

# Steelhead on the Fly, Part One

Article and photos by Bob Maulucci

I have a theory that I probably cannot prove, but in my heart I know that it is true: some anglers are trout fishermen and some anglers are steelheaders. I grew into fly-fishing by chasing big lake run browns, Chinook salmon, and steelhead, and so my heart has never strayed far from there. It is only the convenience of spring and summer fishing that keeps me a trout bum. My real passion lies with the silver-sided Great Lakes steelhead.

Yes, I know that many of my West Coast friends will cry foul that these are not the same sea-run fish that they chase summer and winter, but I think they are selling the Great Lakes' fishery a bit short. The quality of the Lake Erie and Ontario steelhead that I see each spring and fall is excellent. In the decade that I have chased these fish, the increase in out of state plates is a sure sign that the fishery's glorious secret is now out.

It is the dynamic of a crowded fishery and my desire to fish cane rods that create a special circumstance for me on stream. I may not be the most successful steelheader out this way, but I cherish every moment of it. Now, in coupling my rodmaking hobby with steelheading, I am enjoying the challenge even more than ever.

To me, they are three essential elements that are necessary for success: Preparation, good gear, and good technique. With the diverse challenges that these fish bring to the angler, you will need to possess these three elements if you want to make your season a success.



## Preparation

The first rule in steelheading success is to be where the fish are, and there is no way to wander down to the stream and expect to have a successful day. The die-hard steelheaders that I know all have a secret network by which they share information. When you are a 40-hour a week guy, you are not a diehard. These guys are out three or more times a week, sometimes on their way home to or from work to get a quick hour in. You need these guys to get your weekend and holiday jaunts in.

You cannot always rely on the Internet or the local United States Geological Survey (USGS) water station reports. For one, there are a great number of people who are publishing inaccurate information on the fishing. The shops claim the fish are in to drive up sales, and the diehards post that the streams are all blown to keep out of towners away. The only way to find out what is going on is to be part of the network. Only the person on stream that day will be able to accurately predict the next day's quarry.

# Volume 10

Because my favorite stream runs through mostly agricultural land, it is very prone to muddying up at the first bit of rain. While the USGS provides a wonderful service to fishermen in posting the daily flow, it is not always there when you need it. As we experienced in October, the site and phone hotline can be down, and you will again be stuck needing to talk to someone in the know. Just get used to it. Find someone on stream or in the fly shop that you can trust and get permission to call him or her before you get out. Give them some fancy spey flies you have tied up or spend some money in their shop to win their trust. Keep them informed of your outings when you get the chance to be the one on stream. It is a mutually beneficial system, although you are seemingly getting more out of it at times!

Preparation also directly related to the weather I alluded to. Fall weather can be a volatile time here in Western New York. Over the course of a given day, you have to be prepared to hike and then stand on stream casting for hours at a time. The weather can range from bitter mornings to sunny afternoons that give way to bitter evenings. Rain is a constant threat, and you need to be prepared to tough it out because it often brings good opportunity. Barometric changes often shut the fish off, but the hundreds of slight temperature, light, and water level changes that occur over the course of a day can have a positive affect on steelhead. I am not overly scientific, but I know that success in steelheading, no matter if it is the weather or the tackle, relies on a trigger. Subtle changes in weather (and tackle) can make a seemingly lousy wet day into a glorious one.

Gear wise, I always keep in mind that the weather can change at any minute. I would strongly consider a modular approach. I wear breathable waders and comfortable hiking style boots to stay comfortable over the long treks that it often takes to escape the crowds and get to the good lies. I prefer the Chota brand boots, as I find that their soles offer me the best balance of comfort and traction. I wear thick fleece socks to give added warmth to my feet and they give me enough protection to allow the breathable waders to be worn well into the winter. Make sure you try these on when you buy your boots. You may need to adjust your boot size to fit your waders and fleece socks. Cramped feet mean cold feet. Poly undergarments, a few fleece layers, and a good breathable rain jacket complete the picture. A waxed cotton baseball cap or fleece hat can be swapped between your vest and your head depending on what time of day it is. Every time I leave without both, I wish I hadn't left the other one behind.

A collapsible wading staff is sometimes an overlooked piece of equipment. It seems like a burden, but when you fish in the rain for a long period of time, you may find it a needed aid in overcoming rising waters on weary legs. After a long day of battling the elements, I do not seem to have the sense of balance that I possessed earlier on. Yes, I know staffs can be annoying hanging from your wader belt, but find a way to work it into your routine. Mine has a rubber tip which I find preferable to the spike tipped versions. A more expensive model would probably offer you both. By the way, that wader belt I just mentioned is standard issue as well. I

## **BAMBOO RODMAKERS DATABASE PROGRAM**

Keep track of all your

- ◆ tapers
- ◆ construction notes
- ◆ clients
- ◆ components
- ◆ and more....

