

Fifty Years a Steelheader

Still in his sixties, the writer can look back on half a century of steelhead stalking.

The very rivers he fishes conjure magic images to any steelheader, past, present or future.

Hear, for example, of the Russian and the Rogue, the Copper and the Klamath, of the Sustut and the Kulik and the Mad and then the Eel.

Ken Morrish

THE YEAR 1921 WAS A VERY GOOD YEAR—this was the summer that I discovered that I could get paid for going fishing. We had been spending our summer vacations at Mohawk on California's Feather River where my dad, Will, had seen to it that, if I wanted to fish (which I did), I did it with a fly rod (which I also did). We were based at the Feather River Inn part of the time, where I picked up a few summer dollars as a caddy between fishing forays to the various lakes—Grass, Jamison, Gold, Long and others, as well as Jamison, Smith and other creeks as well as the middle fork of the Feather.

The Feather River Inn had an old French-Canadian guide, Jerry Burrelle, who took parties out fishing and sometimes there were more dudes wanting to go fishing than there were days for Jerry to take them. I had become a fishing buddy of Jerry's and one day he suggested that I give him a hand with a party and take two people to Gold Lake and row them around fishing (the pay, \$5.00 a day . . . wow!).



Kendric Morrish lives in Walnut Creek, California, and caught his first steelhead in 1924 as a teenager on the Klamath in Oregon. He is pictured here with his first Eel River steelhead, landed in 1927.

And by the end of that summer I was richer than Croesus, with well over \$100 in the can in my trunk. This was hot money, burning a large hole in my pocket so I went over to Ben Golcher on Market Street in San Francisco and blew the entire bankroll on a 3¾-oz., 8½-ft. Leonard fly rod, a 3½ Hardy Model Perfect reel and a genuine Halford tapered line—the only 14-year old in the entire world with such equipment! (I should have gotten a slightly heavier rod, I realize in retrospect, but I still have and use both the rod and reel every summer on certain waters.)

Now for the start of the steelhead affair. The summer of 1924 my father took me on a two-week fishing trip as a high school graduation present. We started at the Smith River, where the State of California had a prison road camp building the new highway into Oregon, had a glorious week there and then decided to try for salmon at Requa at the mouth of the Klamath. In those days most of the fishing was done with a heavy hand-line of green twine with several ounces of lead to hold the spinner down in the moving water; we anchored along Murderers Row and did we catch salmon. Now comes the point of this long introduction. Dad got wind of the fact that Pete Williams, a very fine Indian boatman, would run us up to Blue Creek for the day to try for steelhead—of which I had not seen any to date—so we booked ourselves for the next day. Up we went early in the morning with those lovely mists rising off the river as the sun came up, and with mergansers spattering off ahead of the boat as it roared up the heavy riffles.

I was ideally equipped for steelhead on a heavy river, of course, with my new under-four-ounce rod, a double-tapered line, no backing (what was backing?) and a pair of tennis shoes, and, oh yes, a fine mix of #10 Black Gnats, Royal Coachmen and Gray Hackle



Yellows, all snelled, and several six-foot three-dropper leaders and a small trout net. Was this all a recipe for a debacle, like it sounds? No sir, by the grace of God, I have been lucky all my life and this time was no exception.

First, there was only one lone fisherman on that long riffle where Blue Creek comes into the Klamath; second, the water was low and clear (for the Klamath); and third, the river was crawling with thousands of "half-pounders" (weighing up to perhaps two pounds) who just loved that little Black Gnat fished almost on the surface on a sweeping "across and downstream" cast. Man, that little rod was scared to death, and so was I, as the first "half-pounder" took off downstream with simply a double-tapered line to work with. Well, I was young, got ashore, and ran like a deer down that long beach just ahead of disaster, beaching the fish in due course.

This was the first chapter in an unfolding story which hasn't ended yet after fifty years. When Pete Williams came for us in the late afternoon a new steelhead fisherman went back with him, already puzzling as to where to get some tackle designed for these lovely creatures.

