

STEELHEAD

Are they really the fish of 1000 casts?

Text: Hannah Belford

Wild Steelhead (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) are an anadromous (sea going) Rainbow Trout (also referred to as *Oncorhynchus mykiss*), but also now been classified by biologists to be more genetically related to the Pacific Salmon (*Oncorhynchus*), with one large exception – Steelhead can be repeat spawners.

Steelhead can be found from California, through Oregon, Washington, British Columbia, up to the Alaskan panhandle, and in South America and in Asia. Their lifespan can be up to 9 years, with smolts spending between 1-3+ years in freshwater. Their length of stay in the rivers prior to migration to the ocean depends on how healthy the ecosystem is, the water temperature, and the amount of food source. Spawning always takes place in the spring, regardless if the run is a winter/spring or a summer/fall run.

Steelhead will spend 1-3+ years at sea before they return to spawn. After spawning, many will return to the ocean, generally for a shorter time than their initial period, and return to spawn a second time, and in some cases a third time. Post spawn, a Steelhead is referred to as a Kelt. When mother nature sees a decline in the run that year, she will add into the system 'jacks', which are sexually immature males (generally) or females to ensure that the run survives. These are fish that have not spent as much time at sea, thus they are smaller, and depending on size and region, can fall under Rainbow regulations instead of Steelhead regulations.

Depending on the watershed or region, mating practices can vary, with Steelhead instead mating with Rainbow Trout. This is based generally on the strength of the genes of the fish. Smaller fish generally stay Rainbows, and larger and stronger fish desire to go to the ocean and become Steelhead.

Steelhead runs

Winter and spring Steelhead are fish that enter river systems that are closer to the salt water/ocean, as they do not stay in the system for long. They run into waters that are both large, and in some cases, enter streams so small, or in some

cases, dry, that they must wait for enough rainfall or snowmelt until the creek bump up enough to become a small river. Their main goal is to get in, find a mate and drop their eggs. Winter/spring fish generally site in more aerated water, preferring the riffles at the heads of runs, and the tail-out.

Autumn fish are generally fish that must travel farther to their designated homeland, and the initial run starts to enter rivers in August, with the main run of fish ending towards the end of October/early November, although they will keep trickling in during November. By December, most, if not all, of the fish will be into the river system, where they will overwinter and spawn in the spring time. If the river has an accessible lake, the fish will spend the winter in the lake. Many will drop back and spawn in the mainstem, but most will spawn in the slow waters immediately below the lake. Since summer/fall fish are not in a hurry to spawn, they can be found in all parts of a run/pool, and as the season progresses, they tend to stack up in the waters of least resistance.

Some watersheds will get both a winter/spring run of fish as well as a summer/fall fish run. I have caught spawning summer run fish while I was fishing for fresh winter fish. Lastly, Steelhead roam and are opportunistic. On an ongoing basis, they are increasingly found in new rivers and creeks.

Casting

Steelhead are referred to as the fish of 1000 casts, but as one of my friends and fellow guide outfitters says, "the fish of 1000 GOOD casts." I find that both amusing, and often true, but it doesn't have to be that way. As a guide, I witness almost every guest overthink the sport. I did in the beginning too. Everyone did.

When I first started Steelhead fishing (1979), single hand rods were all that our family knew, and although frustrating, losing many flies and casting into trees were just the norm. Through the years I somehow managed to figure out the double spey cast, without having seen it prior, and over time I started to guide people that had spey rods.

Oregon Steelhead guide
Kate Taylor fishing on the
upper Nass river, in Northern
British Columbia.

Photos: Tim Romano



Kate Taylor and Jeremy Roberts taking
a quick heli ride to Steelhead shangri la.

Although I was very curious and marveled at the ability to cast with what seemed effortless ability, I didn't venture into using a double hand rod until I was roughly 30. It took me a while to understand the concept, but now I could not imagine swinging for anadromous fish any other way. Even when I use my single hand rods, I implement spey casts into the sport.

I love to cast, and consider myself now a caster more than an angler. But, I can get impatient with fishing if my casting isn't working out. And, the more impatient I get, the worse my casting becomes, resulting in giving myself a time out to the situation. Hero casting befalls us all, more than once in our fishing adventures. I am still guilty of it when fishing larger rivers.

Now, that said - every cast should be fished, because if it wasn't for bad casts, I would only catch 1/2 of the fish I do. It is much more conducive to have good line management than casting ability. In my opinion, line management is the single most underrated skill of any angler. Keeping your fly line taut and having control of the speed of the swing, as well as knowing where your fly is during the swing will greatly increase chances of knowing when a fish has taken the fly. A bad cast can be corrected into a good swing with a few simple line management skills, whether fishing single or double hand rods.

