

Autumn Steelhead

a personal swing through change in the Great Lakes

By Rick Kustich

This fall marks an anniversary of sorts for me exactly thirty years have past since I caught my first Great Lakes steelhead. It hardly seems possible, but reflecting back it is easy to see the tremendous changes that have occurred in the Great Lakes steelhead fishery during this time. Snagging has been abolished, angler attitudes and ethics have improved, and enlightened management of the resource has become prevalent. There is no question that the opportunity for a high quality fly fishing experience has never been better. This especially true where wild, naturally produced steelhead are concerned. Lower limits, dam removals, and improvements in water quality have lead to increased wild populations on many rivers. This comes at a time when native Pacific coast steelhead numbers are sadly declining. Also, the wise use of hatchery programs has established steelhead fisheries on many rivers that do not have sufficient water quality for reproduction.



Nearly everything that I first learned about steelhead has changed in the last thirty years. The first information I gathered on Great Lakes steelhead came from the handful of anglers fishing for steelhead at the time, tackle shops, or very limited written volumes. Most of that early information has proven to be wrong or at least greatly inaccurate. Thousands of hours on the water and thousands of miles traveling to fish for steelhead has taught me one valuable lesson – keep an open mind.

One of the most significant changes that have occurred during this time is that the fall has emerged as my favorite time to pursue steelhead in the Great Lakes region. Most of the outings early in my career occurred in the winter or spring. While steelhead generally spawn in late winter or spring, throughout most of the region populations are comprised mainly of winter-run fish. On most rivers,

winter-run fish begin their migration in the proceeding fall months. October, November and early December can be the prime time on many rivers throughout the region. Fall steelhead will generally be in prime shape from a summer of feeding and tend to be more aggressive. Fish at this time will also be more likely to provide the exhilarating fight for which steelhead are well known.

Understanding steelhead behavior in the fall may be the most important ingredient for success. Water temperature directly impacts steelhead behavior. A thermometer is an important part of steelheading equipment. Steelhead tend to be most active in a range of water temperature of approximately 40 to 60 degrees. This is another reason that I favor the fall. It is common to find water temperatures that fall within this range. But the actual water temperature may not be as important as the direction of the mercury. A significant drop in water temperature of five to eight degrees can dramatically slow down steelhead activity. After a cold night I will often time my fishing for later in the morning and into the evening to allow the water temperature to recover. I catch many more steelhead when water temperatures are fairly stable or on the rise than when the mercury is dropping.

Another important factor is water level. An increase in flow due to autumn rains draws steelhead in from the lake or energizes those fish already in the river to continue their migration. Either way it has the effect of stirring the pot. Steelhead change holding lies and become more active and aggressive. Sometimes heavy rains will result in water that is too high and/or dirty to fish. But as the water recedes and clears some of the best conditions can exist for fresh, aggressive steelhead. During the fall it is usually important to react when the conditions are right. I usually closely monitor two or three rivers that I enjoy fishing during the fall – each of differing size and length. Then except for periods following very heavy rains or during a drought, good conditions will commonly exist on a least one of those rivers.

From my own perspective the one item that has changed most dramatically is the fishing approach or technique. When I first started fishing the Great Lakes tributaries, there were very few anglers that were actually fly fishing for steelhead. Most of the techniques at that time focused on presenting small egg or nymph patterns and a dead drift presentation. And most of those involved some form of rigging that seemed to fly in the face of conventional fly fishing. But in the last fifteen years there has been a movement toward techniques that are similar to those that have traditionally been used for Atlantic salmon and steelhead on the Pacific coast. During the fall months, active steelhead will readily strike flies fished on a tight line and allowed to swim and swing across the current. Many myths and misconceptions about Great Lakes steelhead have debunked over the last three decades. The idea of the wet fly swing being an effective method to catch steelhead in the Great Lakes region has taken some time to gather momentum. But each year more anglers are finding this approach to be the most challenging and satisfying way to fish for steelhead.

To fish the wet fly swing I generally make a straight-leader cast across stream. On smaller rivers the cast will likely cover to the opposite bank. On larger rivers the cast will be as long as I can comfortably handle. An immediate upstream mend after the cast will allow the fly to sink quickly. With proper weighting, casting and mending the fly should begin to fish in a broadside manner almost immediately. The fly and tip of the line remain perpendicular to the current through the initial phase of the presentation. Short upstream mends will be used to remove any downstream belly in the line and allow the fly to move slowly and seductively. Actually, the mends will be more like a manipulation of the line and should not change the position of the fly but simply slow its speed. When the fly

reaches a point approximately 45 degrees below the casting position, it will begin to swing through the various current lanes at an angle to the current. The rod tip is pointed at the fly and additional manipulation may be needed to prevent a down stream belly in the line. A slow swing seems to keep the fly more accessible to the fish. The fly should be allowed to swing all the way to a point directly



below the casting position and left hanging there for a couple seconds. Steelhead will often follow the fly and grab it after the swing has been completed. If no steelhead has taken the fly, I make one step down and begin the process again. I work a pool or run from the top to the bottom.

