

My Winter Steelhead Flies.

by Jeff Mishler

There is no silver bullet when fly fishing for winter steelhead: No secret fly. No special rod and line combination. No magical leader material guaranteed to help you catch more steelhead. The simple act of casting what is accepted as a modern winter steelhead pattern requires specialized gear that wasn't commercially available 15 years ago. It looks easy enough; just put two hands on the fly rod like this, make a couple sweeps like so, and wham! The fly takes your hat off. Like other pastimes requiring hand eye coordination and a sense of timing, fly fishing with a two handed rod takes practice. Lots of practice.

Put enough time on the water and a few things about your gear become apparent: It takes far less effort than imagined to cast 90 feet, and you don't need a 14 foot, 9 weight to do it. The slower you go, better the results. Application of power and timing are far more important than the sheer speed of your movements. If you wear wraparound sunglasses and keep your hood up, the worst casting mistakes result in torn Gortex, welts on the skin and maybe a perforation or two. The injuries are minor if you pinch the barb, stay bundled up in your essential protective gear and pay attention to where you place that unpredictable anchor. Eventually, it will click.

Practicing with a balanced setup certainly moves the process along. But if you are struggling, one of the variables limiting your evolution may be the size of the fly you're casting. I was fortunate to spend a lot of time with the developers of the Intruder style steelhead patterns during the filming of the Skagit Master DVD series. One universal realization is that a steelhead will eat a fly larger than you can cast effectively. You could jack a 5 inch long Lamprey pattern behind 700 grains of Skagit line, but that doesn't sound like fun, and unless you are proficient with your gear, trying to cast super sized flies will

knock the zip out of your cast. For the everyday steelheader, it's unnecessary.

Steelhead don't hold in the same type of water throughout the river and it's impossible for one steelhead fly to effectively fish every lie; that un-weighted marabou tube might swing completely to the bank in the last tail out up river, but when the next piece of holding water is a 5 foot deep mid river oasis surrounded by turbulence and the water temps are cold, that light piece of fluff on a hook ain't gonna cut it. But Steelhead are predictable and each encounter reaffirms a few beliefs I have about this obsession: They take up the same positions in the river year after year. The grab usually follows a complete turn-over of the line, tip and leader regardless of the length of the cast. Control of the fly should be instant; the fly starts to sink, it hovers, re-orientes in the current, starts to move off and there's the grab. The size of your fly has everything to do with that all important turn-over at the end of the cast.

Sitting at my bench, before I begin, I pause and imagine that exact piece of water I plan to fish and tie accordingly. If I'm tying an intruder style fly, I keep the overall mass and size in check because casting water logged four inch long flies, all day, sucks. The overall length of my Intruders is about 3 inches. The body is about 1 ¼ inches long. The rest of it is tail and wing, creating stability as it sinks or swings. If it has to sink fast, I tie it sparse and add substantial lead eyes. If the fly has to hover, it gets bit more bulk in the tail section and very light eyes in front; just enough lead to make the fly sink perfectly horizontal in the water column. I do not want the fly sinking in a butt down manner. A hovering, slowing sinking fly at the edge of a fast water seam, has been a little too enticing for many a steelhead, particularly after an abrupt mend moved it three feet or so just before the tension eases and the tip sinks; the fly starts to pull towards the fast water and the fish says, "I gotta have that before it's gone". Ever have that toilet bowl flush-like eruption around your fly, way out there, after the first mend?

But here's the curveball; for most of my winter steelheading I rarely fish Intruder style flies unless I'm casting to a very specific lie. I've settled on a simple fly design for my winter steelhead fishing based on these principles; the steelhead must see your fly in order to eat it, and the fly that stays in the water the longest, has the greatest chance to be seen. Meaning, the easier it is to cast, the longer it's fishing. Steelhead Leech style patterns, sporting a bunny strip attached at mid-body extending back over a fixed or free swinging hook, produce so much realistic wiggly-waggly I'm-fish-food-come-eat-me movement that their success in cold water situations is no surprise to me. But the challenge with bunny strip is two-fold: How to keep it from wrapping around the hook if it isn't threaded to some sort of fire wire weaved through the strip, or if it is threaded up and down through the flesh, how to maintain that wicked movement. Most of the firewire style ties, turn the wiggly part into a straight, apparently lifeless piece of shoe leather. Although I'm sure steelhead would also eat a piece of shoe leather on the right day.

