

Selective Steelhead

Tactics that work on "one-time risers"

JIM VINCENT



THERE ARE TROUT fly fishermen who care nothing for the "numbers game" so prevalent on freestone rivers. These anglers consider the spring creek their arena. To them the ultimate is a successful day spent casting to selective fish, matching wits and bugs, perhaps hooking a fish or two. There are steelheaders who, with a few variations, play their game with the same finesse.

A definition of a dry fly might be an artificial fly that floats naturally and drag-free in the current. Its opposite, the damp fly, is a surface fly that is always under tension, dragging. The damp fly looks as if it has a slight vee wake as it moves down the river and across. The wake is caused either by fly design such as the Atlantic salmon Bomber fly, or by tying one or two half-hitches behind the upturned eye of the hook. Occasionally, for a radical action, this "riffle hitch" is tied behind the hair wings of the fly. However, if the fly is

fished too fast, it throws up spray, and if the fly is moving too slowly, it sinks.

Often, you must let out a little extra fly line to slow a dragging fly, and occasionally you must take in line to speed it up. You want a waking fly to move across the river's surface like something alive—escaping. When they see a fly fished at this tantalizing speed, some steelhead, and some Atlantic salmon, sometimes go berserk and rise to the surface to slash at the fly.

Until recently, the problem with taking steelhead on the surface has been a frustrating phenomenon called the "one-time riser." This type of steelhead will boil on the dragging surface fly one time, but will not rise again to subsequent casts. For years the standard angling method in hooking the occasional riser involved either waiting a few minutes to rest the fish, then cast-

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ing the waking fly over the lie again, or moving three or four steps upstream, tying on a black thinly-dressed wet fly, and "grease-lining" the fish by keeping the fly riding perpendicular to, and at the same speed as, the current. The technique often resulted in a hooked fish, but for me it was no more productive than 50 percent. I have no patience to wait on a missed fish; I like to come right back on him.

In the last three years, I've been experimenting with another technique that represents a combination of several ideas given to me by damp-fly steelhead experts. I did not invent these techniques alone, but skilled anglers like Darryl Hodson, Harry Lemire, and Bill McMillan gave me clues that, with a few tricks of my own thrown in, comprise a system that seems to hook 80 percent of the fish after that first rise to the damp fly.

The pure drag-free dry fly accounts for less than 25 percent of my fish taken by surface-fishing methods. Either casting the fly directly upstream, or fishing it in a downstream reach cast, it will hook fish that are unjaded, or slightly virgin, in seldom-fished waters.

Mike Maxwell, a skilled fly fisherman in British Columbia, taught me a trick using his fishing method. Mike believes that every steelhead stream has its own indigenous aquatic life that young steelhead parr key in on. This "latent memory" triggers a rise from adult steelhead, although they have not fed on the surface during the two to three years they were absent from the stream and away in the Pacific Ocean.

I've witnessed Maxwell in action, and his form of dry-fly fishing is certainly effective. Maxwell fishes a tributary of the Skeena watershed. This river has large (crawl out) hatches of golden stoneflies (*Acroneuria-ruralis* and *californica*). Mike uses a 15-foot, double-handed salmon rod and Spey casts over 100 feet, letting the #8 deer-hair and yellow-thread imitation, tied on a light-wire hook, float drag free. He holds his rod almost vertically, with a loop of line about 12 inches long near the reel. During the drift of the high-floating stonefly imitation, he twitches the rod tip lightly to make the dry fly act like a live insect. Then the fly floats drag-free for several feet, at which point he twitches it again.

The fish takes the fly either during the drag-free period, or it sometimes follows the fly and takes during the twitch. Immediately, when the steelhead takes the fly, Mike drops his rod tip to the water, and the 12 inches of slack moves out through the guides. After a few seconds, he lightly raises the rod tip to set the



hook. He then must play the fish carefully due to the light-wire hook. Invariably, the landed rainbow shows the hook imbedded in the hard corner of its mouth.

I fish the drag-free fly in wilderness conditions, for summer-run steelhead that I know have not been fished over. I once had a day, however, when I saw *Ephemera doddsi*, or small Western green drakes, hatching on a stretch of a wild steelhead river. I had a few patterns in my vest, left over from fishing the Wood River in central Idaho for 14-inch rainbows. I had four steelhead landed before the day was out, having used my #14 dark, green-bodied fly in the drag-free manner. The sea-run rainbows ranged from eight to 14 pounds.

