



Pennsylvania's Streams of Steel

by Darl Black photos by the author

With the arrival of fall, the most asked question by anglers from one end of Pennsylvania to the other is “Are steelhead in the streams yet?”

“The steelhead fishery is a huge economic boom for Erie County from October through April, attracting visiting anglers from around the United States as well as other countries,” said Mike Tome, a 30-year angling veteran of the tributary streams. “Having worked at local bait shops for many years, I believe most tackle shops make more money during steelhead season than from Lake Erie perch, Walleye and Smallmouth Bass fisheries combined.”

Nearly 50 years ago, Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission (PFBC) initiated a salmon stocking program in Lake Erie to generate a unique offshore summer fishery in the main lake as well as create stream angler opportunities in the fall. However, a variety of problems were encountered, and the salmon stocking program eventually came to an end. The PFBC turned to steelhead, which many thought were a better species match for our smaller streams.

Pennsylvania angler Bill Logan has been hooked on steelhead fishing for more years than he can remember. “I started off fishing for steelhead with bait. During the fall, I



A very nice steelhead taken on a live Emerald Shiner in the late fall from Sixteenmile Creek, Erie County.

used nightcrawlers and Berkley Power Bait in the lake where fish were staging near stream mouths. In the tributaries, I relied on single eggs but found myself loosing single eggs on almost every cast, so I switched to fresh skein. In late winter, nothing was better than a live Emerald Shiner. Eventually, I got away from all that messy bait, turning instead to specialty flies and bobber jigs on a fly rod. I’m a bit of a sloppy caster with a fly rod, but I still catch fish.”

According to Logan, consistent success on the steelhead streams involves learning to play the varying water level and clarity of the shale-bottom streams. Low and clear conditions on the tributary are the bane of most steelhead anglers, because fish are very edgy. The only thing worst for steelhead success is a very high and very muddy stream. For the majority of stream anglers, either rising or falling water offers better fishing opportunities.

Logan prefers fishing falling water to rising water. “Rising water in the fall through early spring will bring steelhead into the streams. However, rising water can quickly turn muddy,



Lake Erie steelhead fishing produces high angler interest.

which destroys the fishing. Basically, if you cannot see steelhead, you are not going to be able to get the fly in front of their face. By the same token, muddy water prevents fish from seeing your bait or fly.”

As streams begin to clear and water flow drops a little, anglers will find steelhead in the tributaries. The slower the fall, the more prolonged the good fishing.

“Rather than driving all the way to Erie immediately after the area receives a good rain only to find steelhead blown out by the time I arrive, I now wait until the streams begin to clear,” said Logan. “Depending on the amount of rain—or snow melt—the falling water window is generally open longer than the rising water window.”

It wasn’t that many years ago that the fall steelhead run into Lake Erie tributaries kicked off in October or even late September. This was the result of fairly reliable heavy rains in early fall. Anglers became accustomed to finding and catching steelhead shortly after fall. However, our weather patterns have changed. Currently, quality rainfall in early fall is rare. This has forced a shift in the steelhead run.

“Rain in September and early October would stimulate fish moving into the streams,” said Tome. “Now, low stream flows in the early fall will stack up steelhead along the Lake Erie shoreline near the creek mouths. When sporadic rains do come, spectacular fishing usually lasts only a couple days before the water becomes low and clear. It appears the better stream runs are in November and December when more water is available.”

Rick Gauriloff, owner of Trout Run Bait & Tackle in Fairview, explains that hitting the Pennsylvania streams as

the bite is peaking is a little more involved than looking at the Erie forecast. “Basically, all the Pennsylvania tributary streams in Erie County are shale bottom, but due to the length of the stream, drainage area and actual topography of the streambed, every tributary responds differently to rainfall or snow melt. The numbered creeks on the East Side fish well right after a rain as they are rising, but they get skinny fast, dropping much faster than West Side streams. Everything else being equal, Twentymile Creek, Sixteenmile Creek and Twelvemile Creek will clear and drop quickly. But to the west of the city of Erie, Elk Creek, Crooked Creek and Conneaut Creek are the last to clear and will retain good flow longer.”

But things are rarely “equal” when it comes to rainfall within the drainage of each stream. Rain may fall on the East Side and not on the West Side, or rain may fall further inland impacting the more southern drainage areas of Elk Creek and Conneaut Creek and not impacting the shorter streams. Even among East Side streams, Twentymile Creek has a larger drainage area and will hold water a little longer than the other streams only a few miles down the shoreline.

“But, you also need to look at the make-up of each stream in terms of fishable holding water for steelhead once the water drops,” said Gauriloff. Although all tributaries close to the lake are shale bottom, the West Side streams have more broken rubble to create current seams, and they also have more curves, bends and pools than East Side streams. This is especially true of Elk Creek and Conneaut Creek, which extend much further inland than the others. On Conneaut Creek, you can find steelhead up to 38 miles from the lakeshore in Crawford County.”



An angler battles a steelhead on Walnut Creek, Erie County.



An angler with an Erie steelhead.

“Conneaut Creek has all the characteristics which make Elk Creek the overall best steelhead water; I have nicknamed it ‘Little Elk,’” said Gauriloff. “But, there are problems with access on Conneaut Creek. There are very few places to park near bridges and few public access sites to the stream. Basically, it is only fished by locals or through special invite of property owners.”

With a lifetime of fishing on Erie tributaries, Gauriloff offers the following additional insight:

- For the limited amount of the stream within Pennsylvania waters, Twentymile Creek has good public access and parking. As the fall progresses into winter, the fish move upstream getting into smaller tributaries in New York. However, Twentymile Creek does not have as much fishable structure such as holes and bend pools as the West Side creeks.

- Sixteenmile Creek gets a good number of returning fish and stays open all winter regardless of cold temperatures because of the water treatment plant on the stream. Many anglers bypass the limited water on Sixteenmile Creek for Twentymile Creek except in the dead of the winter when nothing else is open except Sixteenmile Creek.

- Twelvemile Creek is satisfactory, but it does not seem to get the run of fish that some other streams do.

- Fourmile Creek has very limited access. However, there is some decent fishing below the golf course near the mouth.

- The first stream on the West Side is Walnut Creek. Everyone knows the Manchester Hole and infamous Wall at PFBC’s Walnut Creek Access. Serious steelhead anglers avoid these extremely popular easy access areas. However, Gauriloff acknowledges some good water further upstream on Walnut Creek at some public access points.

- Elk Creek is the best steelhead stream due to its length, water volume and fish-holding structure. Steelhead hold in Elk Creek much later into the spring than other streams with catches possible until almost May.

- Crooked Creek is often overlooked by visiting anglers but features a lot of fish-holding water due to softer substrate upstream, which creates nice undercuts and deep runs. However, it is a narrow stream with brush-lined banks, making it hard to fish. A naturally reproducing Brown Trout population occurs in the upper reaches of Crooked Creek.

- Raccoon Creek is very small but offers some opportunities in the lower end close to the lake. You’ve got to hit the stream at the right time, because the fishing is hit and miss.

As soon as word gets out that steelhead have started entering the streams, anglers flock to the easy-access public sites, resulting in a circus-like atmosphere. Many anglers seem satisfied with this experience as long as they can catch fish. If you don’t like shoulder-to-shoulder fishing, it is possible to enjoy a different steelhead experience by taking the path less traveled.

For more information on steelhead fishing and public access sites, visit www.fishandboat.com/steelhead.htm. Besides public sites on streams, some property owners permit “access via waterway only”—meaning you must remain in the water. Walking is often required to reach better holes. Go to www.visiterie.com for information on lodging and tackle shop locations. ☐