It was inevitable, I guess, that my son Tom would rebel against his dad. Don’t get me wrong: at 15 he still loves fishing, it’s just that he’d prefer to target things other than trout; things exotic and mysterious, things his dad knows nothing about. So when we decided to go to Canada, I knew he’d be on the lookout for some very un-Australian angling opportunities.

“How do giant spring salmon sound?” I suggested enthusiastically.

“Okay, I suppose. But come on Dad, admit it, they’re really just another sort of trout.”

Then a friend of ours, Danny Rimmer, who lives in Tasmania but was raised in British Columbia (BC), presented me with a bundle of BC fishing magazines; and it was here that Tom discovered the existence of the white sturgeon.

**Sturgeon and the mighty Fraser River**

If you know anything at all about sturgeon you’ll probably be aware of the Russian beluga (Huso huso), the world’s largest freshwater fish—famous for its caviar—which can attain 3000lb (about 1400 kilograms).

The Canadian white sturgeon (Acipenser transmontanus) is smaller, but still huge—the largest freshwater fish in North America in fact. It is one of several Acipenser species, and the only sturgeon present in Pacific drainages of the west coast.

There are two major white-sturgeon rivers. The Columbia is sourced in the Canadian Rockies but ends up flowing out of Canada, then south down the middle of Washington State before turning west, where it defines a substantial part of the Washington–Oregon border. The Fraser, on the other hand, lies entirely within British Columbia—this was the water for us.

The Fraser was named after Simon Fraser, ancestor of Malcolm, who in 1808 traced the river, which passed through Alexandria, central BC, all the way to the ocean. His hope had been that he was following the Columbia, for this would have enabled his North West Company to float furs collected on Canadian prairies to an established port. His disappointment was profound.

The Fraser, it turned out, is 1370 km long. It is also one of the muddiest rivers in the world, which has implications for fishing.
North America, a situation bought about because there are no lakes along its length that might slow the turbulent current and enable the settlement of fine sediments like glacial rock-flour.

The best fishing is found in the lower reaches between Langley (about 50 km from the port of Vancouver) and Agassiz (a further 80 km upstream). Here, historically, white sturgeon are said to have reached 20ft (6 m) and 1300lb (about 600 kilograms). These days a big fish (the equivalent of a ten-pound trout) is considered to be 8ft (2.4 m) or about 300lb (140 kilograms).

Cascade Fishing Adventures
Tom researched frantically, and then presented me with the case for hiring a fishing guide:
‘You really need to fish from a seaworthy boat to have any real chance of success. The best stretch of river is huge and treacherous: the water eddies and wells, boils and rolls, sucks and churns. Marc Laynes of Cascade Fishing Adventures is one of the founding sturgeon guides. He’s been operating on the Fraser for 17 years, has an appropriate boat, boat-handling skills and a knowledge of the river. Not only that, he operates out of Chilliwack, which is about 75 minutes east of Vancouver via Highway 1, bang smack in the middle of the prime stretch of sturgeon water. A typical guided outing involves eight hours on the water for a maximum of four anglers.’

I responded dubiously. ‘Is the fishing any good in September? And what are your chances of success?’
‘The best time for chasing sturgeon is from April through until November: we’ll be there at peak time. Marc reckons that a typical day will see five fish boated, but occasionally they catch 20 or more. He says that fish of around 100lb are reasonably common, that you can realistically hope to hook something approaching 200lb, and that over the years he has assisted in the capture of several fish in excess of 800 pounds. He’ll supply all the gear.’

‘Price?’
‘Comparable to a day of guided trout fishing in Tasmania.’
‘Price?’
‘Only $549 Canadian, or $699, depending on whether we have two or four anglers.’

I paused to think.

‘They have their own modern accommodation on site: Chilliwack Mountain Bed and Breakfast. Good rates. Can we do it? Please?’ Then, in desperation: ‘They also specialise in salmon. After I’ve caught a sturgeon we could spend the rest of the day fly fishing up a tributary like the Vedder.’

Big day out
As chance would have it, Danny and his eight-year-old daughter Katie were in BC the same time as us, so we invited them along. We arrived at the B&B the evening before the big day, and within minutes of meeting Marc and his wife, Maggie, they felt like old friends. Not only that, but Marc expressed confidence in his ability to get Tom and Katie a fish of a lifetime.

