A nice alternative
As I stepped out of my rig in late October at the Grave Creek boat landing on the Rogue River, Jeff Helfrich strolled over and said, “Paul, I hope you didn’t bring your guitar this time.”

“No, I left it at home,” I said.

“Good,” he said. “Cause it doesn’t look good out there.” He nodded toward the river as he spoke.

I showed up at the boat landing early that morning expecting to help unload the stack of drift boats for our late October steelhead fishing trip through the Wild and Scenic section of the Rogue, but, instead, I joined a covey of men standing around keeping one eye on the river, and the other watching the rains come down.

The Rogue was carrying mud and silt as it rushed past us at 4,000 cubic feet per second. On my drive out to Grave Creek that morning, every crevice, side creek and notch in the canyon had water cascading down to the river. Another inch of rain was predicted that day, and up to two inches more the following day. Fishing was out, given the high flows and the projected heavy rains to come. As the guides stood around waiting, they wondered how white-knuckled the boat ride through the canyon might be.

Rain persisted as we waited for the rest of Jeff’s clients to show up. People were coming from the Bay Area, Seattle and Idaho, as well as from Portland and Eugene. They were expecting four days of stellar fishing for the Rogue’s “half-pounder” steelhead on light fly tackle. Instead, as each client showed up at the landing, Jeff went over and told them that he was canceling the trip.

That was a tough call for any outfitter, but Jeff’s decision reflected the wisdom of wanting to ensure a quality trip for his clients, as well as caution after decades of running the Rogue through the Wild and Scenic section. The canyon can get nasty at high flows — putting guides, as well as clients, at risk.

Dean Schnell and his wife Seda, friends and fellow guides from Idaho, had driven over for the trip. Dean had recently retired from teaching school in Emmett, Idaho, and he was looking forward to his first fall trip down the Rogue chasing half-pounders. He’d called me and asked if I’d like to join him in his boat and show him some of the lies and techniques for catching these one-salt fish on a fly. “Heck yes!” I said without hesitation.

Dean’s disappointment was etched on his face as we stood at the boat landing and watched the other rigs drive off.

“Sorry you won’t get that first trip down the Rogue,” I said.

“Yeah,” he looked down for a moment. “Good call on Jeff’s part, but man…”
“What’re your plans now?” I asked. “Head straight back to Emmett?”

“We’ll go back to Eugene and spend the night with friends,” he replied.

“Well, one option,” I offered, “is to meet up on the Willamette tomorrow and go steelhead fishing from Dexter Dam down.”

Dean and Seda exchanged looks. “So, what’s that run like?” Dean asked. I said that I’d been wading for steelhead on that run the previous week, and it’d been productive with three fish in four outings.

“At least you’d get a shot at a steelhead before you head home,” I said to them as they climbed into their rig.

“Seda’s never caught one,” Dean said. “I’d sure like to get her into a steelie.”

We decided to meet the next morning in Pleasant Hill and float the Pongo run on the Willamette. The rain came down in sheets when we met up. As we drove across the Jasper Bridge, the river was running muddy and speckled with leaves. Dean and Seda were behind me, and I expected my cell phone to light up once they saw how turbid the river was. But I assumed that Fall Creek was the culprit that puked all the sediment into the river, so I pressed on.

At the boat landing below Dexter Dam, the river ran low and clear. The rain kept pummeling us as we pushed off and headed downstream. I’d brought two eight-weight fly rods for them to use, and I threw in my Spey rod as well. They rowed me across the river, and I got out to wade while they took turns casting and swinging flies.

We didn’t get a bite that first mile of the trip — we didn’t even see a steelhead. When we came around a sharp bend in the river onto a prime fly fishing lie where I was sure they’d catch a fish, we saw an armada of drift boats in front of us. I counted nine drift boats in fewer than 200 yards. Every guide in the valley must have come to the same conclusion I had that morning: with the heavy rains, the only stretch of river that would still be clear and fishable was below Dexter.

“No wonder we haven’t had a bite,” I yelled as I pointed downstream at the flotilla.

We slipped past the fleet of boats and fished our way to the take-out, but we still hadn’t had a strike when we were in sight of the boat landing. I knew of one last pocket right at the boat ramp, but another angler was fishing just upstream of the boat ramp from the bank.

We pulled up to the boat ramp, and I said to Seda, “Roll cast from the front of the boat while Dean and I shuttle our rigs.” About 40 yards from the river, Dean and I heard Seda screaming.

“Either she hooked up, or she fell in,” I said to Dean.

He ran back to help Seda, while I went for the rig. When I returned, Seda had caught and landed a seven-pounder — not bad for a first steelhead on a fly.