Primarily, I use the dragging fly. Recently, I fished an American Western river with broad, even flows that are ideal for surface fly-fishing methods. I was fishing pools that were fairly crowded. Usually there were two fly fishermen in front of me and a couple behind working downstream through the 300-yard pool. I also use a 15-foot double-handed salmon rod with a number 10 double-taper line and a 12- to 14-foot leader. With the double-hander

I can cast farther than when using a single-handed rod, and the line control is extraordinary. I felt no disadvantage being the third fisherman down the pool. I was also experimenting with a Beartooth woven leader that had a 12-inch piece of stretch shock leader tied near the butt. (This material is so elastic that you can almost stretch it twice the original length. I find it immensely helpful when I am too slow in dropping my rod at the strike. It makes up for my mistakes.)

Setting the Hook

THE HARDEST HABIT to break while fishing a damp fly to steelhead is the normal way of setting the hook; pulling the rod back over your shoulder as you would on a freestone rising trout. Instead, the second you see the boil you must throw the rod tip down toward the water and toward the bank near which you are wading. Washougal Washington angler Bill McMillan believes that when a steelhead rises, he actually creates a suction, or vacuum, in the water, and if the rod is lowered immediately, the fly falls into the suction created, and the fish is hooked in the corner of its mouth. If you don't lower the rod, however, all you see is the boil. You'll feel nothing, and you'll think the fish never had the fly, when in fact the fish took it. It is one thing to know the right way to hook a steelhead, and another

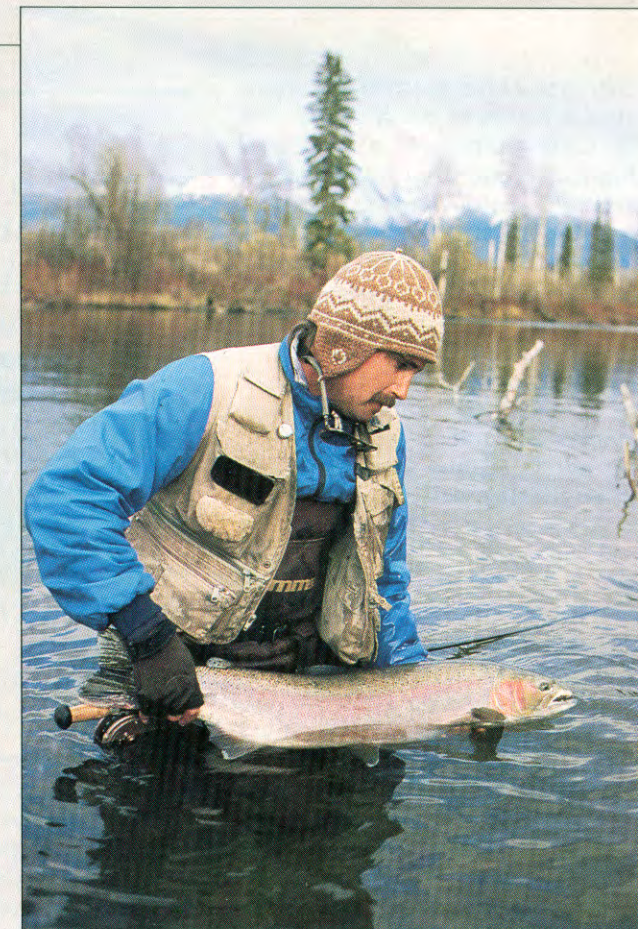
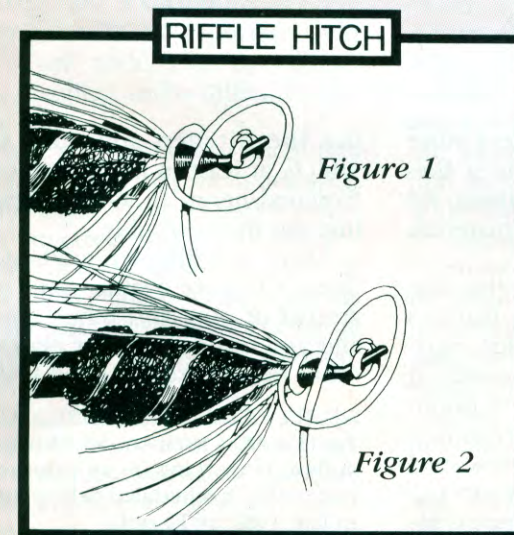
to see that monstrous head slashing violently 80 feet away. There is an element here of absorbing a sense of technique and then actually doing it under pressure. I have days when I am relaxed and do it right, and others, such as one recently when I raised seven different steelhead and blew all but one fish. All had taken the fly. I was so upset with myself that I muttered: "Okay, let him have it."

