

# Steelhead on the Fly, Part Two

Article and photos by Bob Maulucci

Last issue, we looked at the preparation, rods and building techniques that can bring success when fishing for the lovely silver-sided steelhead trout. This time, I would like to focus a little on the techniques and flies that work well for me on the stream.

When fishing for steelhead, it is important to get the fly to the fish at the proper depth. Depending on the time of year, this could be in any of three major zones: right on the bottom, active in the middle of the water column, and although rarely seen, rolling about the surface. It is important to have a versatile system that can adapt to the movement of fish quickly throughout the day.

## Swinging Flies to Fall and Spring Fish

Fall and late spring fish in the Great Lakes tributaries tend to be the most active, and I find them throughout the water column, but usually nearer to the bottom. The warmer water temperatures tend to excite the fish, and they can travel several miles upstream in a typical day. Because of this, I try to cover a lot of water in my hiking and also in my casting routine. When the fish are so active, I enjoy using either a long 10-14' leader and split shot, or a short sink tip (Airflo Fast 7') and about 4' of straight fluorocarbon. Both are attached to my long-bellied fly line via a braided loop to loop connection, usually the bigger Orvis braided leader connectors. Be sure to get the larger line weight connectors.



I typically fish pools and walk by the faster water that connects them. This gives me a better chance of spotting fish and presenting casts that cover the entire pool. Under most circumstances, I will begin at the head of the pool and make several casts that cover the pool systematically, anticipating that fish will be moving through the pool throughout the day.

I present a typical wet fly swing approach to these fish. With 5-10' of extra line in hand, I cast directly across the pool or slightly at an angle downstream. I mend my line once upstream shortly afterwards, adding a little line in the process, and this allows the fly to sink farther down before the long belly of the line drags on it and causes it to rise in the water column. When the belly of the line starts to catch up to the tip, I move my rod downstream slowly with the swing of the line and allow the line to be grabbed by the current and swing sharply towards the bank. When the cast comes to an end, I twitch the line several times before lifting it back up and making my next cast. I am constantly surprised at how many fish either follow the fly at the very end of the swing or come upstream to strike the fly as it hangs downstream in the current. Do not be too quick to cast again, as you will miss fish.

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When I cast again, I release the remainder of the line in my hand and thereby lengthen my cast somewhere around 5-10,' covering nearly the same water, but reaching slightly farther out and downstream from cast one. When this is done, I take two steps downstream and I start over again. This way I can effectively cover the pool, and by maximizing the amount of time my line is in the water, I have more success.

In a silly way, it reminds me of my father showing me how to cut the grass as a young child. He instructed me to always overlap my passes to insure that I didn't miss any spots. He may not be a fisherman, but his thorough ways have stuck with me!

Okay, so you wonder when is the fish going to strike and how will I know if he or she does? First, I can honestly say that I have picked up fish throughout the swing, but Most of the success comes as the fly is midway through its swing to the bank. Rarely do I pick up fish at the very beginning of the cast. It is quite possible that they are there, but the slack in the line does not offer me the chance to feel the strike and so they go undetected. Fall and late spring fish are very aggressive. They will try to strike the fly with a detectable bump or series of bumps as they nudge the fly. Most of the time, a simple lifting of the line will set the hook on them. When you feel weight, that is when you want to strike once moderately and set up for the fight. Another effective technique that I have used and seen in action is to hold a loop of line in your reel hand. If you drop the line upon feeling the strike, you can often hook the fish as he returns to his lie. Be careful especially when the fly is directly down stream of you, as this is a sure way to rip the fly out of the fish's mouth and leave yourself cursing and kicking midstream.



### Dead Drifting to Winter Fish

For winter steelhead, it is essential to change your tactics to meet the behavior patterns of winter fish. These fish are less likely to chase a fly and therefore, an ability to spot fish and present a dead drifted fly is often your best chance of hooking up. By using a loop to loop connection, I can easily switch from my swinging set up to a longer leader, strike detector, and split shot. In colder weather, drifting nymph patterns, glow bugs/ carpet flies, and Wooley Buggers seems to be the right ticket. Use a high stick technique and get the fly down to the bottom with a few light mends upstream.

