



Steelhead Fishing in Idaho Brings Thoughts of Fall

By Mike Demick

The outdoors, camaraderie, spectacular scenery and soothing sounds of nature are all important to steelhead anglers.

But in reality, most anglers seek the heart-pounding, knee-weakening feeling and rod-thumping action immediately after hooking a steelhead.

The feeling is so addicting that anglers will endure extreme weather, risk truancy from work and spend countless dollars all for the chance of catching one of these magnificent sea-going trout.

The addiction also means a big boost to local economies. Economic studies show that steelhead fishing contributes nearly \$100 million a year to Idaho's economy and supports thousands of jobs.

For those new to the sport, don't be intimidated by the gear, tackle and unfamiliar regulations. The regulations are simple, and all you need to get started is basic gear, a fishing license and steelhead permit. Idaho Fish and Game and most local sporting good stores can be helpful. But here are some general hints to get you started.

First, a medium to heavy weight rod and reel loaded with 10- to 20-pound line is a must for the powerful steelhead. Bait cast and spin casting gear work well, but it's best to use gear that's comfortable.

Drift fishing, either from shore or a boat, is probably the most common method for steelhead. This technique uses the river current to carry the tackle in a sweeping arc by casting upstream and letting it drift downstream, bouncing along the rocks on the bottom. Typically, hooks rigged with colored yarn, a small drift bobber and baited with cured roe or shrimp are used with pencil lead or slinky type weights. Large spoons

or spinners can also be effective using this technique. The secret is to keep your tackle moving close to the bottom to provoke a strike.

Another popular method is back trolling – or pulling plugs, as it's commonly referred to. This is done from a boat moving slightly against the current and working slowly down the river and from side to side.

While not as common, the same effect can be accomplished from the shore with the use of a side-planer. Kwikfish and crank baits such as Hot Shots, Wiggle Worts, and Rattlers of various colors can be used with or without bait.

Bobber and jig fishing is another method familiar to panfish anglers. The bobber is carried on the surface by the current while the lead-headed jig works just off the bottom. Most anglers bait their jig hooks with shrimp or roe, and popular colors include pink, black, chartreuse, red and purple.

Fly-fishing for steelhead is becoming more popular and will challenge even the most experienced angler. A long rod, nine foot or longer, and a heavy reel capable of holding 150 yards of line and backing is required to tame the strength of the strong fighting steelhead. Streamer flies in red, yellow, pink, black or orange with crystal flash in the tail generally

work well, as do woolly buggers or any leech pattern in darker colors.

No matter what method they use, anglers can keep only hatchery-raised steelhead marked with a missing adipose fin and evidenced by a healed scar. If the adipose fin is present, the fish is "wild" and protected under the federal Endangered Species Act and must be released.



Fly angler pulls in a steelhead in the Boise River on a November afternoon. *IDFG photo*

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The Fish of A Thousand Casts Lures Idaho Anglers

Adult steelhead returning from the ocean start swimming into Idaho waters each July.

Beginning in August and for the next nine months anglers pursue hatchery steelhead as they migrate up the Snake, Clearwater and Salmon Rivers. Steelhead fishing winds down by the end of May as the fish reach their spawning grounds in Idaho's mountain streams and hatcheries.

Steelhead are a type of rainbow trout that spawn in freshwater streams, migrate to the ocean to grow, and return to fresh water as adults. They are common to the Clearwater, Snake and Salmon rivers.

Idaho's steelhead are often classified into two groups, A-run and B-run, based on their size and ocean life history.

Idaho's A-run steelhead are usually found in the Snake and Salmon rivers. They return from the ocean earlier in the year, usually June through August, after spending one year in the ocean. They typically weigh 4 to 6 pounds and are generally 23 to 26 inches long.

The B-run steelhead most often return to the Clearwater River, but some return to tributaries in the Salmon River. These fish usually spend two years in the ocean, and start their migration to Idaho later

in the summer or fall of the year, usually late August or September. Because of the extra year and the extra summer in the ocean, they return as much bigger fish. Average B-run steelhead weigh 10 to 13 pounds and are 31 to 34 inches long.

Steelhead grow larger still when

and the male fertilizes the eggs as they are deposited. The female covers the eggs with gravel by continuing upstream and the current carries the gravel over the eggs.

The eggs hatch in early to mid-summer. The young fish live in the stream and migrate to the ocean, usually after two years of rearing in the stream. The juvenile fish that migrate to the ocean will grow rapidly.

