

On the Grab STEELHEAD

UNTIL RECENT YEARS, many fly fishermen believed that steelhead and Atlantic salmon did not feed after they entered the rivers to spawn. That was a fact, many believed, and disbelievers were scorned. Those beliefs prevailed when I started steelhead fishing many years ago, but I know better now.

The Discovery

ONE APRIL DAY in the middle of the steelhead spawning season, a guy named Dick Smith came into my fly shop in Ada, Michigan. Dick, a fine and knowledgeable fisherman, had spent two seasons in the Pacific Northwest learning how to fish for steelhead, before steelhead fishing became common in Michigan.

On this particular day the usually laconic Smith was excited. "I just caught several steelhead on black stonefly nymphs," he said. "There was a big emergence of the flies, and the fish were going crazy over them."

I commented that this was indeed strange, since steelhead do not feed in the river. "Sure they do," Dick said. "They may not feed as heavily as they do at other stages of life, but they do feed. Today they were going nuts over those nymphs."

I grabbed some large black stonefly nymphs and my steelhead rod and headed for the river. My most vivid memory of that day was seeing a big male steelhead accelerate off a spawning bed to smash an artificial nymph 10 to 12 feet away. I kept that fish, and when I opened him up, I found the remains of 18 or 20 stonefly nymphs in his stomach. I won't say the fish was in the midst of expelling milt to fertilize eggs, but he was definitely spawning—hogging the redd and driving other males away.

As time went on, we began to hear more reports of



JOHN RANDOLPH PHOTO

*Foods Michigan
steelhead eat
and the flies
to match them*



CARL RICHARDS PHOTO

DICK POBST

from Pere Marquette Lodge. These men have spent years fishing Michigan, along with summers spent guiding in Alaska, Canada, and the West Coast. They checked the stomach contents of any fish their clients wanted to keep. (We urge clients to release fish, and will not willingly kill a female.) Here is a summary of what we found:

The fish caught in the fall fed on two things—salmon eggs and caddis larvae. The caddis larvae were the large greenish free-living larvae that fishermen call rock worms. In some cases the fish had only taken a

steelhead feeding. The myth died a hard, fast death. I don't know why I had believed the old cliché. Many of our steelhead are in the river for two or three months, a few maybe six months. It certainly did not stand to reason that they could exist there for so long without a good source of food.

While most reports indicated that steelhead feeding was light and sporadic, some said that the fish actually gorged on certain insects. It was just like trout feeding during a dry-fly hatch, except that the flies were not available as dry flies. When the food was available in great quantities, the fish would feed selectively on the predominant hatch and ignore offerings that were different from their preferred food.

It is more than ten years since those early days. We became well aware of the steelhead's feeding habits, but we never tried to systematically analyze those habits. Recently I was surprised to learn that many fly fishermen were still unaware that steelhead feed in the rivers, so I decided to spend one season getting as many reports as possible and compiling the results.

Our most experienced guides, John Kluesing and Walt Grau, agreed to help. So did Tom and Jim Johnson,



Sometimes steelhead feed heavily on drifting eggs and stonefly nymphs. A large stonefly pattern (opposite page, top) can imitate the naturals, which hatch out of their shucks (opposite page, bottom). Egg patterns work well, too.



CARL RICHARDS PHOTO

From October through April steelhead take a variety of naturals, including stonefly nymphs (above), caddis larvae, and eggs. Green Rock Worms imitate the caddis larvae.

as long as you have a large (sizes 4 and 8) dark stonefly nymph in your box

Presenting the Food

THE FISHING TECHNIQUE for feeding steelhead is based on one of the primary tenets of fly fishing—the fly not only must look natural, it must act naturally, too. Since both fish eggs and nymphs drift along the bottom, the fly must also drift slowly, as the bottom current is very slow. This means you need a split-shot, usually attached to a dropper, to get the fly to the

bottom and make it drift slowly.

You need a sensitive rod to be able to feel the touch of the fish. Light graphite rods in the 7- or 8-weight category, nine to ten feet long, work well. The new graphite materials provide the greatest sensitivity.

Feeding steelhead have their food delivered by the current. Therefore they can lie downstream from the source of food, in a spot protected from the current. In the spring and fall almost all of their food comes from spawning beds. Fish eggs, of course, come from the redds. The larvae and nymphs that are available to the fish are almost all knocked out of the gravel by spawning fish.

The steelhead's feeding position depends on the aggressiveness of the fish. The hungriest fish move right onto the beds. Others lie in a pocket directly below the redd. The most cautious lie at the bottom of a deep run or the head of a pool, where the current con-



Salmon eggs provide an excellent source of food for feeding steelhead. Imitate the eggs with Glo-Bugs.

dozen or so pieces of food, but in other cases they were gorged. Ray Schmidt, another Michigan steelhead guide, reported seeing fish so full of rock worms they were dribbling out of the fish's mouths.

