

# SURF FISHING FOR STEELHEAD

*by Mike Bleech*  
*photos by the author*

Some fishing methods are so enjoyable that the number of fish caught cannot measure success. When such methods result in good catches, we are reminded of why we fish. My first time casting from the beach in the fall of 2010 was one such reminder.

Moderate surf splashed against me, nudging me backwards each time a wave hit. Waves rolled along the beach, left to right, driven by the prevailing wind, making a sound that cannot be described, except by nature. My mind was totally engrossed by the rhythm of the surf.

Steelhead are well known as great fighters. Hooked in the surf, they are free to show their best fight unrestrained by the confines of a creek. The first fish I hooked that afternoon struck as it was coming towards me, so all I felt was a tick, then slack line. That changed very soon when I pulled the rod back over my shoulder while reeling as fast as I could to set the hook. After a cartwheeling leap, the big fish changed direction and headed for Canada. For a while, it seemed as though it might make it. Although I was using only 6-pound-test line, steady pressure from my long rod did its job. The fish turned, and I regained some line before the start of another run.



Steelhead stamina is impressive. This steelhead used a good deal of energy jumping. With each leap, sunshine reflected the iridescence of its lateral stripe and cheek plate.

While struggling with steelhead, time loses meaning. Even releasing the fish is a thrill, watching it disappear with a flip of its tail.

I pity anglers who measure their steelhead fishing by numbers of fish. Each steelhead you hook should be enough to make your day, just one strong run or a hook-throwing jump. Take time to reflect after each encounter. Do not be in too much of a hurry to start casting again. These fish deserve nothing less.

Fishing in the Lake Erie surf for steelhead can be done using just about any spinning, spin-casting or even revolving spool-casting reel and rod. If you were to shop for an outfit specifically for this purpose, start with the standard steelhead action in a rod that has a length of 8½ feet to 9 feet. A long rod acts as a shock absorber for fighting heavy fish on light line. Even more important, when casting off the beach, the long rod adds distance.

Long casts are not always necessary. Kirk Rudzonski, bait and tackle shop owner and an expert steelhead angler, has often said that anglers may spoil their surf fishing by wading into the water. Steelhead may be very close to shore. Mornings, in particular, are times when steelhead can be expected close to shore, usually right in the outflow from a creek or very close to it. The best time to fish for steelhead are mornings. The only exceptions are some winter days when it's best to wait until the sun has warmed the water.

Wading anglers are usually the reason steelhead move away from shore. Proof of this can be found at the mouths of streams where fishing pressure is lightest. Steelhead can be seen moving through the water close to shore all day or sometimes busting schools of shiners. The sight of steelhead keeps anglers enthused.

Steelhead are sometimes seen a long distance from the shore. The casting distance of longer rods is very handy. Using the same spoon, it would not be unusual for an angler using a 9-foot rod and 6-pound-test line to cast twice as far as an angler using a more typical 6½-foot rod and heavier line. If the angler using the long rod uses the proper technique and keeps the reel spool properly filled with good line, the difference in casting distance may even be substantially greater.

With a long rod, holding the tip high while retrieving will help keep the lure running somewhat shallower than it would otherwise.

All reels are not equal, and price is not necessarily a test of which is best. Drag is the most significant function. Steelhead give drag a workout.

Some reels are better for long-distance casting than others. Since I have heard conflicting reasons for long-distance casting abilities of various reels, I will not point to any specific thing to look for in reels. Nothing is more important than keeping the spool filled (though not over-filled) with top quality line.

Spoons have long been the most popular lures for casting for steelhead off Lake Erie beaches. Stickbaits and spinners can also be effective. Your choice in lures may get down to which lures are suited to the depths off the creek mouths.