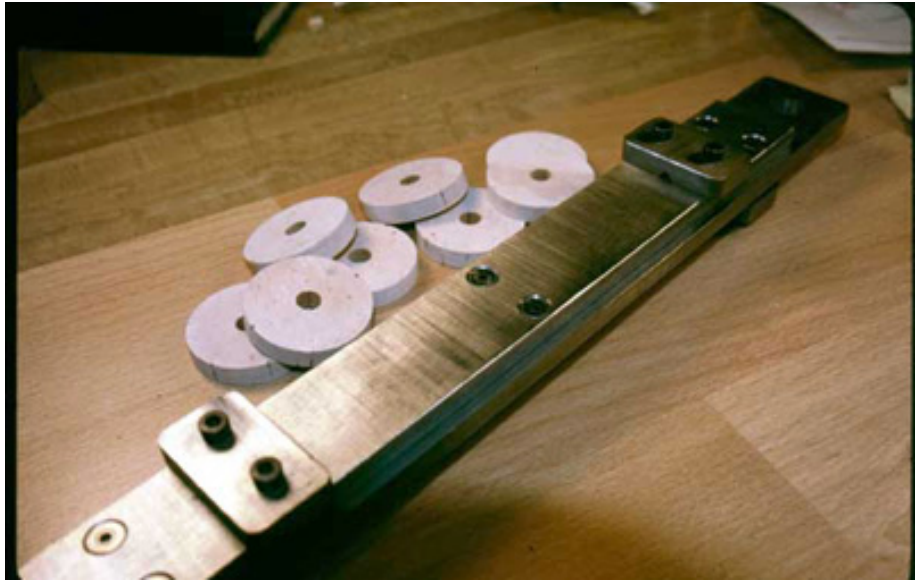
<http://www.direct-pest.com/brmdp/>

## Volume 10

am not trying to scare you, but when you excitedly chase a “hot” fish downstream, you will fall. If you take on water, you can make it all the more difficult on yourself. No fish is worth getting hurt over.

### Good Gear

Moving from preparation and the gear used to combat the stream and the weather, let’s talk about rods, reels, and lines. Since we are talking about using a cane rod to catch these fish, I think it is essential to point out that very few modern steelheaders would consider using such a rod. The light in hand feel and power of a modern graphite rod over 9’ is surely attractive to some anglers,



but I think they are missing several advantages that a properly designed cane rod can have. Their experiments with the big Heddon and South Bend production rods will never give them the satisfaction that a classic custom or modern cane rod can have, and so they continue on with graphite. My preference for cane is as practical as it is aesthetic.

In designing or buying a rod, I consider the rod’s length, line weight, action, and fittings. The shortcomings of longer cane rods revolve around their swing weight. A longer rod will have a very straining effect on the casting arm over the course of a day because the point of the cast’s delivery is so far away from the casting hand. The necessary cane it takes to keep a long rod from crumbling under the pressure of casting an 8 wt line can make the rod feel tip heavy and tiresome. The obvious remedy to this is to hollow build.

In my experiments, I have found that I prefer a 9’ rod, and I hollow build to lighten the tip and butt considerably. I lay my strips out and mark the rod off in thirds, as I maintain a wall thickness of .080 in the butts and I taper down to .075 and .065 in the tips. I leave three inches unscaloped at each ferrule and work right into the tip. I also leave three to four inches unscaloped at the grip where the end of the cork will lie. I am afraid that the constant pressure of casting could weaken the area around the cork if left hollow. Most of these ideas are the direct result of reading Bob Milward’s excellent book *Bamboo: Fact, Fiction, and Flyrods*.

The scalloping is done in my mini-mill with a small jig built for me by Bob Venneri to my specs. It allows me to use a milling cutter to maintain accurate dimensions on my strips. I make small passes back and forth and leave about a ¼” in between scallops. This just seems to me to be a better idea than cutting out long dams between solid points. Also, since I can never be sure of the best guide spacing, I feel safer using this technique and not worrying about where the exact guides line up when I rearrange them for optimal casting. Usually I use 11 guides on a 9’ rod, the stripper guide being 28” from the end of the butt section. It would look something like this, based on Frank Stetzer’s wonderful online guide spacing calculator (<http://www.uwm.edu/~stetzer/guideN.html>).