I don't recall any years other than during World War II when the steelhead and I have not had a visit somewhere, although there may be a year or two I've forgotten. I'll tell you one thing, in passing—that was

A lonely steelheader casts his hopes upon the waters of British Columbia's fabled Dean River. Photos courtesy of the author.



Author Ken Morrish plays the happy warrior as he nets a steelhead on the Sustut in British Columbia.



Morrish hangs on hopefully to a strong Sustut River steelie.

the first and last time I ever fished for steelhead without a reel full of backing. It was interesting that the next time I got to Blue Creek, the big steelhead were in and I needed all the backing a larger reel would hold. I was just lucky on that first trip!

A very few years after this episode I lucked out again. My cousin, Dr. Clarence Crane, had moved out from Boston to retire on the Eel River, where he had purchased the famous old Sandbar Club at Fernbridge and remodeled it for his permanent home. Eel River old-timers all know of the Sandbar Club, a large comfortable old house high above the Eel, and owned by a small number of dedicated steelhead fly fishermen who lived thereabouts as well as elsewhere and who got together for a good bit of fishing, gaming and drinking during the fall season when the fish were in. There were four or five large bedrooms off an enormous living room with a great fireplace which could burn great logs and on the walls were great old fishing photos and great fish in them (the Eel River fish ran big). There were also a number of prolific fruit trees, a vegetable garden and a real barn with everything in it. Oh, yes, a pasture for cows and horses as well.

The years on the Eel are absolutely unforgettable to me, and served as a real catalyst in my steelhead career. The first year Clarence invited me up, it was to troll for salmon in front of his house and down at Snag and Dungan Pools, which we did with great success. I remember the great day when my three fish weighed 26, 36 and 46 pounds.



Angling companion John Gustafson and guide with a Dean River steelhead taken on a Skunk Fly.

That first year I, as a new man on the Eel, was not even aware of the steelhead fishing, having been invited to fish for salmon. By this time I had an adequate steelhead rod and outfit for the Klamath, and as luck would have it, took it along just in case (such as slipping up to the Klamath for a day or two after the salmon were caught). I also had accumulated a few real steelhead flies, with genuine jungle cock wings (considered an absolute necessity in those days).

For some reason or other I had the steelhead rod in the boat the third day of trolling for salmon, and wonder of wonders, I saw a rolling rise of a big feeding fish right near me, and then another and another—and

they sure didn't look like salmon. I cranked in the trolling rig, grabbed the setup fly rod with the Railbird Fly, and cast toward yet another boil. Within three or four casts I had an unbelievable strike and the reel started its song, followed by a double-ended jump of a big steelhead, the biggest I had ever seen. With no current to use or direct it, this fish made up its own script, planing, jumping, running in two directions at once and so forth, one of the great fights in my memory. Eventually I slid the net under a lovely nine-pound hen with sea lice still clinging to her sides. The steelhead were in that week of mid-October, and after one good freshet the week before, that triggered the run; I have never had a better week's fishing since!

There was a crew of real experts that fished the Eel in those days. I remember several that I fished with and they were the giants of the fly at that time. Fred Burrham, a big, strong man with a big, strong voice and who was a beautiful caster. Many is the day I cast alongside him in our rowboats in Snag, Dungan or Weymouth pools. (Did you know that much of the best fly fishing was done from these anchored rowboats at this time?)

Then there was Sam Wells, a fabulous fisherman who owned a small tackle shop in Eureka, but who was on the river more than in the shop. He was Mr. Steelhead to many. I also remember Roy Kopf, a great fisherman from Petaluma, who won the *Field and Stream* contest with a 19-lb., 12-oz. buster that he took from the Eel while I was on the river. A great celebration there was that night, too; what a fish that was. It was long ago, but I seem to remember Roy saying that the only way he was able to land this fish was because it made its first initial run across the river instead of downstream; he felt that the fish could not have been stopped if it had gone downstream on the first run.