Studying the sturgeon photos and books that lined our cosy living room, we found ourselves overwhelmed with a peculiar blend of excitement, expectation and apprehension—the sort of emotion commonly displayed by three-year-olds on Christmas Eve.

Finally, after a restless night dreaming about what was to come, it was morning. Chilliwack by day was much more scenic than I had expected: not quite...
suburbia, not quite a country town. Our accommodation was high up in the hills amid a native broad-leaf forest, and the only houses to be seen were scattered on the far side of an inviting glimpse of the Fraser. There were wild mule deer on the lawns and, amongst the autumn leaves, a scurry of cheeky squirrels, blue jays, whiskey jacks and woodpeckers. This was indeed the Canada of our fantasies; the omens were good.

Although it was rainy and windy, Marc reassured us that his 21-foot jet boat had a canopied half-cabin, and that keeping warm and dry was not going to be a problem.

By 9.00 a.m. we were on the Fraser and Marc was using a landing net to scoop a rancid salmon carcass from the water surface. ‘Bait,’ he explained. He handled it with rubber garden gloves, pliers and scissors while we huddled in the bow holding our noses, trying not to retch, begging him to hurry up.

Five species of salmon utilise the Fraser, seven if you include rainbow trout and cutthroats. Some literature I’ve read suggests that sturgeon prefer to eat lampreys, but clearly they attain their massive bulk by taking advantage of the same resource that sustains everything else in these parts.

Typically a sturgeon will perform three or four vertical leaps, often jumping a metre or more clear of the water.

Live salmon were constantly jumping clear of the water. We were watching one skip, skip, skip across the water surface when, in a jolt of panic, it rocketed skywards—two metres into the air. We realised suddenly, but not as suddenly as the fish itself, that it had landed on top of a hungry harbour seal.

Dead salmon drifted down currents and washed up on riverbanks where they were scavenged by bald eagles and bears. Others settled on the riverbed where, we were informed, they were hoovered up by sturgeon.

Marc used stainless steel hooks that were a full 75 mm from the eye to bend. By law they had to be barbless. ‘They work just as well as barbed varieties and make removing hooks a simple joy rather than a complicated mess.’ The sinker weighed 14 oz and was tied to a short line, which in turn, was attached to a snap-clip a metre-and-a-half above the bait. The rest of the rig was similar to a tuna outfit: baitcaster reels fitted with 100lb line and sturdy fibreglass rods.

‘Then Katie hooked one of about 120lb, and needed a bit of help from her dad to land it.’

Marc anchored in an appropriate current, dropped three lines overboard, and straight away the rods began to dibble, dibble, dibble. ‘Nothing to get excited about yet: they’re just small pike minnows.’ Then, after an anxious 40 minutes, there was a long slow bend in one of the rods. Marc waited while the rod straightened, and bent twice more, then he told Tom how to set the hook.

‘Carefully lift the rod out of the holder, make sure the fish is still sucking at the bait, then, keeping the tip close to the water, sweep the rod forward, away from the fish towards the bow of the boat.’

The fish did nothing for a few seconds—it was just a dead weight that might easily have been taken for a snag—and then it raced away, screaming off line. Five minutes later we witnessed our first jump. The sturgeon rose vertically from the water: up, up, up it came until it was a metre clear of the surface. Then it fell sideways made a short run and leapt again. Finally it dove deep and we didn’t see it again for five minutes until it was right alongside the boat. Here, it seemed to go from full strength to exhaustion in an instant.

‘A small one,’ said Marc, wondering if we would be disappointed. As if! It was an impressive 4ft long and at least 35 pounds. But more than that, it was wonderfully prehistoric. ‘It’s like someone’s given me the chance to hug a stegosaurus,’ said Tom, unable to hide his delight.

‘He’s small enough to lift aboard, if you want.’ Tom wanted; we all wanted. So Marc unclipped the sinker—we don’t want that smacking someone in the face, do we?—then gently slid his hand past the fish’s thick sucking lips and gripped the inside of the toothless mouth. Next he got Tom to firmly grasp the tail, and together they hoisted the beast into the boat.

We studied the primitive fish for a full minute: the four barbels, the scutes (bony plates of modified scale) along the spine...
and lateral line, the strange shark-like skin, the feel of its cartilaginous body. It was very much the equal of being up close to a wild moose or bear. We were still staring in awe as Marc and Tom gently set it free.