To be effective with the wet fly swing it is important to identify the water that avails itself to this approach – generally runs and pools with a moderate to slower current flow. Tail outs with boulders and other structure can be ideal for this technique. Normally, larger rivers contain more of this type of water, but with careful analysis the right flows can also be found on smaller streams and rivers such as well. I feel that it is important to identify a few runs and pools that meet the criteria on your favorite river and to become intimately familiar with that water. To be effective with the wet fly swing one must practice proper presentation and do it consistently over the course of the outing. But most important is persistence. The wet fly swing may not always produce as many hookups as other techniques. But the wet fly swing is more about the quality and challenge of the experience.

The take of a fall steelhead can come at nearly any time during the wet fly swing presentation. A high percentage of takes are experienced as the fly begins the swing phase and picks up speed. That seems to trigger an instinctive response from a steelhead. Some takes will be violent with the steelhead basically hooking itself. Others will just have the feel of weight or possibly the fly line being pulled down river. Normally the take of the fly should be met with a sweeping downstream hook set. The wet fly swing commonly results in a solid corner-of-the-mouth hook up.

It is important to rig properly for the wet fly swing. Steelhead can be caught in all levels of the water column. But fishing the fly within a foot of the bottom will usually result in more takes. I use a variety of set ups to place the fly in this lower zone. Sinking leaders, sink-tips, or weighted flies with a long monofilament leader all have their place. This latter set up works best in faster flows and is a good choice for smaller rivers. I often use a weighted fly with a sinking leader or sink-tip as well in order to get the fly into the fish's zone as quickly as possible. With sink leaders or sink-tips I generally use a three foot leader/tippet of 12 pound test to the fly. A heavy tippet is required to withstand a forceful take that occurs at a downstream angle.

Covering a pool with the wet fly swing requires a ninety-degree change of direction cast. On smaller rivers this can be done quite easily with a single-handed rod. But a two-handed rod combined with a variety of Spey casts provides much more efficiency. A Spey cast makes the ninety-degree change of direction quickly and effortlessly. A two-hander also allows me to fluidly cover the water. The Spey cast uses the surface of the river to load the rod and in no other form of fly fishing do I experience the same connection to the water. Much of the increased interest in the wet fly swing can be attributed to the equipment that is now available. Light, easy-casting two-handed rods loaded with short head lines have allowed many anglers to be effective with a rather small learning curve. Rods referred to as "switch rods", which are designed to be cast with one hand or two and are generally ten and a half to eleven feet in length, are perfect for Spey fishing on small to medium sized rivers. Switch rods are also perfect for an angler transitioning to Spey fishing.



For autumn steelheading with the wet fly swing I generally use larger flies tied of materials that provide for seductive movement while swimming through the water. Marabou, rabbit strip or Arctic fox fur will be an active ingredient in most of my fall patterns and usually add a subtle amount of flash. I tie many of my patterns on tubes as opposed to a conventional hook. The concept of the tube fly provides a tactical advantage when using the wet fly swing. When using a tube it gives the tyer control over where the hook is positioned relative to the materials. Since a steelhead will often pull at the rear portion of a fly, positioning the hook at or beyond the end of the fly will increase the number of hookups. Also, short-shank hooks are generally used with tube flies. Short hooks provide less leverage during a fight with a steelhead and result in a higher percentage of landed fish. Tubes are available in plastic, brass and copper. Brass and copper tubes create an easy and effective way to weight a fly.

I prefer larger to medium sized rivers for my autumn steelhead fishing throughout the Great Lakes region. Larger rivers provide casting challenges and room for hot fall steelhead to dance. I also enjoy

covering some of the more intimate rivers that are readily found in the region. Here is a dozen of some of the better rivers to try with the wet fly swing technique this fall.

Brule River (Wisconsin) – The Brule enters the south shore of Lake Superior at its western end. The Brule is a beautiful river that cuts through a mixed forest of hardwood and cedar. It is an intimate river that would be a perfect match for a switch rod and Spey techniques. The run on the Brule is comprised mainly of wild steelhead. The fall run typically starts by mid September and peaks by mid October.