Then there were Fred and Jerry Kreig (Jerry was Fred's wife and just as good a fisherman) who owned the jewelry store in Fortuna and who could give you true dope on the Eel at any time you wrote or phoned. And there were the stalwarts from the San Francisco Flycasting Club who could fish as well as they could cast—Jack Horner, the Hittenbergers, and many others whose names have dimmed with the years.

The Eel is a very slow-moving stream, and usually low and quite clear in fall flyfishing time. We fished it almost as we would a lake, with long casts, slow retrieves and usually small flies, usually a #8, or sometimes even a #10 in clear water. My best fly was a #8 Railbird with a jungle cock wing. Our flies were not tied on particularly heavy hooks nor fished as deeply as we do today. I would say that most of the fishing was done in mid-water, not too far below the surface, sometimes so near the top that a fish would show a swirl on the surface when he took. This was also true on the Klamath. I don't recall, in those days, any particular effort to get the fly deep as we do today. Maybe the fish were stupider in those days (or maybe we were more stupid to not get it down!).

The final highlight on the Eel was a day in Novem-

ber when I was alone on East Ferry Pool in a pouring rain. The river was starting to bulge a bit, the current was picking up and the freshet water was bringing in a real run of fish that could be seen rolling and jumping as they progressed. That morning I hooked innumerable fish, ranging from a bunch of big "half-pounders" to steelhead of over ten pounds, and capped it off with two real savage new hookbills that went like waterborne tanks. (If you don't know a hookbill, it is the Eel term for a male silverside salmon.) I guess it's a sign of age to look back with so much pleasure on those old days, but I sure do!

There have also been days on the Van Duzen and Mad Rivers that were clock-stoppers, too, and later, the Rogue; in fact, a book could be done on the Rogue alone, with those downstream trips with the Helfrichs and with my old buddy Bob Saylor, who lived on the river for a number of years and boated it like a pro. Then there is the close-by, slow-moving Russian River which is basically used as a bait and lure stream but which turns up with some first-rate fly fishing under the proper conditions. I have a small vineyard on the Russian and know a few secret spots that produce with a fly when the water is right, usually with my friend Jim Keegan, a master steelhead fisherman who can read water like it was a first-grade primer. On the Russian we fish where Jim says. Jim lives in Santa Rosa and has an underground communications system working all fall. He'll be on the Russian, Navarro, Alder Creek, or whatever when The Word comes through on the grapevine.

The Russian River fish are lovely, heavy fish, but are not as fast as in some other streams. They are approaching their spawning time and are pretty heavy with eggs and milt and not as full of go as the "green" fall fish in other streams. Not that they aren't strong, just not as fast; at least, it seems so to me.

Then there was a month in New Zealand as a guest of the New Zealand Government to sample and write about their hunting and fishing. This trip makes the "steelhead" category because, as many of you know, all the rainbow in New Zealand come from our Russian River stock which was sent over there and the Russian River stock is steelhead rather than pure rainbow. I suppose one can say that the center of the rainbow fishing in New Zealand is around Lake Taupo, an enormous fresh-water lake on the North Island which acts as "the ocean" for the rainbow (or steelhead) that ascend the many entering streams at spawning time. When first introduced the rainbows literally exploded in numbers and size, but by now the food supply has adjusted and the rainbow have adjusted and the size has dropped to a four- to eight-pound average, although there of course are a good many taken above that size. They have their own series of wet flies, naturally, but I can assure you that ours work there as well.

The author is starting to talk to steelhead now. Wants only a half-hour of their time to establish a meaningful relationship.

