

Part Two: Migratory Fish

Why salmon and steelhead take flies has been debated by anglers for a long time. The theories vary from ludicrous to compelling but despite the fact that their need for food diminishes during the spawning run, they *will* take our flies and for that, and their tenacity when hooked, they rank at the top of the list of freshwater game fish. But can fly selection play a major roll when fishing for anadromous species? You bet it can but it is far less daunting than one might suspect.

Among the many theories, these three make the most sense when discussing why salmon or steelhead take flies:

1. *Imprinting*: Feeding behavior from the fish's early life in the river to its sea roaming adulthood leaves an impression that stays with it. Parr and smolts feed and act just like trout during their time in the river after hatching. Aquatic invertebrates (caddis, mayflies, stoneflies, etc.) make up the majority of their diet with small vertebrates (minnows fry etc.) augmenting it. They feed voraciously during these stages prior to leaving the river for the ocean and the theory of "imprinting" relies less on their ability to recall or remember this behavior but more of an instinctive reaction triggered by their return to the river environment.
2. *Aggression*: This theory is based on the idea that virtually *no* feeding occurs during spawning and that the single priority of both sexes is to procreate. This is not difficult to accept given what salmon and steelhead endure to reach suitable breeding habitat. In other words, the fish take on a "let nothing get in our way" attitude. The presence of a properly presented artificial fly in the proximity of a holding salmon or steelhead could trigger an aggressive response leaving the fish no option but to eat it or at least bite it. (Most fish have no other defensive weapon other than their mouths and their speed.)
3. *Curiosity*: (taken from Brian Daverns article 'Choosing flies for Steelhead' Fly Fisherman magazine, April 1980) "All higher forms of life exhibit curiosity at times; it's reasonable to assume that this fact can assist us in catching steelhead. Consider yourself watching what you know to be a white marble rolling slowly towards you. Unless you have a specific interest in marbles, you probably wouldn't pick it up, being satisfied that it is a marble. On the other hand, if it passed you so quickly that you had no chance to see it well, you may chase it and pick it up. Who knows, it might be a pearl."

Although there is evidence to support all three theories, depending on whom you talk to, I believe it makes more sense to attend all three schools of thought and study them together rather than trying to disprove one in favor of another.

When looking at flies for steelhead or salmon, it's my thought to first break them down into two categories: attractors and imitators. Obviously each of them plays a roll but knowing when to use one or the other is paramount. Water and air temperature, water clarity and the time of year are the four most impactful factors in choosing the correct fly. From there, your attractors and imitators can further be broken down into three

sub-categories; low, moderate and high water, bearing in mind that clarity on most rivers is directly affected by flows; high flows create low visibility with the river gradually clearing as the water levels drop.

So knowing what the flies are intended to do and when they are intended to be used, we now have to look at the individual situation. Aside from the aforementioned four main factors; current speed and over head cover would round out my list of most impactful factors. For example, if the river was flowing high and fast, with some stain to it, but the temperatures were favorable (somewhere between 8 and 18 degrees c) it would make sense to go with something large and easy for the fish to see or find but well under the surface as their vision cannot penetrate the stain from where they hold near the bottom to the surface.

Then look at over head cover both from the sky and the river bank. A heavily covered bank at the right time of day will cast a shadow on the river that may influence your decision. Finally, you have to look at how the fly is being presented. When the air temperature meets or exceeds the water temperature, salmon and steelhead alike are more willing to rise to the surface so a fly fished on or just under the surface should have different qualities than one fished on a sinking line near the bottom because the fish see it from a different angle and for a longer period of time. To explain this, you need to visualize how the fly looks against its back drop or put yourself in the fish's shoes. A bomber on the surface may be made to make a wake or a wet fly can be modified with a ruffle hitch to serve the same purpose. Either way, the idea is to catch his attention or spark his curiosity by moving the fly through the mirror like window of the fish's field of vision. The color should contrast that of the back drop, whether it is a blue or overcast sky or the green of a forest lined bank. Your assortment of surface flies should cover a range in sizes from 6 through 2 and be tied in light, neutral and dark with wets from size 10 through 4 in similar color ranges.

