

Up in the Night

I don't consider myself a night person. Growing up the mantra in our house was, early to bed, early to rise, so it's kind of ironic that much of my fieldwork through the years has been after the sun has gone down. Reasons for the late nights vary depending on the type of work and specific circumstances. One example was tagging fish at night to avoid daytime heat stress to the animal. Another involved counting shrimp that only migrate at night. And of course owls, which is pretty obvious. Although it can be difficult finding the motivation to drag yourself out when everyone else is going to bed, once you're there, it's usually a good time. The nights are quiet, empty of people, and you see things you might not otherwise. One of my favorite experiences was performing nighttime snorkel surveys for a mining client on Hughes and Ditch Creeks, which are tributaries to the North Fork of the Salmon River in central Idaho.

Snorkel surveys are a good alternative to electroshocking as it reduces the possibility of injury to the fish. This is particularly a concern when dealing with threatened and endangered species such as bull trout, Chinook salmon, and steelhead, which is what these surveys covered. Snorkel surveys can be done during the day, but the probability of conducting a successful survey with rare species is much greater at night. With a shared desire to play in the water, three of us with different specialties found ourselves suiting up in late autumn for a nighttime adventure.

If not for the drysuits things would have been rough. The water was cold, around 40 degrees, and there was constant rain and snow. Because the streams were small, there was only room for one person to snorkel at a time. We thought the person in the water would get cold fast, and the three of us would trade off quickly, but that isn't what happened. Once in our suits nothing mattered, the rain and snow was irrelevant, and the water felt great. The streams were tiny, so small in fact that we didn't think we could survey. But we dragged ourselves along the rocky streambeds and poked our heads into any spot with enough water to submerge a mask. That's when a whole new world opened up. Fish were everywhere – in places I would have thought too small – and not only were they not easily spooked, they were attracted to our red lights. They bumped into the light and would even swim up and bump into our masks. In the end, everyone wanted to stay in the water.

I may not be what you would call a night person, but I have learned to enjoy the world after the sun goes down.