On the last rise of that seven-fish period, I let the steelhead go down and I counted one thousand one, one thousand two, then struck. Too hard. I popped the eight-pound tippet. As in any sport, you can't think about a particular technique too much or you'll blow it.

There are many occasions when a steelhead refuses the damp fly I'm using. The fish simply never quite takes the fly. There are other times, however, when a steelhead is just pricked because I didn't drop the rod fast enough. How do you get such fish back?

That day on the long pool was typical. I started using the #4 Bomber tied by Don Hathaway of Meridian, Idaho. I had a boil at first light, behind the two anglers who were using lightly-dressed Green-butt Skunks. Then, I changed the silhouette to a Bill Bakke #6 orange Dragon Fly with two half hitches tied off to the side of the eye to make the fly wake in the smooth current. Again the steelhead came up, and even though I dropped the rod tip, I never hooked the fish. I made another cast with the Dragon Fly. The fish wasn't interested. A few years before, I would have moved on to locate another steelhead. I would not have believed that the fish was hookable on a dry. This time, however, I stripped in the floating line and tied on a Lemire Greaseliner on a #10 hook. The fish showed again, but I had another miss. I cast a couple times with Harry's fly, but couldn't move the steelhead. Finally, I tied on a #14 black-bodied Humpy with a ruffle hitch, and on

A ruffle hitch (below) is used to make certain flies "wake" while on the water. The fly is tied to the tippet with a Turtle knot (Figure 1) and a half hitch then tied behind it and the hook eye. The half hitch is tied around the fly's head and hook shank. A second half hitch (Figure 2) completes the ruffle hitch.



JIM VINCENT PHOTOS

the second cast I got a solid hook-up. I dropped the rod, let out a foot of slack and counted two seconds before tightening. After a good fight, I landed the fish and removed the barbless #14 hook from the corner of her mouth. She weighed about 12 pounds.

The small fly had hooked the fish, but it is not a good fish locator. I like to use the bigger flies to find a fish. A few months earlier, Harry Lemire had shown me one of his creations that represent an October caddis (*Dicosmoecus gilvipes*) which hatches from the first week in September through the middle of October on many of our Western steelhead rivers. The fly is tied on a #8 hook, the body of spun yellow or burnt-orange deer hair with two gamecock side feathers and a deer-hair overwing. It looks like a Bomber but has a wing. The fly is a terrific fish locator and hooks many steelhead on the first rise. I like it better than a regular Bomber, due to the wings that suggest the caddis in the air at that time of year. You need not ruffle hitch this fly or the Bombers, because their cigar shape makes a wake naturally in fast or extremely slow water. It is the first fly of choice when fishing a run. Then, if I get a refusal, I immediately change the fly silhouette and start dropping in size.

On a British Columbia stream in low water, a few years back, Darryl Hodson taught me that a size 12 or 14 red-and-black-bodied Humpy would take more fish than the usual larger damp flies. On a pool that had been fished heavily with all sorts of wet flies, the fish

