



Catching SPOOKY Steelhead

by Carl Haensel

photos by the author

Dawn arrived along the Lake Erie shoreline with a gray, sullen mist. As we poked through the late autumn woods on the way to a favorite Elk Creek, Erie County, fishing spot, the water in the stream trickled through rocks in the nearby riffles. It had been a few weeks since the last rains had fallen, and area tributaries had dropped. Pennsylvania's Lake Erie streams are not known for their consistent flows, and without rain, little water was left. Weeks earlier, however, it had been a different story, and fall rains had brought

plenty of fish into the rivers. These fish were now waiting in falling waters as we made our way along the creek. Catching them would not be easy. While it can often be simple to find steelhead milling around a pool, many anglers spend frustrating hours casting to fish that refuse their offerings, time and time again. There are a number of techniques that can make your time on the water more rewarding and bring spooky steelhead to hand.

Low water fly selection

If the time is right, steelhead can be caught on almost any fly. Low water steelhead need different patterns. Smaller, more naturally colored flies are good options. Flies as small as size 14 can be effective, but smaller hooks are much more likely to bend or unhook fish than larger



Look to riffles like this spot on Elk Creek, Erie County, to produce more consistently than pools. If few fish are biting, riffles and runs will often produce fish regardless of whether water is low or high.

ones. Often, tying a smaller fly on a larger sized hook can help solve this problem and allow you to fish even smaller patterns. Egg flies in sizes 10-12 can be effective, compared to standard sizes such as 6 and 8. Nymphs and small streamers in sizes 10-12 can also work well. Try natural patterns like Hare's Ear or stonefly patterns that are leggy. Materials that move on a fly like marabou or rubber legs can help convince steelhead to bite when fish are not as willing. If you're going to use beadhead nymphs to get a bit deeper, try using patterns with black or dark brass beads instead of the standard gold.

Tying on your fly

When you're rigging up for steelhead in low water, using different tippet and knots can go a long way to hooking up with fish. Start by using fluorocarbon tippet. It is nearly invisible underwater and offers greater abrasion resistance as well. Lighter weight tippet can help as well but not too light. I've seen anglers go as light as 6x tippet, which presents an ethical dilemma. If you can't land a large fish quickly, you may tire it to a point where it won't survive upon release. Stick to a high-quality 4x tippet in low water

Smaller steelhead flies in sizes 8-12 can produce in low water conditions that may lead to spooky steelhead. From top to bottom: Yarn Egg, Gel Egg, Rubber Leg Copper John, Black Hare's Ear and Jigged Beadhead Pheasant Tail.

conditions. To get a truly "light line" presentation, try using a loop knot on your flies. This can make a much larger difference than line size since it lets the fly on the end swing naturally in the current. If you're using a two fly rig, use a loop knot on the end fly only. Also, use lighter tippet on your end fly. An example of this is to use 3x tippet to your first fly and 4x tippet between the first and second flies.

Spotting steelhead

Often, catching spooky steelhead is about spotting the fish before it spots you. Look for fish in unlikely spots. Often, fish in low water will hang on thin current seams and edges. While heading from pool to pool, don't be surprised to nearly step on fish as you cross riffles. These steelhead can be very catchable, especially if the water is fast. The faster the water, the less time fish have to respond



Steelhead rest in a deep pool in clear water on Elk Creek, Erie County. Fish in these types of locations can be hard to catch and will often spook quickly.

to a presentation, making fish much more likely to be active since fish are expending energy to hold in these positions. Steelhead that are resting in a pool are harder to catch, especially if there is little current flow. Target fish at the front of the pool or in the tail of the pool, as opposed to the deep middle, where fish are often lethargic and resting.

Presenting flies to spooky fish

In normal water conditions, steelhead often ignore a fly line splashing down directly on top of the fish. In low water, the same cast can send fish shooting upstream or down, into locations where you may never see the fish again. To avoid this reaction from fish, there are a few things that you can do. First, lengthen your leader. Use at least 9 feet of leader length. This makes casting harder, but it keeps your line away from the fish. If you're using a strike indicator, try to choose the smallest kind that you can see well. It often doesn't even need to float well. In low, clear water, you can see it if it is under water. Adjust your strike indicator regularly to an appropriate depth for the water that you are fishing. In riffles and shallow runs, this can sometimes be as little as 1-foot or 2-feet. Cast your flies from across the stream or even from above the fish to have the flies, not the line, reach the steelhead first. Watch fish closely for a take. Many times, steelhead take a fly and then spit it out. If the water is clear enough, you can often set the hook by watching the fish instead of your strike indicator.

Fishing in low light

A few years ago, I was fishing on a popular Erie tributary with a friend. The water was low and fishing had been slow. It was a long day, and it showed on the faces of dozens of other anglers. As the sun dipped behind the horizon, the last of the other steelhead anglers left the stream. Soon, my friend hooked up with a big fish. Then, I did. We battled another four fish before darkness fell, and we left the water. In low water, fish often will be more active in low light conditions. Whether it's near dawn and dusk or when clouds and rain roll in, it's a great time to be on the water. You'll also have less competition, especially at the end of the day. ☐



Fish for steelhead in low water and low light conditions.