



Steelhead Strategies

By Steve May

Steelhead season is my favorite. These fish are big, strong, accessible and relatively predictable. Each fall I rely on two basic strategies to hook up with these migratory game fish. I base my selection on how aggressive I expect the fish to be.

Fish fresh in the river after fall rains can be ultra aggressive and willing to strike big and bold flies. The best strategy is to cover water to find these aggressive fish. Prolonged periods of dry or cold weather will find fewer fish in the river and one's that have been in the river a while will be less aggressive. This is especially true if these fish see any angling pressure. These fish require a more precise, in their face, presentation.

Water temperature can dictate the mood of steelhead. If the water is between 50 and 65 degrees F the fish are at their peak of activity. During this time covering water and providing a big target works wonders. Some of the good steelheaders I know commonly use six inch long, butt ugly flies. These work best on fresh fish during high water. As the water gets colder more precise presentations and smaller flies are usually the way to go.

Water clarity is also important. High flows that attract steelhead often dirty the water. When steelhead can't see your fly, good luck hooking up. I find the best fishing is when the water levels are receding and clearing. I like about 2-3' of visibility. If I can stand in thigh deep water and just make out my boots I know I am in prime water. This seems to be the magic zone where the fish can see your fly, but not too well. When fishing dirty water use the most visible fly you have. I recommend a big black one.

If the conditions point to the steelhead being active I reach for a sink tip and a bold fly like a big Spey or leech. I will use a wet fly swing presentation where I cast my fly down and across stream and then mend line upstream to get my fly down to the fish. I take a step downstream after a couple of casts to let my fly scan

the water downstream for a taker. There are few things that compare to a silver steelhead annihilating your fly on a tight line. As many steelheaders say "the tug is the drug". A full out tight line steelhead strike is a truly addictive angling experience.



On a wide open river like this BC gem a sink tip and large fly helps to cover water in search of silver.

I turn to indicator nymphing when I find cold, low or clear water and fish reluctant to move to catch up with a fly. This method excels at precise presentations to steelhead tucked tight to cover. Using a strike indicator and split shot on your leader with a subtle fly can work really well on sulking fish dug into prime fish holding spots and active fish also hit subtle flies.

Learning how to nymph well can really increase your success rate regardless of the conditions. This technique is the one I recommend people learn first because of its versatility and the numbers of steelhead you can encounter with this method.

Get out there and take advantage of your local steelhead this fall with these two strategies. With a little luck and time on the water your reward will be a bolt of silver on your fly that can really warm up a cold fall day.



Originally published in Real Fishing Magazine
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