

Steelhead Fever

by: Kevin Payne

They were lurking everywhere. Behind every logjam, along every deep pool or gravel run, and around every bend or curve of the mighty AuSable. They were of different sizes and each seemed to have its own particular holding area, but they were all of the same species. Some were easily spotted while others were nearly hidden in their annual spring environment. Much has been written about them, and one thing is for certain. Steelhead fishermen are a breed apart.

Fisherman? That's right, steelhead fishermen. At this time of year they pack their waders, rods, vests and anything else they can stuff into their northbound vehicles in order to match wits with the high jumping, drag burning steelhead trout.

The destination could be almost anywhere. Northern Michigan is abounding with quality streams that are steelhead havens in the spring. Along the Lake Michigan shoreline the Big Manistee, Little Manistee, Betsie, Platte, Pere Marquette, and White Rivers all hold large numbers of migrating steelhead. However, along the Lake Huron coast the AuSable River is king. From the mouth at Oscoda upstream to the Foote Dam, the AuSable is home to some legendary steelhead haunts. The bang, the apple tree, the trestle bridge, three pipes, whirlpool, and the high banks are just a few of these. There are also many "secret" spots that only a few hundred thousand anglers have fished before. Every year people still whisper about them. It is a fisherman's prerogative to keep secrets and tell lies.

Last spring this was demonstrated to perfection by a "hollywood" steelhead fisherman at the trestle bridge. This guy looked like he walked right out of an L.L. Bean catalog. Somebody who looks like that has to be really good or really rich. He was wading just upstream from the bridge in his tan neoprene boot foot waders when two fishermen walked up to the bank behind him.

"Anything happenin' around here," the older of the two asked?

"No, I've been here all morning and haven't caught a thing or seen anything caught in any of those boats," Hollywood said while pointing with his fingerless wool gloves toward the line of four boats anchored downstream from him.

"Really? The guy at the tackle shop said this should be the hottest spot on the river."

"Its usually pretty good but today everyone's knocking 'em dead up at the dam I guess," he said as he glanced down his 9 foot graphite rod at the fly dangling on the end of his line.

"What kind of fly is that," the younger fisherman asked?

"I think they call it a springs wiggler. I don't think it'll catch anything, but nobody's catching anything anyway."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. Take care, I guess were going to the dam."

"Okay, take 'er easy." As the two fishermen walked away Mr. Hollywood made a cast up under the trestle bridge and within seconds was head to head with a 4 pound scrappy male. The battle was short but sweet and ended when he slipped the fish into his custom, wood landing net. As he walked back toward the bank he reached down and grabbed a thin, gold colored rope. At the end were four

of the prettiest fresh run steelhead you would ever want to see! Obviously nothing was happening around there, not anymore that is. Hollywood walked down the railroad tracks and out of sight with his limit.

Limit catches are the exception on any river. However, one fisherman could do no wrong. There were a group of five middle-aged men camping on the point across from high banks. Anyone who has fished there knows the difficulty of landing a steelhead over, under, and around all of the logs once its hooked. Many fish were hooked by the other four men but few were landed. The fifth guy, however, put on a clinic playing these powerful fish. In fact, after landing at least 10 or 15 he went back into the tent and slept for awhile. When he came out about an hour later he proceeded to wade back into the river and catch a 14 pound female on his first cast. This was the only fish he kept all day. The other fish were all released to outwit lesser fishermen someday. He also proved that you don't have to look the part in order to catch these fish. He wore old, steel shank, green rubber waders, a navy blue ski jacket and a Detroit Tigers baseball cap. This is far from the neoprene waders, gore-tex coat, and up-downer cap that Hollywood wore.

Throughout the years steelhead fishermen have come and gone, but one thing remains constant. There has to be a greater variety of personalities among participants of this sport than any other.

This is evident in the way they fish. Take casting for instance. There is at least one "whipper" in every crowd. This person seems to be in a constant contest both to make a lot of noise with his rod and to set a world record for casting three split shot.

"Hey Bruce, watch this." After a loud whipping crack the line flies off the spool and the bait promptly lands in the sumac on the far bank.

"Top that one, eh eh eh."

"Why would I want to Jimmy?"

"Aw, you're just jealous, eh eh eh."

The opposite method is the finesse approach. This type of caster will usually look similar to Mr. Hollywood and cast as if there was never any stress or anxiety in his life. He just raises his rod in one hand and slowly tosses his bait out into the middle of the current. He is here to relax and it makes the muscles in the back of your neck tense up just watching him. This type will also be the ones that slowly reel their bait in at the end of their drift and hook three or four lines in the process.

Personality differences also show up in the type of equipment that the fishermen use. A person has to have a great disposition to fish for steelhead with a level wind reel. Not only that, but he must also come up with excuse after excuse as to why he backlashed again. Some of the excuses include, "Boy is it windy!", "The lure must be too light", or the always famous, "My son must have been playing with this thing." Other fisherman with spinning tackle. listen just hoping to hear one they haven't heard before.

"Yeah I know. I wonder if his wife had anything to do with this one."

Of all the peculiar people along a steelhead stream, the best ones to watch are always the dedicated bass fishermen. They are out of their element on a steelhead trip. It is always fun to watch an overweight man sliding sideways down a 100 foot high, 60° sand bank. All the while carrying a flippin'

stick and a 73 pound tackle box, and never even thinking as to how he is going to get back up. When he reaches the river he opens his box and hula poppers, jitterbugs, buzz baits, and 8" plastic worms fall out all over the sand. After replacing everything in its proper place, he reaches down and picks up a hook and a foam coffee cup. This holds the dried out spawn sacs he found at the top of the mountain he just tumbled down. Now that he is ready he latches the tackle box shut and turns to face the river.

"Man shoot! I knew I shouldn't have let Jethro borrow my waders to go froggin'."

He is now out of casting range and his only hope is to entice a fish out of one of the man-made holes in front of him. These footprints of wading anglers don't hold too many steelhead, however. As you can tell, people watching can be more fun than fishing itself. Even so, listening to their fish stories is even better. Usually a story may catch the attention of one or two people, but last spring on a gravel run of the AuSable a dozen or so were "hooked" at once. They were shoulder to shoulder all casting in hopes of fighting an aggressive fish when the story began.

"What are they using?" the blond woman asked as she stood up on the bank.

"Well, do you know anything about steelhead miss," a dark haired man puffing of a cigar asked?

"Only that they drive my husband crazy this time of year. He calls it steelhead fever and I agree with him."

The man, shirtless, leaned back against a tree and adjusted his waders so they wouldn't dig into his bare skin. "A steelhead is a very unique fish, ma'am. They got their name for a reason and that's why these fellas have switched to magnets as bait."

"Magnets?"

"That's right. You see, steelhead are frequently attracted to magnets." By this time the whole group of fishermen turned around and were listening to the wise man talk. "There is one thing to watch out for," he said. "If there is any negative polarity involved it could shoot the steelhead right up onto the opposite bank."

Needless to say, this brought cheers of laughter up from the river below and it slowly brought a smile to the woman's face once she realized she had heard her first fish story.

Steelhead fever has caught a lot of people for a lot of years and it will continue to do so as long as a fish of this power, beauty, and mystique is allowed to survive. This spring, next spring, and every spring thereafter will bring these anglers north to the streams that harbor steelhead. Once arriving they will find their particular holding area and fish until their bodies ache. All the while watching and listening to everything around them. That's what fish stories are made of.