Manitowoc River (Wisconsin) – The Manitowoc enters Lake Michigan about 80 miles north of Milwaukee. This is a good Spey fishing and wet fly swing river. The Manitowoc's gentle gradient produces a moderate flows. Steelhead have access to about 20 miles of river which spreads out both the fish and angling pressure. Since the runs aren't as concentrated as some of the other rivers in the state, it is the perfect place to use the wet fly swing to prospect for active steelhead.

Big Manistee River (Michigan) – A big, wide river which is tailored made for big two-handed rods. Fall fish on this river can be bright and aggressive. Reading the water and finding consistent holding areas takes some time and experience. But it can be worth the effort. Wellston, MI is the center of the action on the river and home to Schmidt Outfitters which provide river information, guides, lodging and fly shop.

Muskegon River (Michigan) – Another big, brawling river that receives a mix of wild and stocked fish. This is a great Spey fishing venue. The runs intensify on the Muskegon in November and into December. Like the Manistee it takes time to learn the water. The curve can be shortened by using an experienced guide. My friend Kevin Feenstra specializes in guiding steelhead anglers using swing techniques and two-handed rods.

Pere Marquette (Michigan) – The Pere Marquette is a classic and has a rich history in Great Lakes steelheading. It is characterized by miles of free flowing currents as it bends, twists and turns through scenic forests land. It is quite a bit smaller than the Manistee and Muskegon and its tight, brushy banks make it a perfect river for a short two-hander or switch rod. The Pere Marquette's run of winter steelhead is comprised of wild fish.

Au Sable River (Michigan) – The Au Sable enters Lake Huron at Oscoda. There is about six miles of water accessible to steelhead below Foote Dam. It is big water characterized by long sweeping pools – perfect for swinging big flies down through slow their tail outs. It is ideal Spey fishing water. The runs here begin in September. My friend Kelly Neuman is an experienced guide on the river and has caught steelhead on swinging flies for many years.

Maitland River (Ontario) – The Maitland enters Lake Huron at Goderich, Ontario. The Maitland is a long gentle river that runs through farmland and undeveloped fields and wood lots. It is one of the most beautiful rivers in the region and is perfect for two-handed fishing. However, its base water flow normally runs quite low and the Maitland usually fishes best in years of above average rain fall. The run here is comprised of all wild steelhead and November is normally the best month on this river.

Grand River Ontario (Ontario) – Due to increased access to spawning water and improvements to water quality, the wild run of steelhead on the Grand seems to build each year. This is a classic river for a big two-hander and Spey fishing techniques. Its gentle flows, long pools and aggressive steelhead make it a joy to fish.

Conneaut Creek (Ohio) – The Conneaut enters the south shore of Lake Erie near the Ohio and Pennsylvania border. Actually, the headwaters of the river are located in Pennsylvania. This is an intimate body of water that has the character of a small river. There are numerous small pools with a combination of gravel and bed rock bottom and gentle current that are perfect to fish with a short two-hander or switch rod. The Conneaut can receive good runs of steelhead by early October.

Cattaraugus Creek (New York) – The Catt has the character of a small western river and is one of the best for a swinging fly in the Great Lakes region. Numerous riffles dumping into spacious pools with fairly gentle flows create the perfect combination. The Catt has a mix of wild and hatchery fish. The lower end runs through the Cattaraugus Indian Reservation which requires a special permit. In cooler, rainy years the steelhead runs can begin by early September.

Niagara River (New York) – The Niagara below the falls is huge, powerful and intimidating. It is also host to a good steelhead run comprised mainly of hatchery fish. It is definitely best fished with a two-hander, fast sink-tips and weighted tube flies. Hookup rates are quite low compared to other Great Lakes rivers but one fish pulled from these mighty waters often makes a day.

Salmon River (New York) – The Salmon is another beautiful river found in the Great Lakes region. Its high gradient and ever fluctuating water levels makes it a challenge to fish with the wet fly swing. But the Salmon River can receive good steelhead numbers in September and which can continue right through the winter.

Baptism River/Knife River (Minnesota) – The enchanting north shore of Lake Superior is home to a vast number of beautiful rivers. Most are rather short from a steelheader's perspective, since up-stream migration is commonly blocked by natural barriers. The Baptism and Knife are both sizeable rivers that allow for a variety of fly fishing techniques. While the steelhead runs are stronger in the spring, fall rains can bring in enough fish to provide for some good fishing in autumn as well. The Minnesota steelhead fishery is managed for wild fish with a mix of stockers as well.