In the very beginning, I casted inadequately and broke my first spey rod rather quickly. After waiting impatiently for 5 months to receive it back, I learned that the slower I casted, not only did it allow me more time to set up for my cast, it took less effort. However; I had an improper setup, and it wasn't until years later that I learned that. I also figured out that my preferred action was medium to slow, and that forever changed my casting style and stroke, which enabled me to become an efficient and precise (usually) caster.

Randy had fished a few days with little action, and on his last day of the week, was rewarded with this lengthy buck. A fitting parting gift...



Photo: Nelson Karger

In giving up my fear of breaking my rod(s), I became able to know how to torque the rod properly (simply a proper line/weight grain match), allowing me to cast farther, with more accuracy. I really believe in letting the rod load fully, by taking the time to set up each cast properly. I would prefer to set up a second, or in some cases, a third time, rather than landing a misplaced cast resulting in poor line management and an uncontrolled swing.

Each spey cast has a certain nuance, and every angler has their own style that they will work into. It takes some time before muscle memory is second nature, and even though there is a 'proper' way to execute all the spey casts, each, and every time that line lands on the water, there is always the chance of hooking a fish. You just must believe...

“

There can be quite a difference in how Steelhead take in larger rivers vs. smaller rivers.

Fishing

When I Steelhead fish, I watch the line instead of waiting to feel the take, as it can only be one of two things that stops a swing...a fish, or a snag. I always fish a loop. Not to 'drop the loop', but instead to have some slack line to be able to completely make the line taut or slack when needed. Taut when a fish takes (a quick strip in of roughly 2-4" line), slack (drop the loop and strip off line) if it is a snagged fly. As a rule, you must feel the weight

of the fish solidly before you react in any way, preferably by simply lifting the rod, not setting the hook. More often than not, they will hookset themselves.

The hang down and retrieve are very important to exercise, and careful consideration should be paid to integrate this part of the swing into each cast. Steelhead will follow a fly during a whole swing, and be twitching with excitement waiting for the fly to move again after a hang down. Picking up the line too quickly, or making the first few initial strips too long (more than 6") can either spook the fish, or simply take the fly out of the zone. The first few strips should be just a couple of inches each, then after roughly three or four strips, you can move on to a few six-inch strips, then onto 2+ strips, confident that you fished that cast correctly.



Every angler has a few favorite pieces of water which beacon to them. 'Fishbowl' is one of those magical runs that I have the utmost faith in. I will hike many miles to be able to swing a few casts.

Photo: Tim Romano



My favorite fishing partner... Sage, and I, on the upper Skeena River, in Northern British Columbia.

Photo: Juergen Puetter

There can be quite a difference in how Steelhead take in larger rivers vs. smaller rivers. In larger rivers I have noticed that the take is generally definite, and you are aware it's a fish hitting your fly, but in smaller rivers (especially those that are very clear) the take can vary from aggressive to a simple pluck where you do not feel the fish, sometimes only noticing a slight decrease in the speed of the swing for a nanosecond.

Steelhead can and will follow a fly across the whole swing, eating the fly multiple times. I have sight fished and witnessed this hundreds of times in my guiding career. They have an innate way of eating a fly, while flaring their gills and taking in water, that allows them to close their mouth on the fly without the angler feeling or seeing any evidence of the fish taking the fly. While standing in a tree one

time, I watched a buck eat a fly 8 times, the final time being while the fly was on the hang down and the fish had a make a choice whether to take it or not due to the fly now being in only 12" of water. That time it took harder, and the angler felt it. However; the angler just thought it was just a rock, but it certainly was not.

In smaller rivers, the fish can and usually become quite trouty, and as they get further up the river, closer to the headwaters of the stream they become increasingly relaxed and will start to slow their journey down. This depends however, on whether the river is lake-headed or not, and if the fish belongs to a winter/spring or summer/fall run of Steelhead.

In my experience, often, the large old bucks will take somewhat tentatively, meaning you will just know that they are there by the

dead weight. The younger, more inexperienced fish are usually quicker to take the fly, and more aggressive. The 10-14 lb. fish are generally the fish that are more aerial and acrobatic, the ones that make the most blistering runs and the ones that push gear to the limit due to the ferociousness of the take. The large bucks can certainly achieve and provide all and more that is mentioned above, but, often, they tend to hunker down and sulk.

Rods, reels & lines

When fishing for Steelhead, the weight of the rod will depend on the geographical location and river one is fishing. Every watershed is different, and rod size and weight, reel size, backing strength and length, line weight, and leader poundage needs to be adjusted.

As a general rule, either a #6, #7 or #8 single or double hand rod is used, accompanied by a reel that holds about 100+ yards of backing. I prefer 30# backing, as I have had 20# break off on a large fish that I wasn't prepared for. Not only did I lose my whole setup, what bothered me the most was that a fish possibly died by wrapping around inanimate objects in the river.

