

Steelhead Primer

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October 2010

I've been asked by guys considering going on the Steelhead outing for the first time to put together a little primer. I'm no expert, and I encourage anybody who wants to add or disagree with any of this to do so. However, the following is what I've experienced and what has worked for me the past few years in weather, and what flies and gear, and tactics to use.

Weather:

Be prepared for anything. Erie weather the second week of November for the past four years has ranged from freezing rain and blowing snowstorms to sunny skies and eighty degree temperatures with a gazillion fruit flies buzzing around piles of spent grape skins. Who knows what the weather will be this year?

Gear:

6 to 8 weight rods 8 ½ to 10 feet long will work fine, a 9 or 10 ft 7 weight probably the most popular. It helps to have a fighting butt on the rod but not essential. I use a standard 7 ½ foot 2X or 3 X leader, make a loop connection and add 2 to 3 feet of tippet as needed. I use the heaviest tippet I can get away with and still hook fish. If water conditions are normal I use 2X or 3X tippet, if I'm not hooking fish and others around me are I lighten to 4X, even in the lowest clearest water I don't use anything lighter than 5X tippet and don't like that light of tippet because the fish break me off to easily.

Flies:

Every year it's something different. The first year we went, small peach egg patterns #16 & #18 were hot along with white sucker spawn tied with yarn, and crystal meth in Root beer, chartreuse, white, blue, & peach in sizes ranging from #18 to #10.

Last year water conditions were very low and the fish very skittish, a lot of the locals were using black Stone Fly nymphs in #16 and #14 with some purple tied in at the collar and no or very little weight. My best producer last year was a large Cream Egg with a bright red blood spot tied on a spey hook that Dick Friss gave me. I tied this thing on out of frustration after my other patterns were failing me. It looked like something that fell off a 1950's poodle skirt but it worked when nothing else did. I hooked and landed several big fish with it, so go figure? The point is almost anything might work.

A couple years ago Tim Bowyers and Steve Graves both caught fish on standard trout wet flies fished down and across, and a guy from another group was slamming fish with a wet fly at the mouth of Elk Creek while guys on both sides of him got nothing. Woolly Buggers in black, white, olive, and furnace are great flies to have in the box. Remember that dark colored beads and heads work better on sunny days. I use bright gold in

cloudy/muddy water or on dark days.

My best day ever was with a Hares Ear size #14 tied in medium brown that I drifted through pocket water while the creek was slowly rising becoming milky from a steady light rain. The fish were on the move, and I can't remember exactly how many fish I hooked and landed, maybe 8 or 9 in two hours. Again, the point is, who knows what might work, so don't leave your trout flies at home. I've learned to bring a lot of flies leaving the ones I don't think I will need at the hotel where I can reload my vest with different patterns if I need to during the outing.

Tactics:

Steelhead is a rainbow trout that in their native west coast habitat go to sea for 2 or three years before returning to their river of origin to spawn. Transplanted Steelhead in the Great Lakes migrate out into the lake instead and grow for 2 or 3 years before returning to their specific creek and spawn. Steelhead will begin to enter the creeks in September, the run peaking late October to mid November some not entering until March or April. Regardless of when the fish run up the creeks they all spawn in the spring. Some Steelhead will run up the creeks and back down into the lake several times between fall and spring, so fish can be on the move at anytime.

A Steelhead does not have to eat while in the creeks. They store up enough fat in the lake to last them through the spawn, but they will bite out of predatory instinct. One of the most fantastic sights and most productive times to be on the water is when fish are actively moving up. Seeing pod after pod of fish in the 22 to 30 inch range swimming by in ankle to knee deep water really quickens my pulse, and is a scenario Ken and I actively seek out. It's possible to sight fish for these guys in this situation and see the take. A good dead drift without drag will often do the trick.

If the fish are on the move and I'm in position to intercept them on their way up I don't wander around much even if all the fish in front of me have left. If they are moving more will come, and they do seem to follow the path of chutes, riffles and slots as those that came before them.

If nothing is moving then ya gotta find the fish. Fish will stack up in holes and in these conditions fishermen stack up with them, be prepared for lots of company. It's not a big deal, most people follow good etiquette, and there are surprisingly few tangle ups between anglers, however, there are always a jerk or ten out there.

The worst scenario is heavy rains and the creeks are blown out. If it's not too bad those wooly buggers will still take some fish, and, if we're lucky enough to get there a day or two after a good rain while the creeks are dropping and clearing things can really break loose.

These are large fish, 5 to 10 pounds, and maybe even a 15, so you would think they are very visible in low water conditions. But they can hug tight to those underwater rock

seams and virtually disappear. I watched a local take 3 good fish in 20 minutes out of a run last year I thought was devoid of fish and had just walked by it without even casting a fly. He was a nice guy, a local, and showed me how to spot'em. Look for heads, tails, or even subtle strips of lighter color along dark rock seams, sometimes a very slight movement will give the fish away. Once ya get the hang of it the fish just seem to pop out of the rock.

Fair hooked or snagged??

If you spend much time fishing Erie creeks you're gonna foul hook some fish, don't worry about it, it happens. If on the hookup you feel a deep throbbing or head shaking you're probably fair hooked. If the hookup feels more like an electric jolt and the fish takes off on a wild reel screaming run and you can't turn or stop him you're probably foul hooked.

I rarely fish a dropper because my snagged fish count goes up dramatically. The usual scenario for me is my smaller dropper, usually a #16 or #18 beadhead, imbeds itself in the base of the tail, dorsal fin, or in a fin ray and holds like magic tied to 3 X tippet. The fish is going nuts, I can't stop it or turn it and I can see my backing if he's not already into it. If it's a really big fish there is always the possibility of losing the fly line if they snag up the backing on something. My guide on a fishing trip to the Manistee in Michigan a couple years ago told me a snagged fish can even break or damage a fly rod, so if I can I try and break them off. Last year, trying to do just that, the fly popped out with a snap, the fly and split shot shooting back and hitting me in the lip and cheek drawing blood. My first thought was lucky it wasn't my eye. If you don't wear glasses ya might want to keep your sun glasses on or get some clear safety glasses.

That's about all I can think of at moment. If ya got a question trot it out and I'll attempt to answer it.