There were no more agonising 40-minute waits after that. Tom took the next fish. It weighed just 15lb, but as Katie remarked, it was ever so cute. Then Katie hooked one of about 120lb, and needed a bit of help from her dad to land it. Tom got another of 80lb, then one nearly as big as Katie’s.

It became clear that some things about a sturgeon’s fight were quite predictable: the initial pause before running, the vertical leaps, the final battle on a relatively short line deep down right beside the boat, the rapid fading of energy at the end of the battle.

It seemed to me that there was no downtime at all between strikes, but perhaps that was just because there was such an air of expectation. Anyway, we were always being entertained by salmon and seals. Not only that, but every now and then a sturgeon would rise spectacularly of its own accord. How could we possibly have gotten bored?

In the afternoon the fish started to get bigger. One that Danny played for an exhausting half an hour left the water several times and was certainly 250lb or so. Although the fish eventually spat the hook, Danny was soon into another of equal size. When this one was finally bought alongside the boat, Marc asked us if we’d like him to manoeuvre the boat into shallow water so we could hop in and get a classic photo of the sort commonly seen in local fishing magazines—us standing in a row, waist deep, struggling to support the fish’s bulk. But everyone wanted to release the sturgeon as soon as possible, mainly so that we could keep on angling.

Marc then asked if we would like to spend the rest of the day fly fishing for salmon in the Vedder River. Tom and Katie looked at me venomously, before yelling in unison, “More sturgeon!”

To tell the truth, that’s what I wanted to do too; and in order to reward my generosity, Tom let me hook and play the next fish. It weighed just over 100lb and I was astonished by its primitive power: no wonder people were sweating from the brow while they played their fish, and stretching aching arms for hours afterwards.

“Just ten minutes before final wind-in,” Marc eventually announced.

Then, pandemonium!

Tom was solidly hooked into a monster.

How big? “Not quite as big as yours, Danny, but big!” Tom grunted. “Strap the bucket around my waist. Quick!”

After ten minutes the fish leapt out of the water. It was huge! A harbour seal, as impressed as we were, moved in beside us, and stayed there. The fish...
Canada’s Amazing Sturgeon

A fish finally breaks the water surface beside the boat.

Sturgeon have four barbels, a soft mouth with no teeth and from the tip of the nose to the front of the mouth, numerous small, round chemo-receptors.

Many individuals spend some time in the ocean before returning upstream to spawn, but many others stay in fresh water throughout their lives. Generally the further upstream you find them, the greater the chance that they are permanent residents. On the Fraser, by the time you get to Prince George, almost 800 km from the mouth, sturgeon are relatively scarce and the average size is just 4ft (1.2 m) or so.

In its Canadian headwaters, the Columbia River—and its major tributary, the Kootenay—have been closed to fishing because natural recruitment can no longer keep pace with natural mortality. In fact, if current trends continue the species will be extinct in these waters within a few decades. It is generally assumed that the crash in numbers can be attributed to the massive hydroelectric dams and associated water manipulation. It seems that sturgeon still spawn in these catchments, but the newly hatched quickly die off. This may simply be due to water fluctuations leaving juveniles stranded. However, since dams act as settling ponds and dramatically improve water clarity, there is also speculation that sturgeon fry and juveniles are now too easily found by natural predators.

Sturgeon are being reared in carefully designed breeding programmes, notably at the Kootenay Trout Hatchery where live fingerlings are on public display, but it is far too early to tell if the headwater fisheries can be resurrected. Accordingly, in 2003 Canada designated the white sturgeon as an endangered species, and it is currently being considered for listing under the Species at Risk Act.

Fishing is still permitted in the Fraser and some of its lower tributaries, albeit on strictly catch and release basis, because here the sturgeon population has stabilised at an impressive 60,000 fish in excess of 400 millimetres. Although this does not mirror historical highs—mining operations, pollution and overfishing once exacted a terrible toll—it is certainly sustainable. Yet sturgeon fishing would have been banned long ago were it not for the Fraser’s high profile as a recreational fishery. For this, we owe a debt of gratitude to guides like Marc Laynes who have actively promoted sturgeon fishing and strongly lobbied politicians and bureaucrats.

Marc says that he would like to think that the sturgeon fishery is safe, is being monitored by those who care, and will be managed so as to provide recreational fishing in perpetuity. Still, angling for sturgeon remains intensely political, so if you want to be absolutely sure of catching one, the sooner you organise a trip the better.

Marc Laynes of Cascade Fishing Adventures can be contacted by visiting www.bcsturgeon.com.