

Trout Site – Steelhead

By Bob Willis

Steelhead are the glamour fish of the trout species. They fight like rainbow with many jumps and long hard runs, get to be monster size, and are beautiful fish. It really doesn't get any better than that in the angling world. My first experience with Steelhead was shortly after I moved to Alaska. I was fishing in the Thorne River on the Prince of Wales Island in southeastern Alaska. I hooked a big Steelhead and was going to be all I could handle. Well, it turned out to be more than the line on my reel could handle, and with about 20 turns left on the spool I had to start running downstream. After I ran downstream for a while the fish stopped in a big pool and I totally slacked off the pressure on him. It worked, and he started swimming back upstream! After a long fight I finally got the fish to shore and was amazed at a 15 pound steelhead. It was not going to be the largest Steelhead I was to catch, but it was my first and was beautiful.



Steelhead are the best fighting trout in North America!

So, with that story as background how do I rate Steelhead? This fish are the best fighting trout of them all. There is no comparison. They are bigger, stronger and fight harder than any other fish. They make long runs, awesome jumps, and will break your line and rod in a heartbeat. There are several places to catch these bruisers, but probably the best is Alaska. But you have to remember that Steelhead are anadromous and are only in the rivers for a portion of the year. The other portion of the time they are at sea.

There are two types of Steelhead and their type determines when they will be found in the freshwater rivers and streams. Ocean-maturing Steelhead enter freshwater between November and April and spawn shortly after they enter freshwater. The stream-maturing type enters freshwater between May and October and will spend several months in freshwater to mature and spawn. Coastal streams are dominated by winter-run Steelhead and inland streams attract the summer-run fish.

Several things happen as you move up the Pacific Northwest coast toward Alaska. There tends to be fewer and fewer summer-run Steelhead as you move north, and the coastal streams are dominated by fall-run fish rather than the winter-run fish that occur a little further south. In Alaska and British Columbia these fall-run fish enter the freshwater streams and rivers beginning in August and continue through the winter. There is a catch. Each river system seems to have its own timeframe for when the Steelhead show up and each one is a little different. This little idiosyncrasy requires that you have some knowledge of the river system you intend to fish. Another thing to remember is that there are few Steelhead in mainland Alaska. There are no

documented populations of Steelhead on the Alaska mainland west of the Susitna River and north of the Chignik River system.

If you love to fly-fish and catch monster trout you must go on a Steelhead trip. It is not like any other experience with a fly rod. I am partial to Alaska, but there are many other places that you can catch Steelhead. There is a good population in the Great Lakes and they also make spawning runs up the Great Lake tributary rivers. This is a good opportunity to catch a good fish with your fly rod. If you should choose to go to Alaska don't forget to try to catch some Dolly Varden Trout. They are also coastal fish and are in every stream that holds Steelhead. They are the most common trout in the southeastern islands and while they do not get as big as Steelhead, they are fun to catch and will give a good battle. They tend to get overlooked and I enjoy catching Dolly's.

If you would like to read more of my Steelhead stories and see the best Steelhead fly I have ever used try the book or e-book **Trout Adventures – North America**. My book will be published sometime in 2012 by Wilderness Adventures Press. This publisher specializes in fly fishing books and has a website at www.wildadventurepress.com. It does have some amazing Steelhead adventures and I have to say this is the only trout that swam between my legs.