

Whitefish
Unlimited
FRESHWATER BOHEMISM
FOREVER!



WHITEFISH ED, SPORTIN' SOME TRADEMARK NEON AT A FORK FUNDRAISER.

Whitefish Ed

Creating his own elbow room BY JOSHUA BERGAN

IT WAS IDAHO LEGEND, like the Everglades' skunk ape or Loch Ness' monster. Since the 1980s, reports of an apparent trout—*fishing* for trout—had filtered through staffers and patrons at places like Harriman State Park and the Nature Conservancy Preserve on Silver Creek. A witness once reported seeing a "...biped oncorhynchus mykiss with a pungent odor and rambling vocalizations..."

This Rocky Mountain boogeyman turned out to be a male human from Boise who merely likes his elbow room, and will go to great lengths to get it. Sometimes he wears sequins, face paint, and a hot-pink construction helmet. Other times, it's a metallic-silver fringed smock with matching headwear. Or often it's as simple as his Whitefish Unlimited baseball hat, a tie-dyed t-shirt, and his painted waders.

"It" is Ed Dunn, better known as Whitefish Ed.

"The first experiment was on the Henry's Fork," Dunn says, comfortably nestled in his Boise lair. "I scored a hot-pink soccer shirt for 50 cents from a thrift store. Thus the neon monster was born."

Dunn is the antithesis to the ubiquitous "bro," and stirs up a wide range of reactions. Some see a breath of fresh air, others see a distraction worthy of an eye-roll, at best.

"In the beginning, and for about 15 years thereafter, reactions were almost 100 percent negative," Dunn says. "Except for people who knew me the whole time. But I think even they questioned my mind."

Anne Marie Emery, Education Conservation Biologist for the Henry's Fork Foundation (HFF), has witnessed the spectacle for the past eight years. "I remember the first conversation I had with Ed left me in an analogy-laced, whirlwind," Emery said via email. "You can see him from miles away dressed in bright neon colors, tie-dye patterns, and tin foil. In a place of tradition like the Fork, Ed sticks out like a flashy, overdone indicator."

Dunn's initial *modus operandi* was to test the idea that bright colors scare

fish. Once he learned that they don't—while learning that they *do* scare anglers—his rationale changed. No more getting low-holed, crowded, or even seeing other anglers.

"Even before stepping in the water, let alone making a cast, I noticed that the hot-pink shirt scared the living snot out of fishermen," Dunn says. "I was avoided. And the more people who think I'm a dork, and that I scare off the river, the better. Ever since I started wearing this stuff, I have not had one tinkling match anywhere I've fished."

So, does this self-proclaimed "pragmatic recessive hippie" actually fish, or is he just looking to stir up the river? Says Emery: "I have yet to meet another angler who takes—not just fishing, but the biology of it—as seriously as Ed."

"I take my flyfishing seriously," Dunn says. "And I take my fun seriously. I have serious fun when doing serious fishing."

Sprinkle in his generous nature, and you've basically got flyfishing's answer to Wavy Gravy. Like the time he stepped in to help a group of HFF interns survey fish. In harsh summer sunlight with little shade, fish started dying in plain view of anglers. "Then Ed comes along and starts showing the crew the proper way to flush a fish through water to maximize oxygen delivery to their gills," Emery says. "We spent a while performing this technique on all the little fish, with Ed right there. It was at that point that I became aware of Ed's genuine care for the resource."

Or the time he combined the jobs of funking up his fishing fatigues while raising money for the HFF. "He grabbed a pair of waders and some puff paint and charged people 20 bucks to sign his waders—that he then wore out on the river. Funds were raised, a dissolved-oxygen meter purchased, and HFF field-capacity increased."

For better or worse, Dunn's influence is spreading. He's put *Fly Rod & Reel* editor Greg Thomas in yellow sequins on the Henry's Fork, and I've even placed a few red ones inconspicuously on my waders.

In atypical flyfishing fashion, Whitefish Ed's unique disposition can remind us all that it's only fishing. "He is boisterous, crass, and loud," says Emery, "but painstakingly human." 🐟