Conversely on the Canadian side of the great lakes, we seldom have the opportunity to fish in ideal water temperatures so during the fall steelhead season, most anglers will use sinking systems to get down to the holding fish. Now, the fish may see the fly for only a short period as it is coming at or by him against a very chaotic back ground. Bubbles and debris will obscure what they see so you want something that grabs and holds there attention. Animated flies tied with materials like marabou or rabbit strips will fill this need. Incorporate some flashy material, such a mylar or flash-a-boo and you have real attention grabber for off colored water. Further to that, I believe that the color of the fly plays a more important roll when fishing deep than when on or near the surface. For example, if the river is tea colored or tannic, like many of the rivers of Canada's east coast, lighter colors like yellow, white or light blue make sense. If the river is muddied due to run off or a spate, light colors will be less of a contrast against that back drop so darks like black, dark purple or claret would be more visible against the light brownish water. Flies tied for high water should be made for both off colored and clear water; flies for the off colored water should have *more* flashy material that those for clear water as the light reflective qualities aren't as important in the clear water. Flies for off colored water need to be on the darker side and be tied in ranges from 4 to 2/0 and incorporate animated material as mentioned above.

Low, clear water needs to be treated very differently and requires a bit more finesse. To take fish consistently in conditions like this requires one's entire prowess as an angler. Long, fine leaders and small flies are the rule and I lean towards more natural colors and styles. Nymphs or soft hackles as small as #14 will typically do the trick but the less obtrusive, the better as these conditions will cause the fish to be far more cautious than when they are holding in the comfort of high water.

The last thing that needs to be considered but of no less importance is the time of the season that you are fishing in relationship to where you are on the river. I feel it is necessary to understand the behavior of your quarry and why they may react differently to different flies at different stages of their migration. Both salmon and steelhead are eating machines while at sea but we have to recognize that upon entering the rivers estuary

or mouth, that need for food diminishes. However, there is enough evidence to show that although their feeding slows, they may still react to forage that they have been accustomed to eating. A case in point happened late last winter when a good friend and fishing partner was working a piece of water very near the mouth of Lake Huron. He landed a fish and while he was removing the fly, he noticed several tiny black stone fly nymphs in its mouth. On the great lakes, these flies begin to get active at about 3C and he recognized that if he found a few in a fish's mouth, then it may be enough of an emergence to get *fresh* fish eating them, therefore, why not change to what they want.

At this point in the river, just hours and less than a kilometer from the mouth, feeding will continue for fish just recently in from the lake. It is important to remember, that these fish have one thing on their mind and that is to get to the spawning water. The further the fish move up river, the less you need to worry about matching the hatch and the more you need to concentrate on presenting a fly so the fish will simply see it. Further to that is; the closer the fish get to spawning, the more their paternal instincts kick in and the more aggressive they become. This is particularly evident with the use of large, aggressive flies that are now the norm on the east coast during the autumn weeks while angling for Atlantic salmon.

Finally, being that the majority of readers are in the great lakes area, I am behooved to mention the final stage of the steelhead run; that being the "drop back" or "kelted" stage. I bring this up as it is often over looked and can provide excellent fishing late in spring on systems that retain cool water temperatures later into the year. Upon completion of spawning, both sexes will hang around the redds for a few days but during that time, they go from being responsible moms and dads and back to being hungry trout. After fasting, in some cases for months, they regain their appetite and begin a feeding frenzy that is unrivaled in the months prior to spawning. On some systems, they will hang around until late May or early June and all you need are large, natural streamers that represent everything from sculpins to crayfish. You can think more like a trout fisherman now and target feeding lanes rather than holding water but if you find yourself on a steelhead river in late May or early June and are casting large streamers, don't be surprised if your next cast yields a 8lb rainbow full of P & V and ready to fight.



Over the years I've taken a lot of notes on just about every component of fishing that interests me. One constant that I have picked up on, whether it be on an east coast salmon river or my own back yard chasing steelhead, the guys and gals that catch the most fish carry the least number of flies. That doesn't mean that you can't own a ton of them, but knowing what you need and when, and how to present it properly will make you more successful.

Attractors and imitators. A streamlined assortment for great lakes steelhead.

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