



Photo - Mike Bleech

Many of the most popular streamer patterns among Lake Erie steelhead anglers are chartreuse-green.

Swinging Streamers for Steelhead

by Mike Bleech

Historically, eggs and steelhead go together like Largemouth Bass and plastic worms. Over the past several years, however, minnows, particularly Emerald Shiners, may have become even more popular bait than eggs. It stands to reason that streamers should be very effective flies. Indeed, they are successful, though their relative popularity probably is not to the levels that bait anglers value shiners. This is largely because of the characteristic of fly anglers to change flies and to try new fly patterns.

Among the advantages of fishing for steelhead with streamers, the fish usually hit these flies on a tight line. Detecting the hit is not an issue. Often, it is like an explosion, followed by a drag-screaming run, hopefully, with a high leap at the end. Then, there is repetition of the same until the steelhead wears out enough to be netted or slid onto a gravel bank.

Of course, the primary reason for using streamers is that they are effective. Steelhead in the tributaries only recently left Lake Erie where they made their living attacking small fish.

Many of the most popular streamer patterns among Lake Erie steelhead anglers are basically white and light green, often termed chartreuse-green, a combination that resembles the Emerald Shiner. Local fly anglers use a streamer they call Fendler's Minnow, in recognition of the angler who originated the pattern, Jim Fendler. Since then, several similar patterns have come onto the scene.

My own streamer selection, at least as far as streamers for steelhead are concerned, has been greatly simplified through observations of the favorite streamers among local fly anglers over the past several years. It now consists largely of a series named by a color and Snowman, such as Blue Snowman, Green Snowman and so on. These streamers are usually some type of sparkly white, man-made material such as Krystal Flash, with several strands of the other color tied at the top. Most effective has been the Lime Green Snowman. Sometimes in very clear water, the Pink Snowman will entice hits when nothing else will.

Each of us may see colors differently, thus it is sometimes difficult to convey what we mean concerning specific colors. The green-chartreuse color used on several effective flies tied to resemble the Emerald Shiner appears to my eyes as lime green, or close to it. Today, we have names for such a long list of colors, most of which were not even recognized as separate colors when I was young. Perhaps, it was a conspiracy between the paint industry and the fabric industry.

The most basic logic behind the use of a streamer comes from the diet of steelhead while they are in Lake Erie. There, they eat a variety of small fish. This diet is mainly Emerald Shiners followed by Rainbow Smelt. Rainbow Smelt have declined in abundance. Density of Gizzard Shad and Alewife is low, and these species grow larger than useful size for steelhead.

Why discuss streamer colors in such length, in such detail and before examining the factors of presentation?

With so many types of fishing, lure color is usually given importance far out of proportion to its importance. With steelhead, tiny variations in color can be critical to success. More so, even, than how the streamers are presented. Presenting streamers can be very simple. Just swing them in the current.

Of course, it is not actually that simple. So, it is at this point that the length of the fly rod must be considered. In the technique of swinging streamers in current, all external manipulation comes from the rod tip, by where the rod tip is positioned both vertically and horizontally. Longer rods allow accurate manipulation across the majority of the width of most creeks.