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ROD WALINCHUS ILLUSTRATION

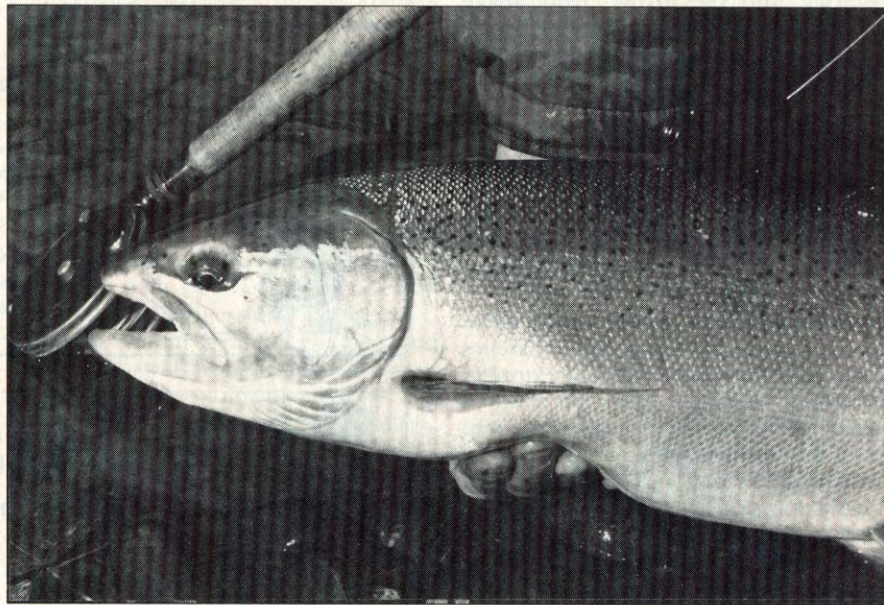
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 were jaded. I could move a fish on the large Irresistibles or Bombers, but it was the small flies that actually hooked them solidly. The problem with most commercial ties of waking, or damp, flies is that they are tied on wire hooks that are too light. A damp fly is always under tension from dragging on the surface, so it doesn't matter if you use a stronger, heavier hook than those used in drag-free dry-fly fishing.

With a light dry-fly steelhead hook, you must be extremely careful on the set, or you'll bend the light wire out. Also, you cannot put as much pressure on the fish during the fight, thus lengthening the struggle, and overly exhausting the fish.

Most strikes on waking flies are violent slashing takes. However, occasionally you get the sipping steelhead take, like a spring-creek rainbow take. They always blow my mind. One day while fishing the same river I mentioned in the northwest, I cast a grasshopper imitation as far as I could with the double-handed rod into a "soft spot" created by an incoming current and subsurface boulders in mid-river. It was like a small pool within a run. The hopper had just landed on the water and was floating drag-free when a huge rainbow head sipped the imitation, leaving a quiet, but large dimple. I was so shocked that, luckily, I failed to react, thereby hooking the fish and landing it.

Later, as I worked down the pool, I raised another fish. Trying several different silhouettes and dropping hook sizes, I finally pricked the fish on a #12 Royal Wulff. After that he wouldn't

come back, and I continued on down the pool. Shortly thereafter, I heard a yell from a fly fisherman behind me who was using a lightly-dressed Lady Caroline wet fly. I'm sure he hooked the same fish.

Not all pools are the same, even within the same river. Later that day, I met Harry Lemire on the bank, and remarked that the damp fly was working fantastically well in the 50-degree water. Harry looked at me, surprised, and said "I can't get them to take the damp fly. They'll boil at it but won't take it. The second I grease-line them with a wet fly, just under the surface, they hit solidly."

I was elated. Here was my angling hero of steelhead folklore fame, a man who had caught thousands of steelhead, essentially telling me I was doing what he hadn't been able to do that day.

I was on the verge of getting a swelled head until the next morning when my theory went to hell. I fished the same pool as I had the day before, using the same technique to locate fish with a large fly, and then to work with smaller flies, while changing silhouettes, until the steelhead would take. Except this time the fish I raised didn't take. I tried every pattern in my damp-fly boxes, including Hewitt Skaters. All I got was boils, usually one-timers. It was small consolation that the wet-fly anglers were doing no better. The fish were jaded. They'd been hammered and harassed a little too much.

About noontime, I started to reel in the line and walk up the pool. Every-one had gone back to camp, so I

stopped and made one last cast where I had raised a fish several hours before. Several last casts later, I really made the "last cast" using a Lemire greaseliner on a #10 hook. I was walking toward the bank, reeling in line, when I heard the explosion. Luckily, when I turned to see what was going on, I put some slack to my fly. I didn't deserve that fish; but I'm not going to complain.

Water Temperature

I'D LIKE TO DISPEL some myths concerning water temperature. Any time the water is between the mid-forties and high fifties, I use a dry or damp fly. Darryl Hodson consistently hooks fish with waking flies in water as low as the mid-thirties. Many quality steelheaders believe they do better on surface flies in the evening. The theory is that the water cools enough during the night to put the fish off attacking a damp fly in the morning. I have not found this to be true. My records show that I catch more fish in the morning on surface flies than at any other time. I believe it is because they have had an entire night to forget and relax after a long day's dodging wet or dry flies.