With their strong British background, the New Zealanders are inclined to use British-type rods and tackle, the most surprising to an American being the enormous ten- to 12-foot long rods (salmon rods to them). The streams, except the Tongariro, are not that large and American rods really fit the pattern better than those two-handed giants of theirs, and more and more of our size rods are being used. Did you ever hear of sinking your fly by jamming the tip of your rod down to the bottom of the stream in order to pull the entire line under? Well, I've seen it done, and often by the boys in New Zealand. Of course, you could likely kill a charging leopard by jabbing him with one of these 12-foot derricks they use, so it apparently does no harm to the rod, but it certainly is a surprise when you see it.

At any rate, the New Zealand streams are a delight to fish, and most are a nice size to cast and wade, and the people you fish with are great. Russian River fish . . . how about that?

Finally, as my days grow shorter and time more valuable, instead of buying my wife a new dress, I have been blowing it on trips to Alaska and Canada—with simply lovely results. I won't talk about the wonderful streams around Lake Iliamna, the greatest trout nursery in the world, because these great fish, although having access to the ocean via the Kvichak River don't seem to leave Iliamna (according to their scale measurements and, therefore, must be called rainbow (and what rainbows they are).

The last love affair is with the Dean River in northern British Columbia (and many of you who read this know the stream well). Heavy water, like the Klamath, subject to changes in depth and color as are all northern streams, when right, this is the classic fly fisherman's stream. If you have never had a Dean River strike, there is really no way to explain it. These great fish don't just strike, they take the fly away from you and you had better let go of that line right now—unless you actually want a broken leader. Runs go up into hundreds of yards and one of the commonest occurrences is to see your line going downstream and a fish suddenly jumping upstream . . . yours.

I learn slowly and not too often, but I now know that to do your best work on steelhead you must get your fly down near the bottom, particularly in a stream like the Dean. I now use heavy hooks, strong leaders, even wrap lead around the leader in a couple of spots, cast quartering upstream when possible, mend the cast upstream and hope it gets to the bottom, because that's where the fish are. If I learn as much the next fifty years as I did the last, I may be qualified to meet a steelhead on even terms.

Here's one piece of information that I learned on the Sustut River in British Columbia. This small river is loaded with big steelhead on their way to spawn. One can cast to a school of thirty or more, in plain sight and in quite shallow water, and watch the fly go by within inches of a fish with no reaction—for some twenty-seven times. Then, on the twenty-eighth there's an opened mouth and deliberate take (and on other occasions an accidental foul hook). This led us to believe that in heavier water where we could not see our fly, we may be casting over many more fish than we thought, instead of thinking "there is nothing in here right now." In other words, maybe we should cast more and at different depths before we think the run is barren.

Finally, some random thoughts on tackle and other subjects. In the old days a fish was seldom released, although the limit was basically adhered to by most fly fishermen. Today, almost every fly-rod man that I know takes pleasure (and pride) in releasing most or all ten- or 20-pound steelhead back into the water after the necessary resuscitation. I really first learned this from my son Bill, who is a better man than I on the big ones. In Alaska, especially, where the big ones take so long to get big because of the short growing season, releasing is an absolute necessity if we want to have any trophy trout left.

As to tackle, I personally believe in using the right size and weight equipment to properly handle the casting and playing of big fish. I want no fairy wands myself, anymore than I want an English 12-foot two-hander. For me, and I think most anglers, a nine- to nine-and-a-half-foot rod that handles a #10 line is just about right for steelhead, and a single-action reel that will take 150 to 200 yards of dacron backing (and I've seen and felt *that* all gone). Fast-sinking high-density line is the only type for steelhead.

Avoid monofilament backing for big fish like the plague, for it can tighten up under the strain of a big fish and really tie up your reel; I know from experience. Use a heavy enough leader to avoid sudden and stupid breakoffs from the surge of a big one. I say ten-pound minimum, and sometimes fifteen, like on the Dean.

As my small contribution to steelheading, I am trying to devise a scheme to be able to communicate with steelhead. If they only realized that all we want of them is a half-hour of their time and a little exercise and excitement—for both of us—and that they could then return to their homes relaxed and refreshed, what fun both of us could have. Let me know if you have any ideas. ■

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