

Let The Insanity Begin!

Karen Chapdelaine shows off a winter-run caught below Reiter Ponds on the Skykomish last season. (WRIGHT & MCGILL/EAGLE CLAW PHOTO CONTEST)



WESTSIDER
By Terry Wiest

December brings the official start of winter steelhead season in Western Washington – my favorite time of year. Although I'll have already

fished for them on the coast prior to this article, about the time this hits the newsstands, Puget Sound streams should be flowing with fresh fish just waiting to be tempted by those of us who are crazy enough to brave what Mother Nature throws their way.

Picture it – 17 degrees out, bright blue sky. You're standing in the middle of the Snoqualmie. Icicles forming on the tip of your rod, your reel keeps icing up. Your hands are numb and your breath seems to freeze as it leaves your mouth. But just then you hook a chrome-bright 8-pound hatchery steelhead and Jack Frost melts away. It takes you a couple minutes to land the fish.

The freezing weather can't stop an ear-to-ear grin as you pose for a quick picture. High fives all around and you're quickly back to fishing again.

And they think we're insane!

THE MONTH OF DECEMBER is generally when the bulk of steelhead are hooked on the Snoqualmie and other Westside rivers, and most of those are caught just below or near the hatchery or rearing ponds they're released from.

Anglers know this, of course. Take the Green River in King County, for instance. As a teenager, my "traditional" first attempt on the Green used to be over Christmas vacation, always trying out my new gear down below Soos Creek and the Car Body Hole. I don't follow that routine anymore as I'm not into combat fishing. You can see the cars parked from the parking lot all the way up and down the Green River Valley Road in early December. Once a rumor of someone hooking a fish on the Green begins, fishermen come out in droves.

That was then. This is now. With only 75,000 clipped hatchery smolts released for this winter (another 33,000 hatchery fish with their adipose fins intact were let loose, but, from a broodstock program, aren't expected till late winter), South Sound steelheaders will turn into "Twilighters" as we venture over to the Forks area to actually catch some fish.

I think the Green may be where the phrase "Fish of a thousand casts" was coined – or at least has seemed like it at times in recent years. Actually that phrase holds true for most of us, at least as we are learning. Steelheading is an acquired touch. It's also a mental mind set that's hard to describe. Until you actually hook your first, there's absolutely no way to fully describe the feeling.

Hooking that first one always seems to be the problem – except for the rare occasion someone gets one on their first trip. Once hooked, whether your first trip or fiftieth, it'll be in your blood.

To try and describe "the bite" is also



quite impossible without actually feeling it yourself. I don't know how many descriptions I've heard over the course of 30-plus years, but the one that seems to be the closest in my opinion is that of a "sponge." As your drift-fishing presentation ticks along the bottom, tick, tick, tick, tick, there may come a spongy feeling as the fish grabs ahold.

Hard to visualize? Even harder to actually detect until you've felt it several times. As you get the "feel" it's still impossible to describe as it becomes more of an instinct. For me I'd say it's all instinct now as the rod becomes part of my body when fishing.

There's a reason steelhead rods are so dang expensive – the sensitivity makes it become real. Fetha Styx, G.Loomis, Lamiglas, just look at the prices and find out what the difference is between them and a "cheaper" rod – sensitivity will be the main reason why.

YOU'LL NEED THAT SENSITIVITY when

fishing in the bone-chilling shadows of the falls in December, when the winter steelhead run is at its peak on the Snoqualmie. From the bank, I'll start at the Cable Hole just below the mouth of Tokul Creek, where smolts are released from (and fishable too, though I don't like steelheading a 4-foot-wide, 1-foot-deep creek). Then I work my way down through the Plum Landing boat ramp, making sure to hit all the pockets with a pink-and-white jig. Fish tend to stack up here, especially in the early mornings, and it's not unheard of to hook multiple fish on a good day. The trick here is to keep moving down through the holes.

Afterwards I'll drive around to the other side via Fall City and fish directly across from the Cable Hole off SE David Powell Road. Hit all the pockets as you'll find fish behind the boulders in the flats.

Another bank option is the mouth of the Raging River. From where it dumps in down to the Highway 202 bridge is all good water. Jigs will work here too, but since it's

a little deeper slot don't hesitate to pull out the sand shrimp or pink worm.

While no smolts are released into the Tolt due to the state's move towards only stocking streams with fish traps, the water around its mouth is too good to pass up.

From a boat, the hatchery drift from Plum Landing to the takeout right above the Raging can be extremely productive, but it's a very short float, so hit every inch of water you can. Just below Plum on the same side are some terrific slots to slide a jig through. Then switch to the opposite side and fish just below the chute – if you're a plug puller, this is your hole.

As the river bends around at the golf course hit the banks. Steelhead will stack in on the golf course side. This should be good for all your techniques and isn't easily accessible to bankies. The slot just above the Tolt mouth is fantastic too.

REITER PONDS ON THE SKYKOMISH

east of Gold Bar is another December fishery that will draw crowds – because it produces good numbers of fish. Later on this month you had better call ahead to reserve your rock as it seems like everyone who works at Boeing will be looking for a piece of the action during their annual winter "steelhead break."

This is some of the best float fishing water in the region. Pink jigs or pink worms on a jig head under a float will get the crowd watching you battle chromers in the cold wind that pours out of the canyon.

Are those of us who claim the moniker "Steelheader" insane? Absolutely! Why else would we be standing in thigh-high, ice-cold streams casting hundreds of times for maybe a chance at hooking a steelhead?

And why else would we release a fish after spending all that effort to catch one?

They may call us insane, but insanity has never felt so good. **MS**