I prefer using a click and pawl reel, simply because I have had the experience of and have seen more than a few drag systems fail during the fight, and I find that when a fish initially takes, the fact that the reel does not have drag, helps to impede improper hooksets since the fish does not feel much initial resistance when taking a fly. More often than not I can land a fish faster and kinder with my Bouglé than with my reels that have drags.

I use a braided running line and a head (depending on length of rod) anywhere from 23'-40'+. In my opinion, a compact head system allows the angler the most ability to really dial in the rod/line weight combo, which in my opinion is the most important part of an angler's success. Nothing is more frustrating than a mismatched line and rod. It can make a day on the water not only confusing, but also painful.

I generally fish 3-#8 rods, a 11'9" with a dry setup, and 12'6" with an intermediate setup, and 13'3" with a heavier weighted setup and a #9-14'0" rod when I am fishing very large water. I often use a Scandi style of head when using my dry setup, and for the rest I use the according weight needed for that particular rod. Generally, I use a 450-grain head for the 11'9" rod, a 510-grain for the

12'6", a 540-grain for the 13'3", and for the 14'0" #9, it casts best when it has upwards of a 650+grain head on it. As a general rule, Scandi heads are meant to mix with sinking leaders, and Skagit style heads are meant to be used with sinking tips. It does not mean that you cannot mix both with decent results, but ideally, casts will work best by sticking to that theory.

I prefer to use sections of T11, and find the MOW system very helpful for adjusting the depth that I am fishing, especially when in smaller rivers. On the larger rod I use roughly 12-14' of T11, due to the fact that I only use that rod in big water. One thing that I found very helpful was when I was told to use a length of sink tip that is no longer than the rod. At the time I was trying to cast a 14' intermediate head on a 11'9" rod, and it just was not working well.

Once I adhered to that principle, life became much easier for me on the water.

Flies

One of the wisest guiding facts that my father ever said to me was “go through a pool with a dry fly, then again with an intermediate setup and sparse fly, then again with a large fly and heavier setup - then you can call the pool fished properly.’ I adhere to that rule on a regular basis.

As a ‘general’ rule, conehead tube flies are my go to flies for fishing a wet setup, and tube dry flies are my other favorite. In low, clear water I love to use sparse traditional flies, and have sight fished guests into large fish with traditional flies as small as a #8. Atlantic salmon flies produce great results, and reiterate my theory that it is less so about the fly choice, with the emphasis instead being proper presentation.

I prefer conehead tubes over unweighted tubes, as they turn over the leader better, as I don’t use a tapered leader, preferring to use 5’ of 12lb. of clear Maxima. I personally believe certain colors work better than others, however; over years of guiding I also realize that every watershed has its own niche when it comes to sizes and colors of flies. My personal favorite for a tube fly is white with Flashabou or Crystal Flash, and combinations of peach, pink or black mixed in with white. Perhaps they work so well for me simply because I have faith in them.

Overview

Fishing should be fun, not penance. Often, we anglers forget that, and start judging our self-worth on our casting skills and hooking to landing ratio. That is a slippery slope, and when fishing

for anadromous fish, we all know that there is a certain level of psychology that comes into the sport, and keeping our expectations in check is the only way to succeed successfully and peacefully while being a Steelhead angler or guide.

I have been blessed to have fished for Pacific Steelhead in multiple areas of California, Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia, as well as in Argentina for the Atlantic run of Steelhead on the Rio Santa Cruz. The steelhead of the Rio Santa Cruz are rainbow that were planted in the early 1900’s, that learned instinctively to go to

the ocean. I found those fish the exact same in, take, fight and where they lie (albeit the river was huge). The only difference visually is that their eye always remains focused straight on, not downturned in any way, giving them a slightly disturbing appearance of being deceased. Other than that slight anomaly, they are just as beautiful in every aspect as the Pacific Steelhead I guide and fish for.

One curious thing was we would frequently catch 16+” ‘smolts’, which I believed to be young steelhead that had learned to enter the river again. We would catch them very far from tidal water, so the reason is unclear as to why they would re-enter before due time, but it just goes to show that when it comes to Steelhead fishing, there is no ‘normal’. They are as individual as the angler fishing for them. ■

The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author, for educational and entertainment purposes, and only to give you general information and a general understanding of Steelhead, not to provide specific scientific data or facts.

“
Fishing should be
fun, not penance.
Often, we anglers
forget that, and
start judging our self-
worth on our casting
skills and hooking
to landing ratio.”

Photo: Tim Romano



My mom, Alice Williams, preparing to outfish us all. Ask her about catching three Steelhead on one cast! No joke...