



The Fall Steelhead Run

by Mike Bleech photos by the author

Every now and then a persistent steelhead angler is bound to hit things right. Pushed by the mildest of wind, persistent rain moves in. Slowly, steadily the creek rises, becoming more colored. Steelhead, many more than anglers thought were in the creek, start moving upstream. Numerous steelhead move into the creek unnoticed until someone catches a 'silver' fish.

The creek bottom fades from view. Then, a gray float about 24 inches above a piece of skein pops underwater. A hook set and the battle is on. First, the steelhead runs to the bottom of the pool, but mercifully, instead of continuing down the next riffles, the fish starts jumping—majestic leaps, some cartwheeling, some twisting, some flopping.

Ever so slowly, agonizingly slow, the fish is fought close to a sandy area where the plan is to slide the steelhead shallow enough to remove the hook for a quick release.

Such was the plan. The steelhead had other intentions. It was not done fighting. A flop of the tail and down the pool the fish raced. This time not stopping to jump. The steelhead kept going, forcing the angler to follow. Not much good comes from following a steelhead as it runs down riffles—twisted ankles, nasty falls, drenched in cold water.

Somehow the small hook managed to keep its hold on the gamefish. Not just yet, actually another several tense minutes would pass. Then, the steelhead was on its side in shallow water, admired for a few moments and released to make another angler's day.

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anglers from many parts of the world travel to northwest Pennsylvania to greet steelhead when fish come out of the deep, offshore waters of Lake Erie to return to the tributary creeks where life started as eggs or smolt stocked from hatcheries and nurseries.

Just when steelhead return to the creeks is not an exact science. Primary factors appear to be water temperature and water flow. Length of day may be the main factor that moves the steelhead to the creek mouths. However, coming into the creeks requires enough water at the creek mouths. If the water is too warm, the steelhead will not stay for long.

The fall steelhead fishery begins at the beaches. Here, casting into the lake, steelhead have a lot of the space to run. At this location, you will probably experience the best steelhead battles.

Casting into the lake is done with casting spoons colored silver/blue, silver/green or silver/red, or with live bait such as egg sacks or egg skein.

It is in the creeks, though, where the excitement over the steelhead run rings loudest, filling area motels and campgrounds. It is the sight of these steelhead that causes the most anticipation. Most steelhead anglers congregate around the pools where the steelhead are visible. However, catching visible steelhead is not always the easiest thing to do. This is a good lesson. Fish for steelhead that cannot be seen.

The great upstream run of steelhead starts gradually, with a few steelhead moving into the lower pools at night and going back into the lake in the morning. This takes place at the creeks where there is adequate flow at the mouths, usually starting at Elk Creek and Walnut Creek.

Heavy rain, enough to open the mouths of the creeks, signals the beginning of the upstream run. Ideally, you



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should be on a creek when the water is rising and getting some color. The first rise in creek level may bring in a large number of steelhead, especially if the creek mouth has been closed long enough for numerous steelhead to accumulate at that spot. Good steelhead fishing will continue until the first rain raises and muddies the creek water too much.

We can hope for just the right amount of rain to keep flows moderately high and to give the water just the right amount of color, the combination being just enough to hide the steelhead. Ahh yes, good steelhead fishing every day.

But, what usually happens is a recurring cycle of low, clear water, then rain and good flow, then blown out creeks, then low, clear water again. Watch the weather forecasts, phone ahead for stream conditions, and you should hit some good steelhead fishing.

Catching steelhead is one of the great challenges in fishing. But the basic fishing tactics are not overly complex.

Start with the right tackle. Never let the lack of a specialized steelhead rod stop you from steelhead fishing. Just take the longest rod you have rated for 4-pound-test to 8-pound-test line. If the reel has two spools, one spool should contain 4-pound-test line for fishing in clear water, and the other wrapped with 8-pound-test line for fishing in colored water.

Then, all you need are hooks, small splitshot and bait. Bait typically means single salmon eggs, egg sacks, egg skein and small shiners. Add a few floats to keep rigs from snagging bottom. These are great when drifts have reasonably uniform depth.

Stealth may seem to be a waste of time with so many anglers along the creeks. However, you will notice that a large majority of steelhead anglers are clustered around the best looking pools. Few steelhead anglers pay attention to smaller pockets or swift runs where steelhead are not visible.



Many steelhead anglers choose to land steelhead without a net. This is easier on the steelhead when being released.

- Walk softly. Fish can sense vibrations on stream banks.
- Keep a low profile when you approach an undisturbed pool.
- Wear dull colors that blend into the creek bottom.
- Don't make loud noises including talking. Sounds made in the atmosphere can be heard underwater.
- Stay out of the water. Most water in our Pennsylvania steelhead creeks can be fished from the shore.
- Wear waders to cross creeks when necessary. This is the only time waders should be used. Fight the urge to get closer to the fish. On a morning of fishing at a beach when only small waves are lapping against the shore, you may see steelhead cruising close. Others will be farther out. All of this is well within casting distance until some overly anxious angler wades into the water. The steelhead disappear, and the hits stop.

You can not control what other anglers do, of course. But, if you do things correctly, good fishing will follow. ☐