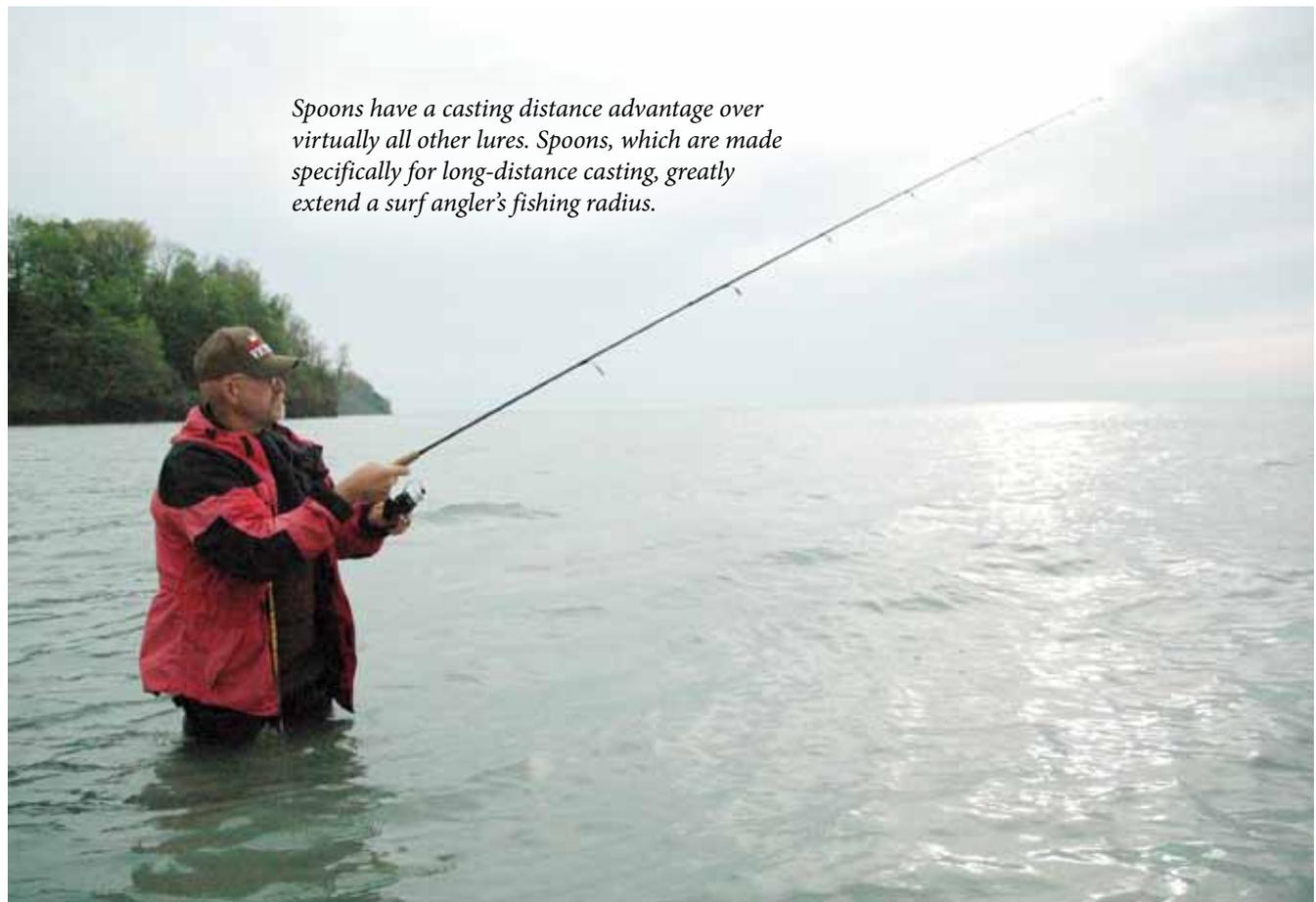
Spoons have a casting distance advantage over virtually all other lures. Spoons, which are made specifically for long-distance casting, greatly extend a surf angler's fishing radius. Once the steelhead moves away from shore, this is a huge advantage. However, there is a trade-off between long casts and using spoons that are so heavy that they snag on every retrieve.

Long standard spoon colors are blue/silver, green/silver, gold/red and gold/orange. Stickbait color patterns that include the same colors in various combinations give steelhead plenty of choices.

Elk Creek, Walnut Creek and Twentymile Creek are large creeks and get the best runs. One major factor that can make other creek mouths much better for surf fishing is when water flows are low, and there is no open channel through which steelhead can swim into the creeks. This



*Most of the popular lures are brightly colored spoons, but stickbaits can be more effective at times when the steelhead are close to shore.*



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causes steelhead to congregate just off these creek mouths where they must wait until the creek flow rises enough to provide access to the channels. Larger creeks are less likely to be blocked at the mouths.

On the east side of Erie, in addition to Twentymile Creek, there is excellent fishing near the mouths of Sevenmile Creek, Twelvemile Creek and Sixteenmile Creek. Public parks provide access to the latter two. The only parking for Sevenmile Creek is along Route 5. ☐