the river remains catch and release only. The bull trout fishery is one of its great draws, a rarity at a time when bull trout habitat seems to be perpetually shrinking. This river has everything a bull trout needs—cold, clean and connected water, with populations of both resident bulls and migratory fish from Lake Billy Chinook. Regardless, it is a notoriously difficult fishery—especially for a newcomer—but this can easily change; show up on a winter day with spitting snow and a blue-winged olive hatch just downstream from the Allingham Bridge and your luck can change.



◀ HERE ▶

"The Metolius is famous for crystal-clear water and finicky fish. Rainbow trout can be spotted far more often than they can be caught. Having stalked and unsuccessfully cast to this fish for longer than I care to admit, I chose to switch tactics and catch it with a camera instead. The fish was following a circuit, and by moving as quietly and slowly as possible I was able to position myself atop a large boulder and lay in wait."

Photo: Toby Nolan



Prior to the 1960 implementation of a dam complex on the Lower Deschutes and the resulting formation of Lake Billy Chinook, the Upper Deschutes Basin and the Metolius River were granted runs of Chinook salmon, sockeye salmon and steelhead. In 2005, the owner-operators of the dams received a new 50-year operating license, which included specific measures to restore anadromous fish passage in the Upper Deschutes Basin. A coalition including Portland General Electric, the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, government agencies and nonprofits such as the Native Fish Society, Trout Unlimited, American Rivers, Water Watch of Oregon and the Freshwater Trust are working together to restore anadromous fish with a goal of self-sustaining and harvestable runs of Chinook, sockeye and steelhead. If anadromous fish restoration is achieved, this will bring back the runs for which the river was named.

THAT OREGON-BASED girlfriend from 30 years ago eventually became my wife, and 15 years ago we made one of our smartest purchases ever. While home from an extended overseas assignment, we bought a cabin in Sisters, OR, a small town near Camp Sherman. The river is now an integral part of our winter traditions.

The Metolius in spring and summer is translucent green and blue that turns to aqua and turquoise in the deep pools. In the fall, more subdued tones come to the fore. In late September and October, bankside brush burns bright red. Peer into the river during winter and the water is almost black; direct light rarely reaches its surface as the sun hugs the horizon.

One of my best fishing days on the Metolius happened about five years ago on a dark and rainy Black Friday. Driving from Sisters toward the Metolius, the moderate rain morphed into something more akin to pellets. This lasted all day, but it didn't matter. My



◀ LEFT TO RIGHT ▶

Paul Snowbeck can't believe he has one of the most popular holes on the Metolius all to himself. Usually three or four other anglers are working like windshield wipers for the same three rising redband trout. Photo: Arian Stevens

Black Butte and Mt. Jefferson, central Oregon. Deschutes National Forest Historic Photo. Photographer and date unknown. Photo: Courtesy U.S. Forest Service Pacific Northwest Region

friends and I were encased in Gore-Tex and half-immersed in the river most of the day. The quiet season was approaching, and once-lush islands scattered through the river had given way to matted straw and bare trees in November. The morning started crisp, but the fleece came off by lunch. We found a downed tree that served as table where we put out a good loaf of bread, some olives and a nutty gruyere.

After lunch we turned our attention to bull trout, hiking a riverside trail to a point where it fades to little more than a game path used more by local fauna than anglers and hikers. Shade overtook the entire river, making any sort of sight fishing impossible, but we knew this deeper pool, probably as deep as the tallest among us, held the bulls. Eschewing the local favorite—light-colored bunny leeches—I took out a trout spey rod and cast a prettier intruder-style fly that could be mistaken for a juvenile trout that had lost its way.

The pool was just long enough to swing and step several times before a long, hard pull turned into a fish moving downriver, peeling off line and backing. We always take turns fishing this pool, and this time it was a friend, the first angler, who hooked up to a nice two-foot plank of a fish. It was a solid, muscular trout that showed no signs of previous encounters with anglers and shook its tail to hasten its release back to the depths. That time of year the days get short, and the hike upriver to the Jeep is long, but we could not ask for any more on a day like that one.



WINTER ON THE METOLIUS is the quiet season. There is the sound of water, a wind in the ponderosas—but the only other sound is that of your own muffled footsteps in the snow. Every winter is different, and sometimes you can hike along bare ground through the ponderosas. Other times snow and ice prevail, the ride along the straight road to Camp Sherman becomes surprisingly dicey, and snow limits where one can pull off to fish. The Forest Service roads serving the area are plowed to Camp Sherman and downstream as far as the fish hatchery—which still provides stock for nearby rivers in the Deschutes basin—for the benefit of the residents.

In winter and early spring, I look for those rare locations where a sliver of sunshine hits the water, something I didn't always do. I'd always noticed patches of sun on the river, but never thought to fish them until one late winter afternoon a decade ago, while walking upriver to my Jeep, I ran into a bearded gentleman who I recognized from a flyfishing seminar at a local club—John Judy. John is an angling naturalist, author and former fishing guide whose name is synonymous with the Metolius River. Until recently, he resided in Camp Sherman, and probably spent every single day observing life on and in the river during his time there.

We passed through the small talk of beautiful mornings, fishing observations and how days on the river are never wasted. Then John explained that he seeks out the spots of sunlight because, he told me quietly, “the fish gravitate to sunny spots on the river on days like this.”

John wasn't fishing that day; he had no rod with him. After years on the river, he was out to simply find and watch fish. “I watch fish, birds and the river far more now than I ever fish,” he said. Those words, and the short lesson, stuck with me.

I now have more opportunities to fish during the quiet season. And so it is, on those days, I find what I'm looking for: a fragment of sunlight through an opening in the ponderosas that illuminates the bottom of a glassy pool. From the shade along the river's edge, I spy through the window of light into the water and try to recognize a tail, rhythmically fanning back and forth. ☞

◀ LEFT ▶

Toby Nolan admires the golden-brown color and bright orange spots of a healthy bull trout before releasing it carefully back into the Metolius River. Photo: Ryan Brennecke