# Volume 10

Number of guides: 11

Indexed off guide 11 at 80 inches

Spacing increases by  $\frac{9}{16}$  inch each guide

## **Guide Distance from tip**

1	4 $\frac{7}{16}$ inches
2	9 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches
3	15 $\frac{1}{16}$ inches
4	21 $\frac{3}{16}$ inches
5	27 $\frac{15}{16}$ inches
6	35 $\frac{3}{16}$ inches
7	43 $\frac{1}{16}$ inches
8	51 $\frac{7}{16}$ inches
9	60 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches
10	69 $\frac{15}{16}$ inches
11	80 inches

I like rod designs that are moderate in their taper and medium fast in casting action. The progressive designs of the Garrison 225, Paul Young Para 17, or the Powell B9 tapers are a good starting point for a steelhead rod. They allow you to cast effortlessly all day without the tip actioned delivery of the faster dry fly designs. I think that when casting a sink tip or split shots, a thicker tipped rod is a better bet. I have been fishing a nice Leonard Duracane model, and the first thing I noticed is that the tip is a bit fine for my liking when using a sink tip. A parabolic or straighter taper rod has plenty of power and the stiffer tip allows you to mend and cast weight with authority. I have built a few Powell B9s, and I think they are a great starting point for steelheading. I used an .080 tip on the recommendation of Mr. Ed Hartzell from Portland OR, and he sure knows his stuff. For those of you who are unfamiliar with the Powell system, a B9 would be a straight taper, increasing by .009" every 6" in a planed strip. On 5" stations, it looks something like this.

0	0.080
5	0.095
10	0.110
15	0.125
20	0.140
25	0.155
30	0.170
35	0.185
40	0.200
45	0.215
50	0.230
55	0.245
60	0.260
65	0.275
70	0.290
75	0.305
80	0.320
85	0.335
90	0.350
95	0.365

## Volume 10

100	0.380
105	0.395
108	0.410

It casts an 8 wt. Line with ease, and it can rip a sink tip of the surface with no problem. It also allows me to use a moderate-speed casting stroke, and that helps me maintain my composure over the long day. I tend to lose touch with a fast, tip-action rod.

Another good rod for steelhead is Jim Wilcox's Wolverine Creek taper. It can be found in the January 2002 issue of *Power Fibers*. It is a great 8'6" rod for 9 wt.

As far as reels go, I definitely have a preference for large arbor reels. I just recently purchased a Lamson Velocity reel (3.5" size), and it is head and shoulders better than the regular arbor reels I have used in the past. These reels included a Billy Pate Salmon and an Orvis Battenkill. The large arbor reel allows you to pick up line faster off the water, and the larger diameter of the spool allows for a more advantageous drag. The starts and stops of a steelhead are less likely to foul your chances as the line is distributed over a larger area. It is vital that you have a smooth drag system, and a direct drive reel is preferable to the anti-reverse reels such as the Pate. I lost many a fish using that reel, and the anti-reverse is difficult to adjust on the fly. I like the large drag knob on the Lamson, as I find myself adjusting it during a struggle.

In a nutshell, you want a reel that provides good line storage capacity, the ability to palm the spool for extra drag when needed, a smooth drag, and a smooth start up when the fish begins a run. I hope that one day, a classic looking large arbor will be more readily available. Until then, I have no problem using a high tech looking reel.

### **Lines, leaders, and tippets**

There are three basic techniques that I use when approaching Fall and Spring run fish: dead drifting, wet fly swing, and the greased line technique. It is nearly impossible for me to talk about lines and leaders without doing it in the context of these three techniques. So, I will preface the techniques (next issue) I use with the following on lines and leaders.

My basic line is a long bellied weight forward line. I happen to use the



## Volume 10

Orvis Wonderline Salmon/Steelhead model, but there are several good line manufacturers out there that make a nice steelhead line. I think the long bellies give you good control at the various lengths you may need to fish in a given outing. I like to fish a shorter line, but these advanced technology coated lines let you really blast it out if you see a fish breaking the surface 50' away.

For leaders, I use two basic systems. The first is a large furled leader from Guillermo Magariños. To this, I attach two lengths (butt and tippet) of anywhere from 1/0-4X, using a rough 60-40 guideline. Since this furled leader turns over a fly so well, the lengths are not critical. I have been able to easily turn over a combined 14' leader using the furled leader butt and 9' of attached fluorocarbon. The other system is to use Airflo leaders. I generally use the 7' Fast or Extra Super Fast leaders with a straight 2-6' piece of fluorocarbon for a tippet.

For the tippet, I have given up using the extra expensive small spools of fluorocarbon, and I have taken to using large spools of fluorocarbon sold in sporting goods stores for spin casting. I have been using the Berkely Vanish brand fluorocarbon in the 250yard spools. They fit easily in the vest, and they are about \$10 for a big spool as opposed to \$10 for a 25yard spool of Umpqua brand (or the equivalent) leader material. I have been using a Trilene knot as recommended by the manufacturer for attaching the tippet to fly. So far, I have found it to be a good strong knot. When you are fishing for steelhead, you will lose a lot of flies to the bottom. By using the cheaper fluorocarbon, I can get the abrasion resistant and low vis benefits at a tenth of the cost. I never hesitate to just tie on a new tippet and start over. If I was paying the small spool price I might think twice.



Next time, **The Techniques and Flies...**