

# Stoneflies for Steelhead

by Carl Haensel

Imagine walking up to a pool and seeing more rainbow trout than you can count? Just think if almost all of them weighed from 3 to 10 pounds. Shangri-La? No, just a normal day on Lake Erie's steelhead tributaries. From September to May, steelhead ascend streams near Erie to attempt to spawn. Not every day of fishing is a magical one, but if you put in your time and drift the right flies, you never know what you might hook.

Many flies can spark a steelhead's interest. Egg flies mimicking both steelhead eggs and sucker eggs are popular. Woolly Buggers and other streamers can also tempt steelhead often. Stoneflies and other nymphs may not be used quite as much in Pennsylvania, though that certainly doesn't mean they don't work well.

The shale that makes up the bottom of our steelhead streams, along with their inconsistent flows, do not lead to high populations of macro-invertebrates. There just aren't many stoneflies there. However, fish that have been in the streams longer seem to be more receptive to stonefly and other nymph patterns. Finicky steelhead seem to favor them occasionally as well.

One of the best flies I've run across that combines multiple concepts is a combination of a

stonefly and an egg pattern. It uses sparkling chenille, popularly called Estaz®, for the thorax. Versions of this fly are commonly used to fish for steelhead and salmon in Great Lakes tributaries in both Michigan and New York. Fran Verdoliva, from the Salmon River region of New York, is often credited with popularizing this pattern.

Thinly dressed versions of this fly in clear water may represent a stonefly with pulsating gills. The more thickly dressed fly is a good bet for off-color water. Always keep scissors handy to trim the fly if water conditions deem it necessary. This fly is tied on a 3x size 8 nymph hook.



The materials used include a bucktail tail, Antron® hare's ear dubbing, vinyl rib, and turkey feather wing case. A variety of different colors of sparkling chenille can be used for the thorax. Popular colors include tan, butter rum, gold, orange, pink and chartreuse.

Drifting your flies is a key part of fishing for steelhead. In most Lake Erie tributaries, the fish see many anglers. By dead-drifting your fly, you keep it moving downstream at the same speed as the current. This causes your presentation to appear more natural. Using a strike indicator on your leader can help you see when your fly has stopped, whether that is on a snag or in the mouth of a fish. Secure splitshot to your leader to keep the fly just a few inches from the bottom—the fish's strike zone. Often you can watch both your flies and the steelhead in the water, and some anglers occasionally spot a steelhead open its mouth and suck in the fly.

Setting the hook when the fly nears the mouth of the fish is not recommended, and intentionally snagging fish is illegal. Though pools filled with steelhead can be tempting, they can also draw crowds of anglers. "Walking the water" and covering a few stream miles can be a good way

to find your own hotspot and get away from crowds.

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