Steelhead trout eat insects and microscopic animals in the water or on the

surface. They also feed on small fish and fish eggs. As they get larger, they will eat larger fish.

Adult steelhead holding in the river prior to spawning do not eat much, but will strike at food or lures.

They respond to a variety of angling techniques. Since they are not feeding as they wait to spawn, the angler pesters the steelhead enough to get it to strike. They're aggressive and will take a variety of bait, lures and flies. Some anglers prefer plugs, shrimp or fresh fish eggs.



Adult male steelhead trout

© Joseph Tomelleri

they spend a third year in the ocean before returning to Idaho to spawn. These steelhead are usually larger than 37 inches and often weigh more than 20 pounds.

The Idaho state record steelhead was 30 pounds 2 ounces and 44 inches long, caught in the Clearwater River in 1973.

Steelhead spawn in streams from mid-April to late June. They use areas of gravel, or cobble, depending on the size of the fish. The female selects a place in a riffle area below a pool to dig a nest, known as a redd.

She displaces the gravel with her body and tail,

Idaho Fish and Game News

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Published by Idaho Fish and Game
 600 South Walnut
 P.O. Box 25, Boise, ID 83707
 (208) 334-3746
 E-mail: idfginfo@idfg.idaho.gov
<http://fishandgame.idaho.gov>
 Volume 24, Number

Steelhead Licenses and Permits	
Resident Fishing License	\$25.75
Nonresident Fishing License	\$98.25
Junior Resident License (14 – 17 years)	\$13.75
Junior Nonresident Fishing License	\$21.75
Resident Steelhead Permit - Full Season Fishing License Required	\$12.75
Nonresident Steelhead Permit - Full Season Fishing License Required	\$25.75
Nonresident Salmon or Steelhead Three-day License/Permit	\$37.50
Prices are accurate for January 1, 2012 but are subject to change by legislative action.	



Hatcheries Raise Steelhead for a Thriving Fishery

Most of the steelhead trout that return to Idaho rivers each year are raised in five hatcheries – fewer than 20 percent are wild.

After the last of the four lower Snake River dams, Lower Granite, was completed in 1975, Congress authorized the construction of several anadromous fish hatcheries in the region to replace the fish runs lost to dams.

These five hatcheries raise and release over nine million steelhead smolts annually and are the basis of the steelhead fisheries in Idaho. Wild steelhead populations in the Snake River, however, are still listed as threatened on the federal Endangered Species Act.

Fortunately for Idaho's anglers, Idaho Fish and Game became concerned about wild steelhead numbers a decade before they were listed. In the mid-1980s, Fish and Game pioneered marking hatchery steelhead smolts by clipping their adipose fins. And anglers were allowed to harvest only steelhead without an adipose fin.

This marking program has allowed anglers to harvest surplus hatchery fish without jeopardizing the survival of listed wild steelhead stocks.

The Clearwater Fish Hatchery and its four satellite facilities comprise the largest hatchery complex constructed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers under the Lower Snake River Compensation Plan.

The main Clearwater Hatchery is in Ahsahka about 45 miles east of Lewiston. It is operated as part of a federal program created to mitigate fish losses caused by the construction of the four lower Snake River dams. Idaho Fish and Game operates the hatchery with funds from the



The Clearwater Hatchery in Ahsahka, east of Lewiston, raises summer steelhead trout along with spring Chinook salmon. *IDFG photo*

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The hatchery raises spring Chinook salmon and summer steelhead trout.

The Magic Valley Steelhead Hatchery is seven miles northwest of Filer in the Snake River Canyon. It produces about 1.5 million steelhead smolts annually. Most of the 8-inch fish sustain steelhead trout runs in the Salmon River and its tributaries.

The Niagara Springs Hatchery is 10 miles south of Wendell in the Snake River Canyon. It is owned and financed by the Idaho Power Co., and operated by Idaho Fish and Game.

The hatchery raises steelhead smolts to sustain steelhead trout runs in the Snake River below Hells Canyon Dam and in the Salmon River and its tributaries.

northwest of Boise.

Oxbow Hatchery was built in 1962 by Idaho Power and is operated by Fish and Game. Its mission is to conserve fish runs that were halted by the construction of the three dam Hells Canyon Complex.

Snake River adult steelhead are trapped at Hells Canyon Dam and transported 22 miles to the hatchery, which has the potential to produce 1.5 million eggs. The eggs are raised to smolt size at the Niagara Springs Hatchery to produce steelhead trout smolts.

Excess trapped adults are planted in the Boise River, in the Hells Canyon Reservoir for Oregon and in the Little Salmon River for the Nez Perce Tribe.

