

My Kung-Fu Is Strong by Al Millan, Director

“I knew I shouldn’t have put butter on my pancakes!” was what I told myself as I slid out of the SUV and onto the freshly wet pavement of the hatchery parking lot. I started questioning how solid I felt that morning after I closed the truck door. I stood there looking at my reflection in the driver’s side window contemplating whether I should ignore the anxiety I felt in my gut and head straight for my waders and gear in the back of the vehicle or make my fishin buddy wait for me as I use that lovely cold and damp porta-potty that was calling my name across the lot. The sight of my friend’s ugly mug through passenger side window accompanied by him asking, “You alright?” interrupted my moment of contemplation. His question was quickly followed by laughter followed by him saying, “You put butter on your pancakes didn’t ya!” My anxiety soon turned to disgust in myself for giving my friend a reason to laugh at me. I looked over at him as he asked, “You need the roll?” I guess it was stupidity coupled with a few pounds of macho that led me to reply, “Nah, just a little excited to be here.” “Well let’s git’er done and show me some chrome then!” he replied as he pulled his waders over his chest. As soon as he said “chrome”, the anxiety quickly disappeared and getting geared up became a priority. A few minutes later, geared up was what we were and the butter was but a distant memory. My kung-fu was strong that day.

So there we were, my good steelheadin’ buddy Vic and I walking briskly down the slick muddy trail toward the river. It was early January with a light sprinkle that we were hoping would not add up to no more than a light rain. Visions of a moderate river flow, green water and fresh red salmon roe danced in my head as we made our way through the myriad of willow trees, berry bushes and poison oak. My buddy’s huffin and puffin turned into a question. “What’s your game plan?” Struggling to catch my breath, I replied, “Nail some chrome! I’m overdue!” “I know that ya dummy,” he said, “where we gonna start?” I managed to find another breath and answered, “That snaggy spot with the exposed roots.” “Man, you must like donating tackle to the river,” he replied, “I’m gonna hit the rocks just above.” “Sounds like a plan man!” I said.

As we neared the edge of the forest, it came to mind that the spot I wanted to try first might be occupied since there were quite few cars parked in the lot. I definitely didn’t want to fish second hand water especially since steelhead are spooked easily. If I didn’t have gear in both hands, my fingers would have been crossed. When we got near the water, conditions were primo. The river had a tint of green but was still dominated by the silty color the river is notorious for. Years of forest mismanagement and poor logging practices had taken its toll on the river’s headwaters. Even the slightest rain could muddy the river in a matter of a couple of hours. The flow wasn’t too fast but more importantly, it had visibility – enough clarity for the fish to see our presentations with enough time for them to react and bite. The sight of the river in the near distance made the pain in my 34 year old knees disappear. We suddenly found ourselves walking faster and gripping our gear even tighter. We were jacked up and my kung-fu was strong.

As I kept my eyes on the river rocks ahead and below so as to avoid tripping over a river rock and giving my friend another reason to laugh at me, I heard my friend say, "There's someone in your spot." I was hoping that Vic was pulling my leg as he normally does. Unfortunately, I looked up to see a lone angler standing exactly where I wanted to be. Disappointment soon set in. Vic tapped me on the shoulder with the tip of his folded rod and said, "Don't worry, I know that guy, your kung-fu is stronger." My friend's assurance was little consolation to the fact that I now had to fish second hand water. I started looking further downriver for another spot to try. As we drew closer, the lone angler reeled in his line, attached his hook to one of the rod guides, and started walking toward us. When we came within conversation distance, Vic asked the lone angler, "Any luck?" The lone angler replied, "I didn't get any bites in the riffle, but there's a nice chromer laying just under the sticks on the other bank." He added, "But he ain't biting today...he's got lockjaw....I'ma go hit the willow run and see if I have better luck up there." "Maybe next time huh," Vic replied as we parted ways, "good luck to ya!" Vic then turn to me and a whispered, "Kung-fu."

A few minutes and a thousand footstep later, I was river's edge at the spot where the lone angler had been fishing. Vic and I had parted ways a few minutes earlier since he wanted to fish a few hundred yards upriver from me. I could see the casting points from where the lone angler had been standing and casting from the impressions of size ten wading boots in the soaked sand. From the looks of it, he had chosen to make his presentations from three different points on the bank. I could understand his reasoning behind casting from these points as I saw the casting lanes which these points gave him. From these points, he was able to achieve good arcs and good sweeps but not good enough to get his presentation to where the fish actually lay. His choices were good but his kung-fu wasn't good enough.

A quick left to right scan of the riffle and opposite bank revealed that the river hadn't changed much since my last visit. The water had about a two foot visibility which, in conjunction with the overcast sky, dictated a moderately sized attractor in a bright color and a moderately sized piece of bait. There were several single salmon eggs on the sand where I was standing. These were remnants of the lone angler's bait which had fallen from the skein as he fastened the egg clusters to his hook. The eggs were natural colored telling me these were borax cured eggs. Since the lone angler complained about not getting any bites, this told me that whatever fish lay in the hole would want colored eggs. So out came the red salmon roe out of my backpack. As I was baiting my hook with some roe, I heard a quick sharp splash from the other side of the riffle. "C'mon roll one more time for me," I muttered. Sure enough, there he was just like the lone angler had said – laying just under the sticks away from harms way. I positioned myself three or four feet below one of the lone angler's previous casting points to give the fish a different presentation angle. I took a short breath and fired. My cast fell three feet upstream of where the fish lay. Every little tick and twitch my pencil lead transmitted up my line painted a picture in my mind as to how the bottom was. Halfway down the drift it happened: he bit. For a split second, my rig had stopped drifting. And after that split second, my rig continued its way down river.

Disgusted, I quickly reeled in as I knew what I had missed. Sure enough, all that was left on my hook was the piece of membrane which had once been attached to a dozen or so salmon eggs. I quickly re-baited and fired again, this time, landing about two feet upstream of my previous cast. "Do that again and you're mine," I muttered a couple of seconds into the drift. A few ticks later, my rig stopped and I set the hook. "There he is!" I said to myself as the fish tried with every last ounce of strength to get itself back under the sticks. For what seemed like an eternity, it was me and him. But fate and my kung-fu was on my side that day and soon enough, I had him on the bank. He was a native buck steelhead all of six pounds and ultra-chrome. I took a few seconds to take a quick snapshot of him and back he went with a thank you from yours truly for another memorable moment. I sat there on my knees on the bank for a few minutes trying to absorb the moment and the memory of what just happened. There was a grin which spanned from one ear to the other glued to my grill as the reality of the moment set in. I had just proven the lone angler wrong. Vic was right, my kung-fu was stronger.

With a deep breath I picked up my rod and returned to MY casting point. After checking my rig for nicks and knots, I re-baited and fired. From that moment on, I proceeded to have a field day. That day, the steelhead gods blessed me with three more steelhead from that same riffle. After I had landed the fourth and final fish from the riffle, Vic made his way down and joined me. "I told ya your kung-fu was stronger....I saw you land all them fish from where I was," he said as he appeared through the bushes. As I picked up my pole, speechless, with an ear to ear grin on my face he said, "Dang what you eat for breakfast?" "Pancakes with lots of kung-fu butter!" I said.