

# Small Stream *Steelhead*

by Carl Haensel photos by the author

Heading to Erie on a Saturday morning in November several years ago, I pulled into the parking lot at the mouth of Walnut Creek and was greeted with a familiar sight. Dozens of cars and many anglers were on the water. Even at 8 a.m., all the best water was taken, and there was not even a small amount of water to fish without being right on someone else's elbow. I decided then and there to start exploring other waters for steelhead in Pennsylvania. Smaller waters, out of the way places, tiny holes that are hard to get into. The rewards soon became apparent. If you find the right hole that nobody is on and the steelhead are active, an angler can do extremely well.

Fishing a small stream for steelhead is all about timing. During steelhead season, there are periods when smaller steelhead streams run almost dry. Look at them on these days, and you will rarely find fish. If you do, fish will be jittery and will not be in a biting mood. Wait for a good rain to bring water levels up and entice fresh fish. Then, start walking the water and looking for fish.

Deeper holes on small streams are generally few and

far between. The deepest holes with good runs flowing into them will hold the most fish. Fish in shallow riffles or runs will often be moving between these points. Fresh fish will be "brighter" or more silver and lighter in color and usually moving upstream.

When you're walking the water, move slowly and wear polarized glasses. Polarized glasses are your most important small stream tool. Stay out of the water and on banks for the best vantage point and to avoid disturbing fish. Steelhead can hide very well in a shallow riffle that is only 8 inches deep. If you see a fish, cast to it. Watch its reaction closely. If you make them nervous with your casting, they will often shift up and down in a run and back and forth across the stream. I've watched anglers fishing to empty water, because the fish they were targeting left after the first few casts.

Areas with overhead cover such as logs, stumps and rocky cliffs hold fish more consistently over time. Find these places and look for them to produce trip after trip, as long as the cover stays in place.

Start your drift upstream far enough to avoid startling fish in very shallow water. Make sure to vary the amount of weight on the rig that you are fishing, depending on the situation. Avoid snagging up on the bottom next to fish in shallow sections. It will frighten the fish, and you will be more likely to foul hook them.

After a rain, fresh steelhead are more likely to be aggressive and hit brighter, larger egg patterns. Sometimes even small streamers, large nymphs or Woolly Buggers can work.

Often, the fly or lure really doesn't matter to a fish that is truly fresh in from the lake. They will reflexively bite at anything appropriately drifted near them, and they may aggressively chase flashy flies or lures.

If fish have been in a stream for a long period of time and the water is low and clear, smaller nymphs or egg patterns on light line may need to be employed to get the fish to bite.



*This nice female steelhead was taken on a morning of fishing on a small Lake Erie tributary stream.*



Even the smallest streams that have access to a steelhead run can provide excellent fishing. During the rain on this small piece of water, fish were actively moving. Look for rainfall to trigger movement into the smaller streams. If streams are rising and holding water, fish will be moving into them. The fishing is often best just after the water has begun to drop and clear.



Getting geared up for steelhead fishing in Lake Erie tributary streams? Get the Commission's FREE Lake Erie Fishing Access Areas brochure/map by ordering online at [www.fishandboat.com/promo/form/pubs\\_free.htm](http://www.fishandboat.com/promo/form/pubs_free.htm).

## Finding your own small stream

Ask an angler to give up his or her favorite small stream steelhead hole, and you'll often get little response. These secrets are carefully guarded since there is rarely room for multiple anglers on these small waters. However, there are lots of access points on small steelhead streams in Erie. A short list of these streams includes Turkey, Raccoon, Crooked and Cascade creeks on the west side and the "mile" creeks to the east side. Other small streams exist as well. Go online for information on Erie waters to find your own small stream nirvana. Visit the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission website at [www.fishandboat.com/steelhead.htm](http://www.fishandboat.com/steelhead.htm) for information on public access points, fishing locations and much more. Excellent maps are also found at [www.fisherie.com](http://www.fisherie.com). Make sure to pay attention to private property, and do not

trespass. If in doubt, ask a landowner before fishing in an area. Take the time to drive areas, and check out access points prior to getting there at 6 a.m. to fish. Scouting done on one fishing day can pay good dividends down the road.

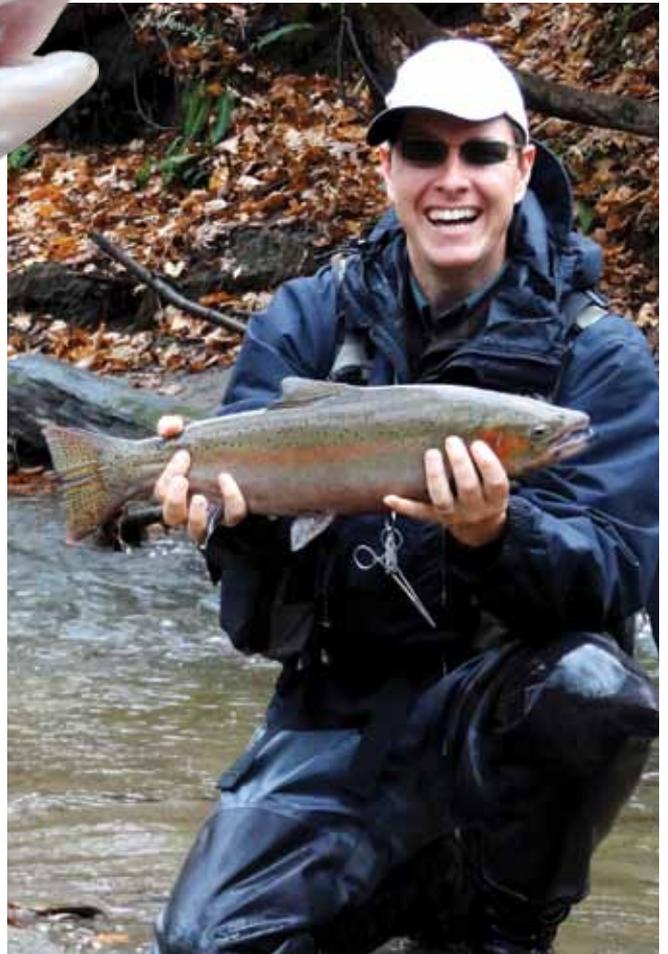
## Lake Erie Permit

All anglers fishing in the waters of Lake Erie, Presque Isle Bay and their tributaries, including waters that flow into those tributaries are required to possess a valid Lake Erie permit or Combination Trout/Salmon/Lake Erie permit. A permit is also required for all of those waters that flow into these main tributaries. These permits cost \$9.70. For more information, see your *Pennsylvania Fishing Summary*.





*An angler fishes a small stream near Lake Erie for steelhead in November.*



*This male steelhead hit a stonefly pattern drifted under a log along the bank. In small streams, overhead cover can easily hide steelhead.*

Avoid these conditions on the smallest waters since they can be very challenging. Cover ground when exploring small streams for steelhead. One reach of a stream may have a good number of fish in it while another will be almost barren. If there are no fish on your favorite water, try another nearby stream. Conditions vary greatly from water to water. It can be great fishing on one stream while it is poor fishing the same day on a neighboring stream. If a stream does not have fish on one trip, try it again the next trip. Try getting up early or fishing late in the day to get access to the fish when they are less finicky and not affected by as much angling pressure. More than once, I've experienced great fishing at dusk after all the other anglers had left the stream. ☐

For more information on Pennsylvania steelhead fishing, go to [www.fishandboat.com/steelhead.htm](http://www.fishandboat.com/steelhead.htm).