I use two BB size split shots approximately 10-12" above the fly. A good rule of thumb is to try two split shots and adjust from there. If you

cannot feel the bottom, you are fishing too high in the water column and need to add weight. If you are constantly getting hung up on the bottom, you are fishing too much weight. If you find a happy medium, you will find those winter fish that hang out just off the bottom.

I use a medium to large orange egg shaped indicator held in place on the line with a tooth pick wedged into the holes on each end. This gives me a good visual clue as to the speed of my drift and when the fish takes the fly. I fish this line almost identically to the way that I fish nymphs for inland trout. When I see a

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deviancy in speed or direction, I gently lift the rod. This allows me to set up on a fish that is indeed testing my fly, and it gives me a chance to continue the drift if nothing is indeed there.

Winter fishing can be tough and often the weather is not very pleasant. I find myself heading back to the rod shop more often than not. Lately, I find myself less likely to be sticking it out to try for stubborn fish in bad weather. However, dead drifting flies can pay off heavily if you are persistent.

## **Greased Line and Dry Fly Fishing to Surfacing Fish**

I thought I would throw this in, but I must start by saying that less than 1 or 2% of the Great lakes fish I hook (notice I did not say land!) are taken on the surface. In the fall especially, fish will be seen “porpoising” on the surface, and anglers quickly try to change over to a dry to take these maverick fish. More often than not, by the time I change over, the fish has returned to a lower spot in the water column and my efforts are in vain. Before trying for these fish, remember that you have a better chance of catching fish when your line is in the water. If something is making a fish active on the surface, that same thing may very well be causing some movement in even more fish below.



There are two methods I have used to entice these fish: a traditional upstream presentation and a greased line or skating technique. If I see a fish upstream of my position, I will try to cast beyond the fish and dead drift on the surface, trying to drift right over the fish’s nose, just as if it were a brown trout during the Hendrickson hatch. This is not a very effective method because it does not rely too much on the fish’s natural tendency to strike out at the fly. I am not as much a believer in the fish “returning to their smolt instincts” and taking flies like trout do. My guess is that steelhead strike things that they are sick of seeing in their faces. I could be wrong, but I have noticed with all these subsurface and surface techniques that if I present a fly over and over, I can get a fish to strike out of what I see as its annoyance.

A better technique on the surface is to swing a fly on the surface and create a small wake. This “greased liner” technique creates enough disturbance that a fish may just get interested enough to come take a look. Fish the fly on the surface in a very similar fashion to how you fish a sink tip below the surface. Do not mend aggressively and cause the fly to sink. Lead the fly with you rods tip so that you are in the surface film or riding on the surface. A large caddis pattern or deer hair bomber will work great, and steelhead will come up and investigate once in a while. The nicest thing about this style of casting and fishing is how the nice even pace of cane allows you to lead and suspend the fly as it travels down and across to the bank. It is a very rewarding feeling when you do it right.

But, I must repeat, it is not as effective as sticking to the two subsurface techniques. It depends on whether you like casting or fighting fish, and of course, it is pretty neat to say you got one “on the dry!” (By the way, for me, anything within 3" of the surface is close enough! That’s “dry” enough in my book.)

For all these techniques, highly recommend picking up a copy of any of Trey Comb’s or John Shewey’s texts on steelheading; Comb’s *Steelhead Fly Fishing* is a must have.

## **Fighting Fish**

Fish fighting is something that is easier learned through experience than through reading about it. I find myself getting “in the zone” as I play a fish, and I find myself subconsciously going through the following routines without much thought. They seem to work, and it is especially nice to have an idea of what to do before you are chasing a fish through a rocky patch of shoreline.

