



# Falling In

(How I joined the North Umpqua winter swimming club)

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March 28, 2023

Wade fishing a river is one of my favorite things to do in life. I feel connected to the water and the fish that live in it when I wade. The hydraulic pressure pushing against my waders and body, and the force of the downstream current are constant reminders that I'm out of my comfort zone and 'playing an away game'. But, it has its downsides and dangers particularly if you're wading strong currents and or cold water. I want to share my experience falling in while fishing the North Umpqua in Feb. of 2023 with the hope you find it interesting and helpful.

## The Fall

I was floating in my pontoon raft, and pulled into an area called "leaning tree". I anchored up in some shallow water downstream from an island. My raft was about 1/3rd of the way across the river in some calm water that sits in the shadow of the island. That soft patch of water grants access to a deep cut where Steelhead like to hold.

I stepped out of my raft and started wading in knee deep water, casting into the deep cut taking 3 steps after each cast. I landed one nice chrome-bright trout; a beautiful specimen in the 16in range. Bringing that fish to hand and watching it swim off got me pretty excited.

2 more casts, 6 more steps and I hooked something larger, but I'll never know what it was. I was now wading in water that was about belt deep. I lost my footing, got swept into faster moving water, and fought a losing battle trying to return myself to an upright position. Eventually I surrendered to the fact that I was going swimming.

I rolled over on my back, kept my head up, and took great comfort in the fact that my NRS Chinook life jacket was buoyant enough to keep my 210lbs and all my gear afloat. The 42 degree water rushed underneath the outer layers of my clothing on my upper body, but was mostly kept at bay by my wader belt. I scanned the river downstream; I was fortunate. I was about 40ft from shore. A deep bucket, with mild current and no major obstacles separated me from the bank. I started backstroking for shore making a bearing of about 45 degrees to it with the currents effect on my progress.

There were a couple drift boats downstream from me, both equipped with outboards. I didn't want to cry for help; I was embarrassed. But, I realized that I would need their assistance to get warmed up. I had no way to get back to my raft where my dry-bag was. It had extra clothes, food and fire-starting material. I yelled 'little help here...' at the top of my lungs and was relieved to see that they heard me and were making their way upstream towards me.

They arrived as I reached shore. I can't say enough good things about these folks. They helped me up the bank, made a warming fire for me, and loaned me extra bits of clothing that they had with them. Without their help I would have been at serious risk of hypothermia. I warmed up by the fire and dried out my clothes. My rescuers retrieved my raft for me, and eventually I was able to finish the float to Page road, extract my raft and drive home.

## Things I Did Right

I had had my wader belt cinched tight. My lower body got damp, but my waders didn't fill with water.

I (eventually) remembered my training after losing control, got onto my back with my head up and formulated a plan for swimming to shore.