



Overlooked **STEELHEAD BAIT**

by Jeff Woleslagle photos by the author

The fishing was tough to say the least, as the water was low and clear and the fish were extremely unpredictable. There had been a recent run of fresh fish that moved in with the last heavy rain and the stream had dropped and cleared quickly. It was an overcast day, and the weather was unseasonably mild. In my mind, it was a great day to be steelhead fishing, but even with freshly tied egg sacs, I couldn't manage to draw a single strike. The fish were wise to all the usual offerings and it was frustrating to see the pods of silver torpedoes finning in each pool and not coax a reaction. When the steelhead seem to have developed lock-jaw, often the best way to get their attention is try something innovative and out of the ordinary or something tried and true that they just haven't seen for a while.

Almost as an afterthought, I remembered some waxworms I had along, so I changed my rig to a tiny size 12 hook. I impaled two of the lively cream-colored larvae on the hook and a single BB-sized splitshot about 18 inches up the line. Approaching the next hole very carefully and casting from quite a distance from the water's edge, I landed the offering at the head of the

pool and let it drift down through the heart of the deeper water. About midway through the very first drift, my line stopped and then jumped, so I immediately set the hook. I knew instantly this was a good fish as line steadily peeled off my reel and the rod arched deeply. The bright silver fish made several strong runs and three impressive aerial displays, forcing me to follow it downstream before coming to the net. It was one of six that I landed that day and one that clued me into the fact that sometimes fresh eggs aren't always the best option, especially when they have been repeatedly exposed to them. Waxworms drifted on small hooks with the least amount of weight possible are very effective when the bite gets tough, and some of my best steelhead have come this way. This is a very light, finesse-type presentation to avoid gut-hooking fish. Be sure to set the hook at the slightest line movement. Fish will often swallow the offering very quickly, so I normally pinch the line between my thumb and index finger during the drift. If I feel a tap or see the line stop, jump or move sideways, I immediately lift up on the rod. I have also caught steelhead drifting waxworms on small jig heads that feature a small amount of tinsel on the hook. I like to do this below a small float, and it can take some experimenting to figure out



Some unconventional baits can put steelhead on the end of your line.

where in the water column the fish want the bait. When that float stops or suddenly takes a sideways turn, it almost always make my heart skip a beat.

There are other overlooked baits that can produce well too. Another trick that I can't take credit for is using popular paste baits tied in egg sac netting. The bright neon colors seem to work best, and pink is my personal favorite. Steelhead, like

all trout and salmon, have a fairly acute sense of smell, and the scent of paste bait is something different than the normal roe they frequently see. It often draws a strike, and you can fish it without the netting as well. Commercially sold salmon eggs can also be effective when tied in normal egg sac netting. I rely on both of these techniques when I have difficulty obtaining fresh eggs or skein but also when I think the fish need to see a different look.

Another tried and true trick that few anglers employ is the use of salad shrimp. You can cure them in any of the commercially available egg cures and tie them in egg sac netting in dime to nickel sizes. Some anglers also use commercial dyes to color the shrimp before tying them up. Just like using fresh eggs, I prefer pink, red and orange netting for this technique, and it can be another good tactic to have in your back pocket.

A bait that is often discounted but can work well after a soaking rain, when the water is off color, is a nightcrawler. I prefer to fish a nightcrawler hooked through the tip of the worm, letting it drift and tumble naturally in the current. I usually fish a nightcrawler weightless, but if I do need to add any weight for a deeper drift, usually just one or two BB size splitshots

will do the trick. I don't see many anglers using nightcrawlers for steelhead anymore, which is why I think they have their days when conditions are right.

If you find yourself dealing with fish that are consistently turning their noses up at freshly tied egg sacs and more traditional presentations, consider some of these often overlooked steelhead baits. It may turn your day around. ☐



The author with a big Elk Creek, Erie County, steelhead.



A heavy steelhead comes to hand after some impressive runs.