The Pahsimeroi Hatchery is made up of the lower Pahsimeroi Fish Hatchery on the Pahsimeroi River about one mile above its confluence with the main Salmon River near Ellis, and the upper Pahsimeroi Fish Hatchery about 8 miles upstream of the lower facility.

The hatchery is funded by Idaho Power Co. Eggs are collected and incubated and then shipped to Niagara Springs Hatchery. When they reach smolt size, they are released back into the Pahsimeroi River in April of the following year where they begin their migration to the Pacific Ocean.

Idaho Fish and Game Policy

Idaho wildlife management policy is set by seven volunteer commissioners. The Idaho Fish and Game Commission's policy decisions are based on research and recommendations by the professional staff of the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, and with input from the governor's office, the state Legislature, hunters, anglers and the public.

The Oxbow Hatchery is in Baker County in eastern Oregon adjacent to the confluence of Pine Creek and the Snake River, which forms the Oregon and Idaho border, about 150 highway miles

Upper Salmon River Steelhead Have Complex Lives

By Tom Curet

You can tell by the number of drift boats arriving in town every weekend – the steelhead are back in the Salmon River.

So when did they get here? How long does it take them to get here from the ocean? What do they do all winter? The steelhead has one of the most fascinating and complex life histories of all sea-going (anadromous) fish that return to Idaho to spawn.

Steelhead began migrating from the ocean back to Idaho in July. Counting facilities on Columbia and Snake River dams allow biologists and anglers to track the movement and timing of these fish. A few will arrive in the upper Salmon River by late August or early September.

As of early August, the steelhead run crossing lower Columbia and Snake river dams had been modest compared to recent years. But once river temperatures drop, steelhead may begin to make their way to Idaho waters.

Radio tracking of moving fish shows that returning steelhead are capable of traveling up to 18 miles each day as they navigate their way through reservoir pools. In free flowing portions of the Snake River, they move up to sixteen miles per day.

In some years the water temperatures in the lower Snake River reservoirs can

be high enough to inhibit adult movement into the Snake from the Columbia River. During those warm years, the arrival of the adult steelhead can be delayed until later in the fall.

Fish will continue to arrive in the upper river corridor throughout the fall, and the upstream migration will continue until winter descends on the Salmon River country.

During most years, steelhead have been documented upstream as far as Challis before the onset of winter. Once winter grips the river, many of these fish will remain in the larger pools and deep run habitats in the Salmon River, waiting for spring to arrive at hatcheries or spawning areas.

After staging all winter, fish begin a final push upstream to their spawning grounds when winter relents. Many fish are en route to either the Pahsimeroi or Sawtooth fish hatcheries or to one of the many Salmon River tributaries to spawn. This is the time we again see large numbers of anglers from throughout Idaho and surrounding states in their own migration to the river for a chance to catch one of these awesome fish.

Spring river conditions dictate how the spring fishing season progresses. Ice jams can dominate the river corridor throughout the winter. These ice jams,

composed of hundreds of tons of broken, angular ice, can at times completely block and dam portions of the Salmon River. When the river is blocked, fish may not be able to move upstream in the spring, and depending on when the ice jam releases, this delay can affect the quality of fishing upstream of North Fork.

Rain or early season melting can also make the river conditions challenging for anglers.

The fish have really only one thing on their mind in spring – spawning. If they have been delayed because of cold weather ice jams or muddy water from snow melt or rains, the fish can move quickly from their winter staging areas to their spawning locations. On such years, fishing can be slow and difficult. But if late winter or early spring conditions are mild, fishing can be good because river conditions remain very stable and clear for anglers.

The steelhead life history strategy is quite different from Pacific salmon, such as Chinook or sockeye, which all die after spawning. After spawning, some adult steelhead will begin migrating back down-river in an attempt to reach the ocean again.

Before dam construction on the lower Snake and Columbia rivers, some of these fish were able to make a repeat spawning run. But repeat spawning is rare today.

The eggs from fish that successfully spawn in local streams will incubate throughout the spring, and the fry typically emerge in June and begin foraging for food. Juvenile steelhead remain in the upper Salmon River one to five years before migrating to the ocean to complete their grueling life cycle.



Steelhead anglers in boats line up in the upper Salmon River.

IDFG photo

For more information and for steelhead limits and seasons, and fishing rules please consult the 2012 Fishing Seasons and Rules brochure, available at Fish and Game offices, at all licence vendors and on the Fish and Game website: <http://fishandgame.idaho.gov>.