

# SCUDDLEBUTT



## Sculptor Jeff Taniguchi

“IT ALL STEMS FROM MY LOVE OF THESE FISH,” SAYS SCULPTOR JEFF Taniguchi, referring to his artwork. But he could be referring to almost any facet of his life. Taniguchi lives in Vernal, Utah, surrounded by some of the best flyfishing in the state, as well as neighboring Wyoming and Colorado. So he isn’t the only local who loves salmonids.

But few have channeled their fervor for flyfishing into such productive and artistic undertakings. Take his efforts in conservation, which started 15 years ago when he returned to flyfishing following a stint as a competitive bass fisherman. After getting involved as a volunteer with the state’s Division of Wildlife, he became a member of Utah’s Blue Ribbons Fisheries Advisory Council. Then he started High Desert Anglers, a Trout Unlimited chapter with more than 70 members focused on stream restoration and making sure native trout get a fair fight against oil exploration in the region.

Though he treats fishing and protecting local habitat as a full-time job, Taniguchi also manages to teach welding at Uintah Basin Applied Technology College, where he has earned four national Welding Instructor of the Year awards in the past 30 years. And though the heat, noise, and metal of welding might seem incongruous with the cool, quiet calm of a trout stream, Taniguchi has also brought his passion for fish to his workshop. After watching one of his mentors, renowned sculptor Gary Prazen, turn pieces of wire into pieces of art, Taniguchi started playing around with some scrap metal, trying to see if he could make something out of it.

Once he got the hang of it, he knew what his artwork would become. “I wondered what would happen if I put my love of flyfishing into some metal sculptures,” he says. “When I came up with my first one—a rainbow that came out pretty cool—it really inspired me.”

Since then he has graduated from single fish to sculpting complete underwater scenes with names like “Boss of the Pool,” “Citizens of Yellowstone,” and “Tail Race Nomads,” many of which feature multiple fish, plants, and riverbeds.

Preferring to use only steel in his sculptures, Taniguchi says his work is an “evolutionary process,” forcing him to occasionally use different materials and techniques to achieve the realistic feel that distinguishes his work.

For instance, a field trip to a crusher plant that makes steel ball bearings gave him the idea for his river-bottom gravel. He creates moss by blowing metal onto metal. And fire is the key to achieving dramatic color patterns without the use of paints or dyes.

“There are different torch settings to simulate the spots of a brookie, the brightness of a rainbow, or the darkened top of a brown,” he says. “That’s the neat thing—it all comes from the integrity of one material.”

While others credit Taniguchi’s skill and ingenuity for creating the look in the eyes of his sculptures or the realistic swish of a tail, the artist himself gives all the credit to his real-life models.

“Every sculpture that I make has a story behind it from an actual fish,” he says. “Clients love that I can take a clear photo and turn it into art. It really means something to the angler to have a piece of art that is the fish they caught and released.”

Just don’t bring him a picture of your golden retriever or even pet goldfish and ask him to recreate it in steel. “People have asked me why don’t I make a dolphin or a shark, but I can’t do it,” he says. “I don’t have the passion for those animals that I have for trout and salmon. And I work to my passion.” —*Stephen Camelio*