



Some Winter Steelhead Fishing, Please

by Mike Bleech photos by the author

For two consecutive, freakishly cold, winters, winter steelhead fishing was hardly more than a memory. With streams locked in ice, even breaking away the ice to do a little fishing was impractical. Even if one had the ambition to break several inches of ice from a pool, guides would quickly clog with ice, and line would freeze into stiff wire. Furthermore, fishing with heavy gloves is terribly awkward, and keeping the body warm demanded heavy layers of clothing. A feeble attempt froze my face so badly that I could not get a close shave for three years.

Then, finally, last winter was mild. Nice even. However, creeks were low and clear. For one to fish, it demanded crowding around the best pools, a situation that spoils steelhead fishing for a country dweller such as myself.

My steelhead catch was such for three years that if it had been my first three years of winter steelhead fishing, I may have given up on it.

Memories of a few decades of winter steelhead fishing, though, have chiseled wonderful images that will ever drive my desire for more winter steelhead fishing adventures.

Deer hunting draws the great crowds from Lake Erie tributaries. Cold and stream wary steelhead are not so easily tempted by the offerings of anglers either. Gone are most of the anglers who gage their fishing by numbers of fish caught. Steelhead fishing becomes more personal. To those who genuinely appreciate steelhead, one leap and a popped tippet makes for a great day.

In cold water, steelhead do not jump as often nor as high as they do during fall in less cold water, and they do not have

the endurance they do in less cold water. It matters not a bit. On their worst days, steelhead are better than other fish of the Great Lakes.

Steelhead are more than great jumpers. They are flashes of pink and purple stripes glistening through a spray of water. They are wild and beautiful in gorgeous settings, bringing great vitality to streams that tumble through steep drops from higher ground onto the Great Lakes Plains.

During October and November, the reality for the majority of steelhead anglers is crowded streams. Crowds gather around the pools where steelhead are visible. Anglers are, to a large extent, cooperative, pleasant and good sportsmen. Forget your net, and someone will net your fish. Ask what the steelhead are hitting, and someone will tell you.

Still, getting away from other anglers is a major objective, and there are places to get away from most, if not all, other steelhead anglers. Look for the places that are most remote, places where access requires steep climbs.

Maps showing steelhead fishing with public access are widely available at bait and tackle shops across the Pennsylvania section of the Lake Erie coastline. Also, visit the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission's website at www.fishandboat.com.

Timing is critical in planning steelhead fishing trips with the best chances of catching fish. Steelhead are in the creeks through winter, however, the likelihood of catching steelhead is many times better when conditions are right.

The best time to fish the steelhead creeks during winter is when a rise in flow has attracted new runs of fish. This rise



Releasing a steelhead should be done without removing the fish from water.

may be due to warm weather, snow melt or rain. Ideal stream conditions are when the flow is moderately up and the water has enough color to hide most steelhead.

The best steelhead fishing often happens on warm air days, anything over 60-degrees F. Air is calm, and clouds are so thick that the bottoms are edged in black. Wisps of fog stretch from the ground to the low clouds.

Sight fishing is probably the most widespread fishing approach during fall and spring. Pools where numerous steelhead can be seen attract gaggles of anglers. Winter steelhead anglers tend to be the more serious and experienced steelhead anglers. Most strongly prefer that they cannot see fish, and fish cannot see them.

According to local bait and tackle shop owners, live shiners are the most popular and effective bait for steelhead during the winter. Egg sacks or skein come in second. Efforts should be taken to keep whatever bait is used close to the bottom. Unless snags are a problem, rig with a splitshot, as light as possible,

about 6 inches, no more, from the hook. Use a fine wire, wide gap hook with an offset point. This should result in a much better hook-up percentage than using plain bait hooks. Where snags are a problem, try suspending the bait under a small float. This works well in pools or runs with fairly uniform depth.

Fly anglers may want to concentrate on small streamers and egg patterns. Streamer patterns used by winter anglers usually have a white and light olive in the color pattern, sometimes with glitter. Colors and sizes of egg patterns should be varied with water color, using larger, bright red flies in colored water, shades of orange when the water has a little color and white or light pink in very clear water.

Special gear for winter steelhead fishing should include waders with cleats on the bottom, a wading stick, a hand warmer, gloves and a towel. A camera will keep your memories vivid. ☐



Egg fly patterns should be matched to water clarity. Use bright red in muddy water, shades of orange when the water has some color and white or pink in clear water.