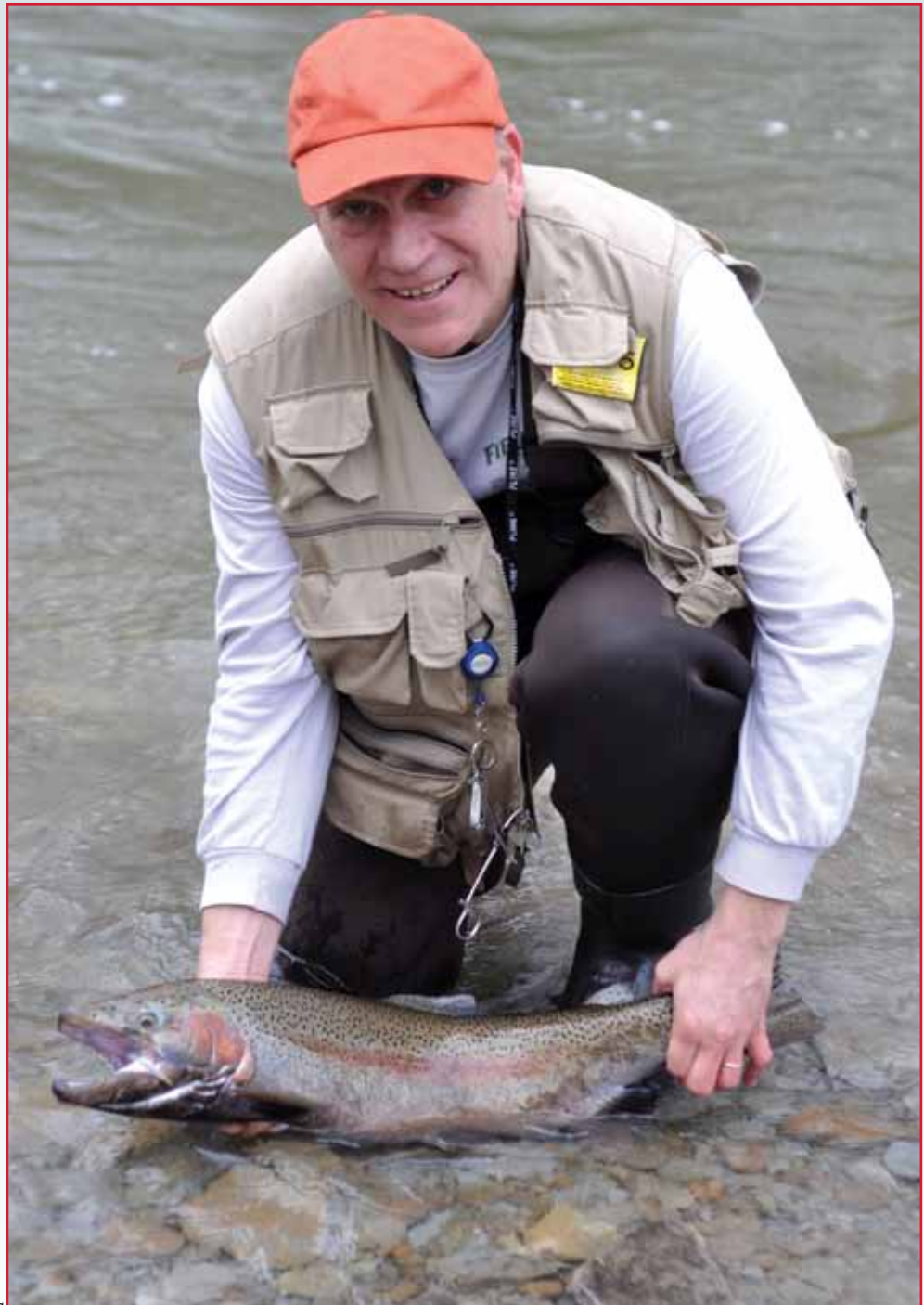


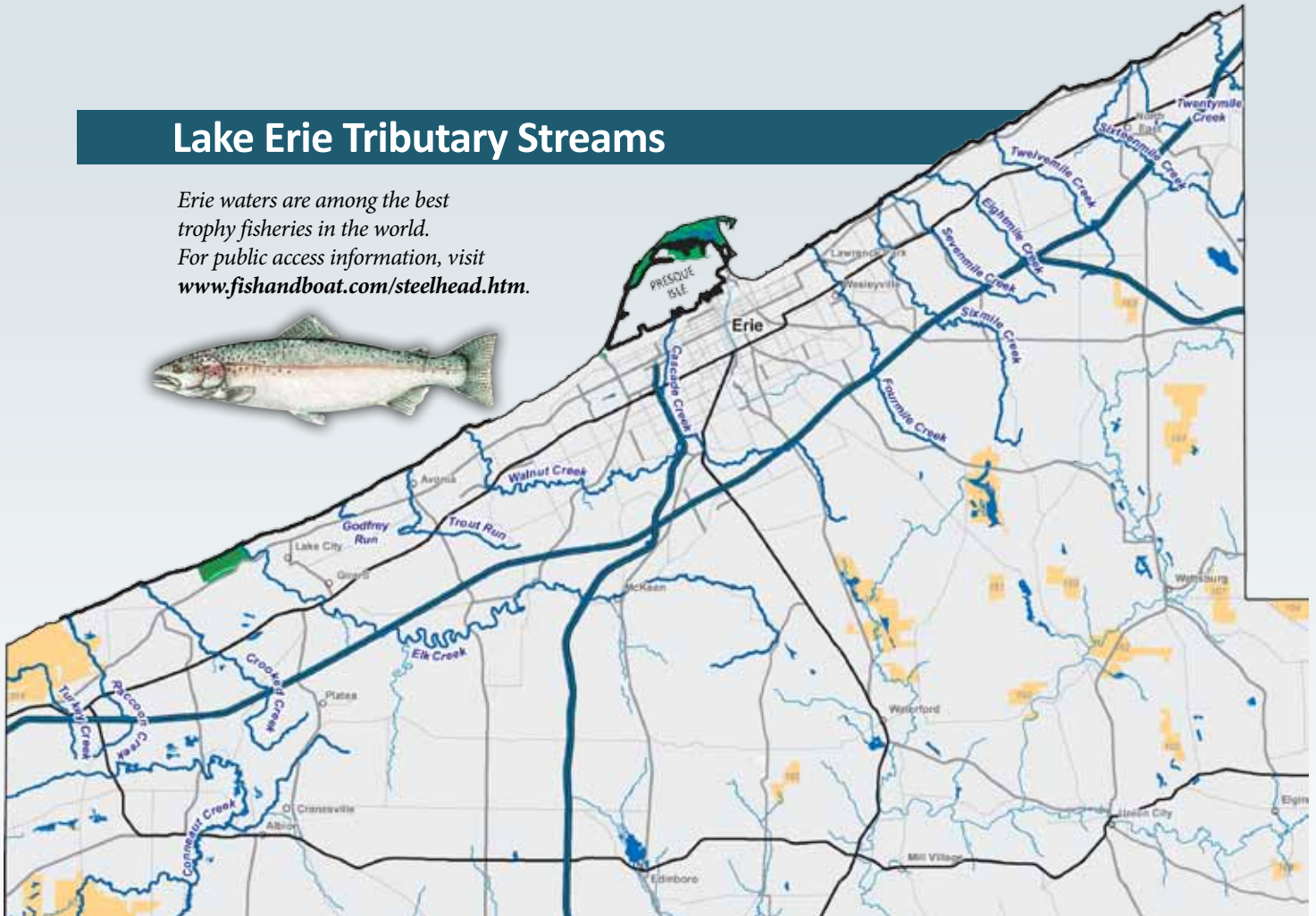
photo: Mike Bleach

An advantage of fishing for steelhead with streamers is steelhead will usually hit these flies on a tight line. Detecting the hit is not an issue and is effective.

Seldom will you see a veteran Pennsylvania steelhead fly angler using a short rod, meaning any rod shorter than 9 feet. My own preference is 10 feet, a particular 6-weight rod I built for myself. Though, I will admit it was not built for this purpose. The rod was built for fly fishing the Allegheny River. It just happened that the first time this rod was put to use was on a steelhead fishing outing. Since the size of trout it was intended to catch is about the same size as steelhead in Pennsylvania streams, it didn't seem out of

Lake Erie Tributary Streams

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place to use it on that steelhead outing. Mostly, I was very anxious to use the rod.