Winter-caught fish fed only when the air was warm, generally on sunny afternoons, and had only one food source—the tiny winter black stoneflies. Jim Bedford, a serious winter-steelhead fisherman, reported taking fish, caught on hardware, that had tiny black stoneflies coming out of their mouths. On sunny afternoons you can find hundreds or thousands of tiny black flies crawling over the snow. That is the sign that the insects are emerging, and the fish are feeding.

Fish caught in the spring once again fed on eggs—their own, salmon eggs, and the eggs of suckers—as well as the large brown and black stonefly nymphs that are abundant in the rivers. These are not readily identifiable, as some are actually brown or black stoneflies, and others are early dark stages of golden stoneflies, which hatch later. That is not so important,

centrates the flow of drifting food.

Since feeding steelhead often take wiggler patterns or imitations of the *Hexagenia* nymphs, we were astonished to find no evidence of any fish feeding on the natural *Hexagenia* nymphs. We also found only one case of a steelhead having eaten a minnow.

It is apparent that steelhead, like all trout, feed on those sources that are abundant in their stream. Fortunately for us, there are few sources of food, so we need only about five patterns to carry us through autumn, winter, and spring, when most Michigan steelhead fishing occurs.

During autumn you need single-egg flies, size 6, in a variety of Glo-Bug colors, including orange, and Green Rock Worms, size 10, pale green with a brown head. Tiny black stonefly nymphs, size 12, work best in winter. In spring use single-egg flies, size 6, pale yellow and chartreuse, and black stonefly nymphs, sizes 4 and 8.

Summer Steelhead

SUMMER STEELHEAD HAVE only been returning to the rivers in Michigan for a few seasons, and they don't return in huge numbers. There is not yet much of a run. Most of the summer steelhead are caught accidentally by anglers who are fishing for trout. The larger

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MONTHS	# FISH	CONTENTS
Oct/Nov 1987	7	Salmon eggs
	5	Eggs & caddis larvae
	5	Caddis larvae
	15	Empty
	32	
Dec 1987	3	Caddis larvae
	7	Empty
	10	
Jan 1988	0	No fish killed
Feb/March 1988	7	Tiny winter stonefly nymphs (3 gorged)
	12	Empty
	2	Cased caddis
	21	
April 1988	4	Eggs (taken on redds)
	6	Eggs (taken in runs)
	5	Early black stonefly nymphs (3 full)
	18	No significant amounts of food
	33	
Study Total = 96		



Green Rockworm



Glo-Bugs



Stonefly nymph

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Steelhead . . .

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steelhead certainly have added spice to a few trout-fishing trips. We've heard several reports of anglers fishing for trout with light tackle and finding they have a ten-pound steelhead hooked on their trout flies.

Jim Johnson, whose lodge is on the banks of the Pere Marquette River, has had quite a few reports. His impression is that the fish are really oriented toward surface feeding. He reports three steelhead taken on dry flies that imitate the *Hexagenia* mayfly, and one taken on a white mayfly pattern—genus *Ephoron*, which hatches in late summer. Jim has also hooked three fish while he was fishing a small tan emerging-caddis pupa just under the surface film. It appears we can expect some exciting fishing as this summer run progresses.

WHAT ABOUT THE OLD IDEAS that you need to use bright attractor patterns to aggravate the fish into striking? I asked Jim if he ever uses attractor patterns. "Practically never," he said. "I don't



The natural stonefly nymphs that Michigan Steelhead eat.

know of any of the more successful guides who use attractors any more. The more you fish, the more you catch fish by imitating both the appearance and the behavior of their natural food. Steelhead are trout, and they key in on food just like trout do."

Since I've long believed that, I readily accepted it. Unfortunately, making the fly act like a nymph or an egg means you must dribble it along the bottom using split-shot. We all know that is a productive way to fish. But now I've set up a personal challenge. I will not use split-shot in the future. If it means I catch fewer fish, I'll accept that. First the experts told us the fish would not take flies, then they told us that we had to use attractors, and then they said that steelhead did not feed. We've proven all of those wrong, now I'd like to find out if I can catch steelhead consistently without using split-shot.

DICK POBST operates the Thornapple Fly Shop in Ada, Michigan.

An open letter to Press Powell, Powell Rod. Co., Inc.—

June 9, 1990

Dear Mr. Powell,

I purchased one of your 9 ft. Travel Rods. At the time I wondered if I was doing the right thing in spending so much money on a four-piece rod. Using it for the first time last week, and after landing a few very hard fighting 3 lb. Rainbow and German Brown trout, I have come to the conclusion that my money has been well spent.

I don't think I have ever cast with a rod that is so well balanced and responsive. Even in high winds, I could roll cast, tuck cast, stack mend, and parachute cast my DT6 line better than any of my two-piece rods. Your untiring efforts, devotion to flyfishing, and loyalty to the Powell tradition is reflected in the quality of my 9 ft. Travel Rod.

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CPT Kenney Parsley

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