



A client of guide Mike Zavadlov shows off a Peninsula steelhead. (MIKE Z'S GUIDE SERVICE)

Shifting From Chrome To Chromier

It's that time of year when salmon runs transition to early winter steelhead in Washington.

By Terry Wiest

MONROE, Wash.—Can you feel it?

It's that time of year again, when many of us shift gears from salmon to steelhead.

In the Northwest, steelhead are without a doubt the most prized catch and definitely the most frustrating for those who are just getting their first taste of this madness. But, rest assured, once you tie into one of these chrome beauties, you'll be hooked like the rest of us.

While everyone dreams of catching 20-pound trophy steelhead — I know I



Bruce Lambert of Graham, Wash., admires a hatchery steelhead he caught late last December on the Humptulips River. (LAZER SHARP PHOTO CONTEST)

DON'T COUNT ON STEELHEADING IN LATE WINTER, AGAIN

Get your steelheading in early, Puget Sound anglers, because it's unlikely we will see catch-and-release seasons for wild fish in late winter and spring 2011.

That much can be said with some certainty even before the state and tribal comanagers agreed on how many natives are coming back to the basin.

For awhile, there was even a chance the brat-bonking season was in trouble. However, NOAA-Fisheries and WDFW appear to now be on the same page for protecting the ESA-listed stock and going forward with winter fisheries.

New this season will be an overall 4 percent maximum mortality cap on wild steelhead across five river systems in the basin, far lower than the up to 10 percent buffer WDFW had wanted. For sport anglers, the effect of that may make for even shorter fisheries than this past season.

Last winter saw early closures on almost every river between the Canadian border and Tacoma. Then, in the 2010-11 fishing regs, WDFW moved the end of season on many streams up by two weeks, to Feb. 15. And while a manager wouldn't say whether steelheading will be closed even earlier this season – he was awaiting preseason management plans – a well-placed source says they wouldn't be surprised if fishing is pruned back to the beginning of February to limit impacts to wild steelhead.

Outside of terminal fisheries, that could affect fish boxes. Preliminary catch stats from the 2008-09 season show that 24.3% of the 3,345 clipped steelhead kept in Puget Sound rivers and marine areas were landed in November 2008, 33.5% in December, 24.8% in January 2009 and 16.5% in February. **—Andy Walgamott**

do – the reality is not many will achieve that goal each year. But you can catch many steelhead nonetheless.

The best advice I can give anyone is to target those 4- to 6-pound hatchery steelhead during the peak of the runs. The more fish that are in the river, the better chances you have of one of them being interested in your presentation.

Here are some more important tips to remember when targeting hatchery steelhead:

- Fish near the hatchery
- Use techniques that *you* are familiar with
- If using bait, use *good* bait
- Use light setups
- Run-n-gun – cover water and move on
- Be stealthy
- Network to get reliable information

What techniques you use are personal preference, but hatchery steelhead tend to go for a good drift presentation of eggs or shrimp. I'm partial to float and jig fishing myself, and the fish do love the pink/white combos without bait. From a boat it's hard to beat side-drifting.

Most hatchery runs will peak from the second week of December through the second week of January. I've taken this into consideration when schedul-

ing the Steelhead University Seminar on Dec. 4 (see next page) so after attending, you'll be primed to go catch some steelhead the next weekend.

WHERE TO GO With a combination of smolt plant stats, catch history (both personal and state cards) and, of course, a networking of fishing buddies, I've put together some suggestions on where and when to fish for hatchery steelhead. However, as with any fishing prediction, there are many factors that will change all the way up to the day of the trip, primarily weather and, do I dare say it, netting schedules.

As with every year, there are some disappointments and there are some all-stars. In Western Washington, the perennial all-star is the Cowlitz River. Even though last year was supposed to be a "down" year, there were tons of fish caught and this year will be no exception.

With an additional 30,000 smolts being planted in the mainstem (and a total of over 800,000 in the system), the Cow will once again be the No. 1 producer of winter hatchery fish in Washington.

"The Cow has been the most consistent producer of good numbers of fish," says Phil Stephens of Mystical Legends Guide Service (206-940-0052). "There will be fish in Decem-

ber and January, but late February and March is when the bulk of the fish show up. By March 15, the whole system should be full of fish."

The biggest disappointment last year was a tie between the Green River in King County and the Humptulips north of Aberdeen. Although I could see the Green coming – and didn't even fish it, despite it being practically in my backyard – this year things will take a 180. With no significant hatchery kill, there were almost 60,000 more smolts

released for the class of 2010/2011.

Given the optimal river conditions all spring and summer due to the Howard Hansen Dam scare, we should get a higher ratio of fish returning. I know I'll be there this year.

