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Fly Fishing Techniques for Steelhead

By Cameron Larsen

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There are a few basic steelheading techniques that every steelhead fly fishing angler knows, or should know. Which one you use will depend on several things including water level, clarity, temperature and speed. Also one must take into account outside temperatures, time of year, and time of day. And finally which fly you are using, which also depends on all of the previously mentioned things and more. But we are here to simplify, to present a few basic techniques to give the fly angler a foundation on which to experiment.

The most popular steelhead fly rodding technique is the wet fly swing. This is used traditionally when steelhead are in fairly shallow water (less than seven feet) and water moving at about walking speed. To begin the technique, you cast upstream from where you are standing, you should be also be standing upstream from the designated target. Once you cast you need to mend your line immediately. And then do nothing else. The mending allows the fly to sink without hindrance. The fly then swings down in front of the desired target. When the swing is done allow the fly to dangle for a few seconds. And be alert, often this is when the strike occurs. Generally I give the same spot a few casts and then move a little and try it again.

Another technique is the dead drift. During this technique it is crucial that the fly drift without tension, and be allowed to drift freely. A strike indicator is mandatory, and a strike indicator that allows you to see whether or not your fly is floating without being impeded is the best. Some fly fisherman use macramé yarn, others use a corkie and a toothpick, both indicate whether the fly is floating as it should. Traditional indicators also work. The idea is to keep the fly directly below the indicator, than free floating has been achieved. Dead drifting is used primarily in pools or slower riffles. Dead drifting does not cover as much water as the wet swing, but when fishing in smaller streams, or a narrow concentration of where steelhead are lying it is a very precise and effective method. The indicator can be adjusted to vary the depth at which your fly is presented.

One last popular method is bottom bouncing. Bottom bouncing works well in faster water, when steelhead are lying on the bottom. It is, as the name describes, bouncing your presentation along the bottom. Cast your fly upstream and allow it to sink to the bottom. Generally a couple of split shots BB

sized placed twelve to eighteen inches above the fly, will get the fly down. But sometimes more weight is needed. Once the bottom is hit, lift the fly line out of the water by lifting your rod tip up, keep excess line in your free hand. As the fly moves downstream away from you gradually lower the line and let more fly line out.

All the above methods work with nymphs, streamers or egg patterns. More on fly selection will be presented in upcoming articles.

Cameron Larsen runs the online fly shop www.bigflyco.com

Steelhead Overview

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This article is intended to be a basic education in the great game fish the Steelhead. Entire volumes have been written on the subject, so this article will not go into much specific detail. Those of you wanting the hottest tip, will be better off calling your buddy, local guide or fly shop. However, if you are a beginner or thinking of beginning, or a seasoned veteran looking to catch perhaps a new idea or remember a lost one, we hope this series will be of value.

Steelhead are nothing more than sea run Rainbow Trout. They are born in fresh water streams (at least the wild steelies are) where they imprint everything from water chemistry to natural occurring food sources. The Steelhead life cycle is about as varied and complicated as fish can get. They can spend anywhere from 1 to 4 years in freshwater before going to sea and 1 to 4 years at sea. Steelies are native to the Pacific once occurring from the Asiatic coast to Southern Alaska and originally down to the Tijuana River. Now they are found as far south as Central California.

Steelhead have been successfully planted in the Great Lakes region, and fly fishing there can be incredible. Great Lakes steelhead live entirely in freshwater, and migrate up the tributaries to duplicate the spawning behavior of the Pacific Steelhead.

To further complicate the Steelhead life cycle is the time they return to spawn. There are generally two runs of steelhead. One enters the river in the summer and runs through fall, usually spawning in early to mid-winter. This is typically called the summer run. And then there is a winter run where the fish enter the river in early winter to early spring and spawning sometime in that time frame. The Great Lakes Steelhead generally enter the river in early fall, especially in Pennsylvania, and fishing can be done in fall, winter and spring.

Steelhead fly fishing is becoming more and more popular and with good reason. When conditions are ideal a 'chromer' will smash a fly and treat the fly angler to a treat that is hard to duplicate. When steelhead enter the river we are getting them at their biological prime. Loaded with survival instincts that include territorial and sexual aggression, they can rip into your fly and go off on a terror of a run, that will often leave the uninitiated limp lined and open mouthed. But the angler will be hooked. In upcoming articles we will delve more deeply into techniques of inducing strikes from this terrific

game fish.

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