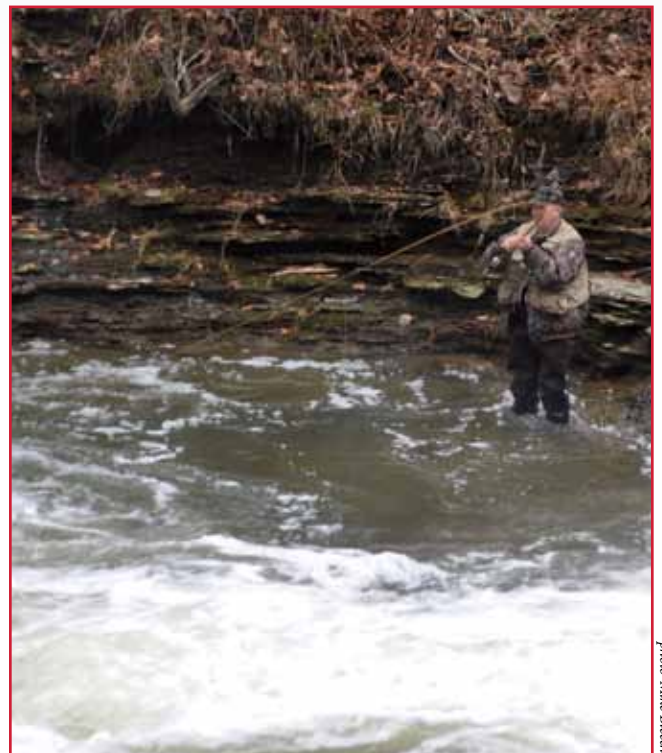
The outcome of that outing, which was fairly successful, was that the rod became a dual-duty fly rod.

Most of the Lake Erie tributaries in Pennsylvania are so small that a 10-foot rod will nearly reach across the water.

Another equally important advantage of a long fly rod is that it allows anglers to reach the fish without the necessity of wading. When streams are busy, it is virtually impossible to find a pool where no one has been wading. When there is less fishing pressure, this advantage can be of the utmost importance. Wading is sometimes the surest way to put steelhead off their feed.

Not every steelhead angler has the luxury of having a rod bought or built specifically for steelhead fishing in Pennsylvania tributaries, so my suggestion is to use the longest 6-weight or 7-weight rod in your possession. Most fly rod veterans recommend the 7-weight rod.

Some situations just beg for swinging a streamer in the current. One is when the water is low and clear. Anglers will be crowded around pools where they can see steelhead swimming close to the bottom. However, these steelhead are not likely to hit anything. It is the steelhead that you cannot see that are more likely to hit. In this situation, those are the fish that are holding in riffles where swirling water blocks vision.



Steelhead that are holding in riffles with swirling water will often hit streamers.

photo-Mike Blech



photo-Linda Steiner

Relatively few anglers on most creeks at any given time will be using streamers. In this situation, a streamer may provoke a hit, simply because the steelhead has not seen one.

Often, swinging a streamer in the current is just the wrap-up of any retrieve, such as when the streamer is cast slightly upstream then worked across a pool. At some point, the current will carry the streamer downstream to a point where the retrieve is logically ended. From that point, the streamer swings across the current on its own. This is when many strikes occur.

That does not work well in riffles or swirling current. In this situation, the entire retrieve can be swinging the streamer across the current, starting with a cast that slants downstream. Then, it reaches to the far side of the water you want to cover.

Swinging a streamer is taken to the next level by manipulating the location of the streamer with the rod tip. Swinging action is produced when a streamer swings in the manner of a pendulum to a point directly downstream from the rod tip. Keeping the rod low and horizontal to the water will stop the swing roughly a rod

length into the current. Bring the rod tip across current by either raising the rod tip or swinging it downstream slowly, and the streamer will follow. At any point, the rod tip can be stopped to hold the streamer stationary.

To some degree, the depth the streamer runs can be manipulated. Pulling the rod upstream will bring a streamer up in the water column. Dropping the rod tip downstream will quickly produce slack line, which allows a streamer to sink.

All of the rod manipulation is intended to put a streamer precisely where you think a steelhead may be holding. You will be surprised by how many steelhead hold in riffles, even during winter.

The basics of swinging streamers with the current are simple. But, actually putting it to use is considerably more difficult than it may sound. Like most things, practice makes perfect, or at least better. Fly anglers who are experienced in streamer swinging make it look well orchestrated. Some will fish through a stretch of water without lifting the streamer out of the water.

Be sure to add this technique to your bag of tricks if you plan to be a serious steelhead angler. ☑

For more information on Pennsylvania steelhead fishing, go to www.fishandboat.com/steelhead.htm.