

Lee Spencer, A Modern-Day Thoreau; A Steelhead Pool, His Walden Pond

New book from Patagonia distills “fish guardian” Lee Spencer’s 14 seasons as caretaker of seasonal home to spawning salmon in southwestern Oregon

A Temporary Refuge by Lee Spencer

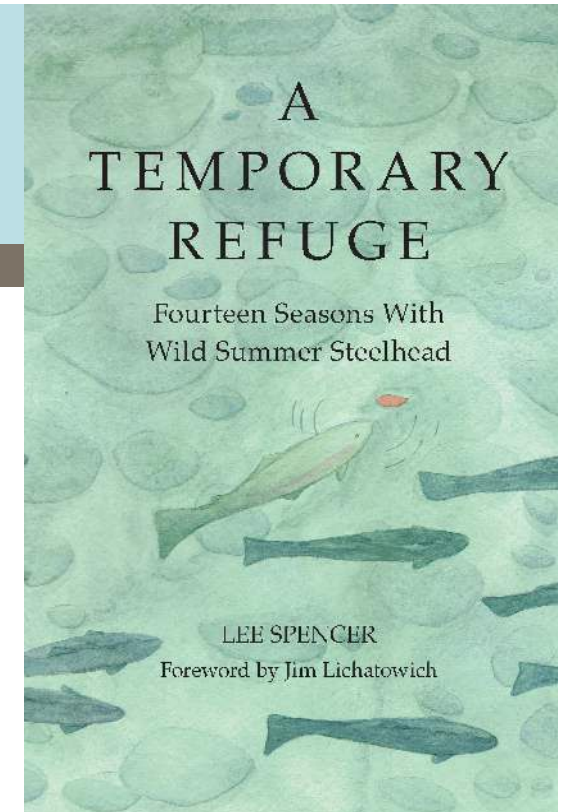
Every May to December, Lee Spencer camps next to a deep pool along the North Umpqua’s Steamboat Creek in Oregon. He’s been going there for 17 years, many of those years with his companion, a herding dog named Sis. Their explicit job is to protect the 400 to 800 cherished wild summer steelhead that come up from the Pacific to spawn in Big Bend Pool from poachers who had been known to dynamite the pool to create a massive kill. His implicit calling is to observe and record the web of life that nurtures the pool and its surroundings and inhabitants.

A Temporary Refuge is a distillation of 14 seasons of Spencer’s detailed observations of Big Bend Pool, capturing natural history teeming with fish, water, vegetation, birds, mammals, insects, reptiles and amphibians, seasonal changes, interesting events and stories, and the companionship of his “good dog” Sis, a fellow keen observer.

Oregon’s iconic fish gather in the pool each season because it is a cool haven from the heated stream flows of summer. Steelhead are comfortable in temperatures at or below 57 degrees Fahrenheit, and Big Bend Creek is the coldest tributary of the Steamboat basin. Fishing is off-limits—it has been for decades—but the sheer number of steelhead in one place makes the pool a prime location for poachers. After the last dynamiting event in 1992, volunteers began to spend the night at the pool, a duty eventually formalized by The North Umpqua Foundation. The local nonprofit partnered with several other organizations to form the North Umpqua FishWatch. It’s a simple, quiet life with no phone, email or internet access—just a man with his dog and his notebook. Spencer lives onsite in a trailer provided by the foundation, who also supplies him with a per diem. His work ensures the wild Pacific salmon can finish their journey up river to lay eggs, and in turn, survive as a natural breeding population.

“Smaller and smaller numbers of wild adult salmon return to their natal streams each year. The frequency of poaching has caused serious damage to the populations of wild summer steelhead, but the fundamental problem is our blind reliance on hatcheries, our continuing industrial assault on primal ecologies, and our growing population numbers,” Spencer says. “So the summer steelhead have found their refuge, and this refuge needs a caretaker.”

Spencer’s work as caretaker for the Big Bend Pool was featured on the PBS series “Oregon Field Guide,” and in Patagonia’s award-winning 2014 documentary “DamNation.” One of his concerns in talking about the pool—he’s careful to not give away the exact location—is that he does not want to encourage visits. He presently records at least 1,500 visits each season, and in *A Temporary Refuge* he urges that an increased number of visits could have negative consequences for the summer steelhead holding in the refuge pool.



BOOK DETAILS

Patagonia

By Lee Spencer

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During his first full season at Big Bend Pool, Spencer realized that the pool represented an unusual opportunity to take notes on whatever the wild summer steelhead did. He says he was “peculiarly trained to document the unknown” after 25 years of note taking and observation as a prehistoric field archeologist. Spencer has spent more than 3,400 days sitting with the wild steelhead at the pool, and 16 seasonal volumes of his notes can be examined on The North Umpqua Foundation website (northumpqua.org).

In *A Temporary Refuge*, Spencer is a modern day Thoreau, and the steelhead pool is his Walden Pond. In the grand tradition of *The Sand County Almanac*, this book will educate, inspire, and activate conservationists and anglers to appreciate and protect the waterways they love.

Key Messages / Story Ideas

- Writing about Natural History: Lee Spencer as a modern-day Thoreau
- A Man and His Dog: Lee Spencer and Sis, who spent 10 seasons at Big Bend Pool with Spencer
- Closed to angling since 1932, the North Umpqua is known as a “finishing school” of steelhead fly fishing
- Spencer cuts the points off the hooks on his flies (rifle-hitched moose-hair muddlers) so as to not pierce and tear the skin of a steelhead's mouth
- Steelhead live at 57 F or below - as climate change continues to reduce snowpack, Big Bend Pool and the other cold-water pockets on Steamboat Creek become even more important
- Hatchery fish and the multitude of threats they pose to wild fish

About the Author

Lee Spencer is the FishWatch caretaker at the Big Bend Pool of Steamboat Creek. From May to December of each year, he watches over the remote pool and the summer steelhead that gather there. He lives on site in a trailer provided by the North Umpqua Foundation. He has no phone, email, or internet access, but occasionally drives back to civilization for supplies. Spencer has lived at the pool for over 17 years, which has given him the chance to study the fish and other wild animals that come there. In addition to his duties of educating visitors and deterring would-be poachers, he takes careful notes about his observations for field research, which are often used by biologists and employees of the Forest Service and Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. Spencer was featured in the documentary “DamNation.” (Patagonia, 2014).

About FishWatch

In 1992, poachers dynamited the Big Bend Pool on Steamboat Creek, killing many fish on the river's most important spawning tributary, and threatening the long-term viability of the river's wild fish stock. The North Umpqua Foundation led an effort to raise a reward to lead to the arrest and conviction of the perpetrators. The Foundation has also acquired high-tech monitoring equipment to help catch and successfully prosecute poachers.

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Lee Spencer and Sis at Big Bend Pool

“*A Temporary Refuge* is an incandescent work of natural history, an Oregon cultural treasure, and a sanctuary for aching hearts in a dark time.”

—David James Duncan,
author of *The River Why* and
My Story as Told by Water

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