I've had rare good fishing on a hot, sunny day in August as well as some superb fishing under a full sun in October. It has made me question the old rule about fishing in the morning and evening; staying in camp at midday. October's midday fishing may be better due to the lower declination of the sun. However, another myth I hear frequently concerns A.H.E. Woods's axiom about only being able to raise an Atlantic salmon to the surface if the air temperature is warmer than the water temperature. This is not true for me. I've definitely hooked and caught many steelhead on waking flies when I was fishing water with a temperature of 50 degrees, and my fingers were numb, the cold wind on my face a harbinger of winter.

East Coast Atlantic salmon fishermen, using damp flies consistently, learn from tradition about techniques of dropping fly size and changing silhouettes, relatively new concepts for Western steelheaders. The West does not have the traditions of Edward Hewitt or George LaBranch. In fact, prior to the past 50 years, most steelheaders would not have believed one could take steelhead with wet flies, let alone a surface-dragging damp fly. Yet it's true, that frequently, once a steelhead has boiled to the dry fly and missed or refused, the real fun of working a selective fish begins.

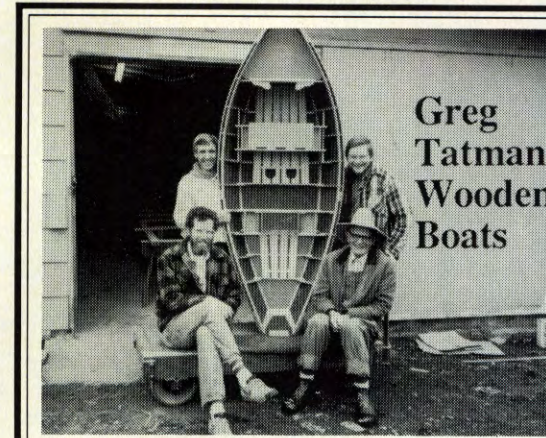
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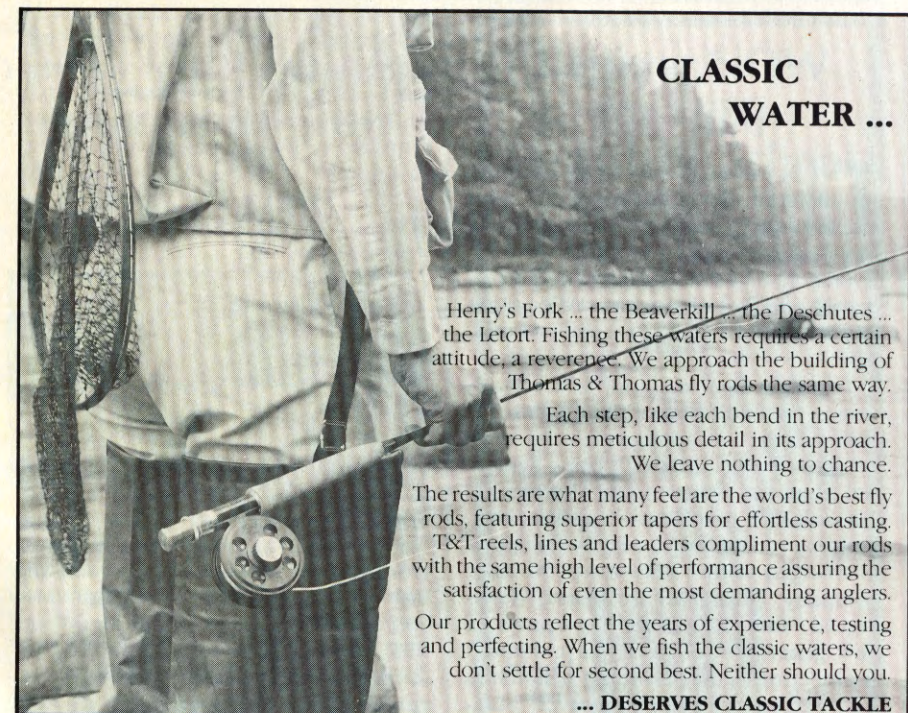
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