The pattern I've adopted is another amalgamation from the many leech patterns sold commercially; each possess qualities I like, but none do it all. (It is a tall order to claim to have invented the steelhead leech (style) fly, so I'm not too concerned about stepping on any toes. I liken it to improving the woolly bugger. If I do step on your toes, my apologies in advance.) This bastardized leech pattern fishes clean, for the most part, is versatile, and can be tied to sink quickly, or to hover and swim just under the surface. It's small and does not carry a lot of water. Most importantly, its a fly pattern I can modify on the water to match the conditions. Not all winter steelhead are resting in 5 feet of heavy winter flow or in pocket water surrounded by rushing runoff. Long sexy runs with scallops and trenches in the river bed hold the biters too. By changing the configuration to suit the swing, I'm confident on every cast.

This steelhead leech can be tied featuring a bunny strip, or marabou of the same color for super light flows. Tying the fly on small tubing allows the tyer to add a conehead or leave the front of the fly unweighted, but prepped for a lead bullet weight. If I go the bullet weight route, I know I can fish the

fly into all water types.

Tying details:

You'll need a tube fly tying rig of some sort: The Eumer Tube Tying Adaptor is a good one.

Cut 1.5 inches of tubing material and place in tube fly adaptor

Start thread at the middle of the tube.

Tie in a sparse and neat chunk of Arctic Fox on top of the first wraps. This helps keep the bunny on the top of the tube and out of the hook gap. Gotta give credit to the Koertge/Larimer combo for that little tip.

Strip the fur off the first $\frac{1}{4}$ inch of a 2 inch piece of black bunny strip. I avoid using the magnum strips.

Turns the fly into the shape of a dog turd.

Super glue the tag of the bunny after the wraps.

(If you want to substitute marabou for the rabbit, I spin the fox into a dubbing loop, make three wraps, tie off and then wrap forward three turns of a perfect plume, tied in at the tip and gauged for length.)

Add a few strands of Angel Hair flash along side the bunny strip. Leave long.

Tie in and wrap forward 3 turns of crystal hackle. I want the hackle to lay back just short where the hook point will be in the most forward position.

Tie in a Kingfisher Blue Guinea feather and wrap forward.

Tie off, leaving $\frac{1}{4}$ of tubing exposed.

Head Cement

Remove from tube adaptor and slide conehead on exposed tube.

Heat tube carefully with a Butane lighter to roll ends over on to Conehead.

If I choose to fish this fly unweighted, or slightly weighted, with a fixed hook in soft water, I cut the tube short, leaving about $\frac{1}{4}$ " exposed and slide a chunk of small HMH junction tubing over the Eumer

tubing, slide the tube fly hook into the junction tubing and set the hook into position, point down. I think steelhead eat leeches from the front or T-bone the fly in soft water. To me, this explains the many missed strikes in slow water during the broadside swing when fishing leech patterns. If the hook is dangling off the back and the fish has all the time in the world eat the fly, when he inhales the fly, the hook actually never gets into its mouth. When I move the hook under the middle of the fly and fix it there, when the fly is swinging broadside in soft water, I rarely loose the fish and they are most always hooked inside the corner of the mouth. Conversely, if I choose to swing the fly through a fast run where tension comes on the fly early in the swing, the steelhead chasing this presentation flares his gills, and as Ed Ward says, "like holding a ping pong ball on a string over the toilet and trying to flush it down" the fly does not move into the fish's mouth. The stinger hook is your only chance at a hookup. In this case, I'll leave the tube long, use a saltwater loop knot and dangle a free swinging Gamakatsu SL12 #2 off the back (pinch the barb). The free swinging hook usually drops free of the bunny strip, unless there's a half hitch in it. If I fix a rigid hook off the back of the bunny strip, the strip wraps around the shank often. It might not matter to the fish, but it drives me nuts.

If you choose to use lead bullet weights in various weights to sink the fly, forego the cone-head step, cut the tube to 1/8 inch and use a butane lighter to curl the tubing back into a nice thick pad for the bullet head to ride against. You can rig the Bullet Head Ready version for either hook rig configuration.

If you choose to go the marabou route, you'll find the fly has great movement, the hook ups seem more positive because there's no rabbit strip to get in the way but the durability of the fly is far less. And the darn things seem to bleed color over all of my flies if I don't dry them completely before storing them.

There are two universal qualities any steelhead fly must possess; you gotta be able to cast it, (with a two handed rod in my case) and the fish gotta-wanna eat it. Either of these pattern adaptations meet

those simple standards.