I didn't see the Hump's dropoff last year coming – it sucked – but it could have a huge turnaround. With an additional 70,000 smolts and working equipment at the hatchery, this should be a stellar year, especially around Stevens Creek.

"All signs point towards a good year, but fish it early," tips Stephens.

"By Christmas it's pretty much over."

One river I see having a significant downfall this year – and which is making me cringe because I love it – is the Salmon. It received 120,000 fewer smolts than in 2008.

As for the Sol Duc, while WDFW stats show it getting zero steelhead, the guides association released 57,000.

In December, the Elochoman and Skykomish will be top tier hatchery steelhead rivers. And expert Olympic Peninsula guides Bob Kratzer (Anglers Guide Service) and Mike Zavadlov (Mike Z's Guide Service) both agree

the Bogachiel should also be on fire in December. The Sky and the Bogy should continue through January.

Some other rivers that should provide plenty of December and early January action are the Snoqualmie, Elwha and the Kalama.

A little later, from mid-January through February, I'd focus on the Wynoochee. The 'Nooch had an additional 30,000 smolts and has become one of the staples of the steelhead nation.

I was pumped about the Carbon last year in January, but it didn't happen. I'll give it another shot this year as it received an extra 43,000 smolts.

Up north the Nooksack and the Cascade should both have decent runs but I'm a bit puzzled by the Cascade. I heard reports of several fish showing up at the end of September.

Down south both the North and East Forks of the Lewis should have a good December/early January fishery.

Besides the Cowlitz in February and March, the Grande Ronde in far southeastern Washington will pump out fish.

"The Grande Ronde is a great little river that has a ton of small steelhead," states Todd Girtz. "Although it doesn't have any real trophy potential it is still one of my favorite rivers."

IF YOU CAN'T WAIT for December, here are a couple suggestions for this month.

First of all, Idaho's Clearwater River is a November mega fishery, with double-digit days the norm.

Bordering the Clearwater you can fish the Snake which also produces world-class days.

"The Snake is actually probably the best producer of hatchery steelhead in the Northwest," says Doug Richert from Hells Canyon Sport Fishing (360-490-2521).

Another alternative is the scenic Klickitat River. All these fish should be noted are actually summer-run steelhead.

Can you feel it now? **NS**

STEELHEAD SCHOOL'S IN

You've heard of a school of fish. But have you heard of a fishing school? Well, Steelhead University's fall seminar is just that – a school that teaches us how to fool steelhead into striking.



Luckily, steelhead do not attend.

Steelhead U's fall seminar began in 2006 and was modeled on Salmon University's popular spring seminars. At next month's class, about 150 anglers from Oregon, Washington, Idaho, California and B.C. will gather in Kent, Wash., to hone their skills and talk fishing. About one third will have attended before and be back for more. Why? Outstanding teachers. During a full day of classes, top Northwest steelheaders and guides share their knowledge and answer audience questions.

At this winter's edition, Bill Herzog and Mike Perusse, co-hosts of Northwest Wild Country Radio, will discuss spoon and spinner fishing, drift fishing and center pinning. Chat with Mike at the G.Loomis booth; find Bill at the Amato Books or Sportco booth.

Terry Wiest, host of steelheaduniversity.com, will cover float fishing. Todd Girtz, veteran steelheader, will talk about run timing and hot spots.

Guide Bob Kratzer will offer advice for fishing his home rivers on the Olympic Peninsula. His handouts are full of useful data.

Buzz Ramsey will also share his steelie secrets. Talk with him at Yakima Bait Company's booth.

Tom Nelson from Salmon University will also be on hand.

Tackle companies will have experts at their booths. Gabe Miller and Paul Marander, from Sportco and Outdoor Emporium will display their extensive stock of steelhead gear. Frank Amato Publication's booth will offer 18 different steelhead titles – books and DVDs.

Also in the lobby: Jody Allison of Advantage Tackle Company will demonstrate how to tie jigs. Peterson Pucks will smoke salmon for us to sample. Guide Bruce Warren will show us how to rig for steelhead.

And out front, Wooldridge Boats will display their river runners.

Consider preregistering soon. Last year's seminar sold out. Late-shows, regrettably, were turned away at the doors. –Wayne Heinz

MORE INFO

When: Sat., Dec. 4, 8 a.m.-4:30 p.m.

Where: IBEW Local 46 auditorium, 19802 62nd Ave. S., Kent, WA

Cost: \$88 (includes lunch, tickets for a dozen door prizes, lesson sheets from presenters and Todd Girtz's updated "Todd's Top 60 Rivers for Salmon & Steelhead, with Run Timing & Techniques")

Preregistration: steelheaduniversity.com
Contact: Terry Wiest, (206-387-9293, tbfishin@comcast.net)