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- Always keep your drag at a moderate setting, minimizing your chances of being spooled by a hot fish and also not allowing the fish to quickly break off under a heavy drag. A cane rod provides a nice shock absorber for fighting fish, but it will not overcome bad fish fighting technique. Be sensible with your drag.
  - Keep your rod from going straight up in the air, this is not bass fishing! High sticking a running steelhead is a recipe for disaster! Slack is your enemy, and high rod position will not give you're the leverage to manipulate the fish.
  - Try to get your fish to shore or within range of your hand quickly. Let a fish run, but do not pussy-foot around. A fish that runs several times is going to be in danger. Fight the fish aggressively and you may just be saving its life. A steelhead will fight itself into a frenzy if you let it, and the lactic acid build up can cause extreme damage or even death to the fish. I would rather break off a fish than kill it inadvertently. I have seen guys using very light tackle to fight hot fish. It is not a practice that sits well with me.
  - If the steelhead jumps, lower the rod a reasonable amount and try to pick up the slack before he begins another run.
  - Reel with whichever hand you can, but I prefer to have the rod in my dominant hand. I think that in landing fish, being able to move the fish where you want him (around rock or away from logs) is much more useful than being able to reel in line like a demon.
  - You can strip line more quickly than you can reel. Case in point, what are you going to do if a steelhead decides to run directly back at you? Strip, strip, strip that line! You and I cannot reel quickly enough to fend off a fish like that, and believe me...it happens to the best of us, and we lose the fish. I remember one of the best times I ever had on a local stream. I hooked a large female on a skated October caddis that ran several times, making three wonderful jumps! I could not believe that I had hooked a fish on the surface, and I definitely was not ready for the marvelous acrobatic display she presented. After much hooting and hollering, the lovely lady decided to run straight at me. I reeled and reeled, and was finally left in a bird's nest of line as she rocketed right through my legs, spitting the fly after being given enough slack by my inept reeling. It was a great moment...for her.
- Experience is the best teacher, but the above techniques could help save your day.

## Fly Selection

I will start off by saying that I have seen many days on stream when the patterns that are supposed to work have paid off in aces. I have also seen many days when the usuals get no attention whatsoever. I try to keep my presentation consistent, and I keep my boxes full of flies that are easy to tie and represent a decent range of colors and sizes. If you are not losing flies, you will not catch fish. There is no sense in getting too fancy with the patterns, and most of my flies are rather standard streamers.

When the water is very clear, I fish a smaller more natural colored fly, and when it is green to muddy, I fish a larger more colorful pattern that stands out. When the sky is bright, I go dark with the flies, and when it is dark, I go bright. However, I think it is important that all the flies you tie have some subtle flash or trigger that can turn the fish on. I am still amazed at all the colors of Crystal Flash that are available.



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**Top picks-** I have seen few flies as consistently effective for steelhead as simple Wooley Buggers and Muddler Minnows. I carry Wooley Buggers tied with cone heads in black, purple, olive, chartreuse and white, sizes 4 and 8, sometimes 6's. Muddler Minnows are carried in the same sizes with the colors black, olive, and natural. Most of the time, I will start the day with either a black Wooley Bugger or an olive Muddler. These are the flies that consistently produce for me, and I fish them with confidence. The minute I change up and feel so-so about a fly is when I go to one of these two. If you do not have confidence in your fly, you have nothing to gain.

**Other producers-** I also have good results with Green Butt Skunks, Undertakers, General Practitioners in black, purple, and orange, and Spey flies, mostly black and purple with sparse rainbow chenille or Estaz bodies. Most flies are tied on the same 4, 6, 8 sizes with the odd #2 thrown in for really dirty water. Carpet flies are generally the best winter patterns, with the occasional stonefly nymph or Bitch Creek thrown in for good measure. Polar Shrimp and Mickey Finns make good selections when fish have already seen it all. Some locations like the Lower Niagara can be fished with Black Nose Dace or any simple two toned streamer with good results. Keep a pair of scissors handy in case an overly long tail results in the fish striking short. Trim back a quarter inch and watch out! This happens regularly.

I hope that these two articles will help you to have a more successful outing the next time you get to a steelhead stream. I know that there are many other fly anglers who know more about steelheading, but none love it more than I do. Tight lines.