

Silent Steelhead



by Christian A. Shane

photos by the author

“Silence is not the absence of something but the presence of everything.” Gordon Hempton, author and founder of One Square Inch of Silence.

Pulling the truck around the bend, I notice the absence of vehicles by the field, an ominous sign to start a winter day of steelhead fishing. As I step out into the brisk air, snowflakes fall, and the crows mock me with their daybreak “caws”

overhead. Unfortunately, my fishing buddies took a work day instead of a fishing day, so I am on my own. It snowed 8 inches overnight, and the forecast for today is 22-degrees F with a chance of 3- to 5-inches more.

After rigging up, bundling up and walking down the untrodden snowy path, I recall Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken” poem. Then, a woodpecker knocks on the oak tree above and subtly reminds me that I am the lone idiot braving these conditions for some steelhead. Shuffling my way down the steep path, I reach the tributary’s edge. The water level is perfect, though the stream’s temperature is frigid due to the cold temperatures the last few days. Thin chunks of ice crash and bump together, traveling downstream like floating chimes.

I wade down to my favorite hole, which usually holds fish. The trickle of water that flows into the pool has turned into a frozen waterfall. Off to my left, the cliff face displays a sheet of ice, similar to the intimidating “Wall” on the Game of Thrones series.

Tying on a miniscule #16 chartreuse egg pattern, I trail a Zebra Midge about 12 inches off the hook bend. 5X tippet may be the ticket with the clear and slow water conditions. After a few casts, my rod guides are already freezing up. Unfortunately, my lip balm to keep the guides clear probably sits somewhere on my tying bench.

Larger flurries fall, and the sound of the flurries dipping on the water reminds me of fishing the hatches on Spring Creek in central Pennsylvania. At dusk, I hear the sulphurs landing on the water and the wild trout sipping them off the surface. I imagine a steelhead softly breaking the water’s surface to engulf a snowflake.

A doe crosses the stretch below. She does not notice me and takes her time wading across a shallow section, probably the same trajectory I would have chosen.

I break off an ice chunk in the pool and watch it slowly make its way downstream. Some fish dart for cover and some move into the current. Finally, one leads the pod of five, much like a goose leading its formation. The fish conserve energy and move within the flow effortlessly.

The shadows shift slightly away from my line after a few drifts. The fish are not interested in feeding with the cold temperatures, so I leave them in peace and observe them jockeying for positions. I reflect on finding my own sweet spot in life balancing home, family, work and responsibilities, always trying to attain that attitude of easiness.

I trudge farther downstream and am hopeful to see a break in the cloud cover and the sun peeking out. On the trampoline at our house, my kids and I look up and imagine these billowing clouds as monster trucks or dragons in flight. There is probably a mammoth Rainbow Trout up in the sky somewhere today. The sunshine feels pleasant as my clothing soaks it in. The ice on my fly line melts away, piece by piece, much like time on the water after a long work week.

An overhanging pine branch leads my sight to another pod of steelhead, this time with more activity. Some fish spread up into the frothy riffles. I make

a long drift through the run. On the second cast, my line makes a jolt forward, and I notice a flash. I miss the first hit all day and shake my head at my inattentiveness. The third and fourth casts reveal nothing.

I take a step downstream and cast up and under the pine branch. With a fury, my leader heads up stream. The weight of the fish shocks my rod into the ideal steelhead curve. Though it is sluggish, I manage to steer it away from some debris on the far side, and another fish sits in the current a little above where I had set the hook. I notice it has taken the trailer midge.

Eventually, I lead the other fish to an awaiting net and remove the nymph. The snow picks up again as I release the steelhead into the depths. Two robins chirp overhead, and the wind slips through the tree branches. Water washes away over the remaining ice. Squirrels race from tree to tree. Nature echoes its familiar wintery song. ☐



Steelhead fishing on a November stream.

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