



Department of  
Environmental  
Conservation

# I NY GUIDE TO STEELHEAD FISHING IN GREAT LAKES TRIBUTARIES



The tributaries of Lake Erie and Lake Ontario are excellent for steelhead fishing. Steelhead are abundant here, and nearly 30 of these waters are managed for this species. These powerful fish, which actually are migratory rainbow trout, are known for putting up long and exciting fights when hooked. DEC currently stocks two strains of steelhead: Washington and Skamania.

## WHEN TO FISH

Washington strain steelhead begin to enter tributaries as early as mid-September. From late October through November, they are feeding aggressively. This is typically one of the best times to fish for them. Brief warming periods will bring in new fish throughout the winter months, with others holding in deeper pools. Spawning usually begins in mid-March and continues through late April. After spawning, the fish begin to move downstream to the lake, feeding heavily and providing excellent fishing into mid-May.

Skamania are a summer-run strain providing summer fishing on the Salmon River. They enter the river as early as May, with the bulk of the run in June-September. Skamania spawn in late February-early April.



## STEELHEAD BEHAVIOR

Steelhead behavior changes with the season, water and weather conditions, and how long they've been in the stream. Steelhead demonstrate a few common habits that you can use to your advantage. They tend to:

- Gather where two currents come together to form a “seam”
- Hold above or below structure that buffers the current and provides security, such as large boulders or logs
- Prefer the beginning and end of large pools
- Move upstream on rising and falling water and hold steady in either low flows or flooding conditions
- Dislike bright light. On sunny days, fish early or late in the day

### FUN FACT

The longer a steelhead has been in the river, the darker it will become. A silver colored fish, often referred to as a “chromer”, is a fresh run fish that recently left the lake.



## EQUIPMENT

### Spinning Tackle

Spinning rods should be long to keep line off the water and sensitive to detect the steelhead's soft bite. Rods from 8 to 10 feet, light to medium action, and rated for 6-12 pound test line are recommended. Some anglers prefer long, slow-action “noodle rods”, which can be up to 14 feet long and rated for 2-6 pound test line. The spinning reel should have enough spool capacity to hold at least 150 yards of 6-10 pound test line.



## Fly Fishing

It's important to have a rod with enough length to hold line off the water, make quick mends, and control the swing of the fly. An ideal steelhead rod for Great Lakes tributaries is a 10-foot, 7-weight. However, any 8½ to 11-foot, 6-9 weight rod could be used effectively. The fly reel should have a smooth disc drag with enough capacity to hold the line and a minimum of 100 yards of 20-pound test backing. Fly line should match your rod and be either a weight-forward floating or sink tip line, depending on river flow and depth.



## Lures and Baits

Most of the effective flies, baits and lures for steelhead represent some type of natural food found in the stream, such as fish eggs, nymphs, and small minnows.

- **Flies** – Artificial flies are one of the most popular and effective baits used to catch steelhead. Steelhead flies are classified into three main types: egg imitators, nymphs, and wet flies/streamers. Different patterns and sizes are used at various times depending on season, water temperature, water clarity and flow conditions.
- **Artificial Baits** – Artificial eggs are the most commonly used lure. They come in a variety of styles and colors. Small plastic worms and beads have become popular and also come in a variety of sizes and colors.
- **Natural Baits** – The most popular natural bait used for steelhead is salmon eggs. They are tied up in dime-sized sacks using various colors of nylon mesh; blue is often a very effective color. Earthworms can also be good at times.



## FISHING TECHNIQUES

### Drift Fishing

Drift fishing means presenting your bait just off the stream bottom. Ideally, it should be moving slightly less than the current speed and appear unattached. Add the least amount of weight to your line necessary to keep the bait near bottom without constantly hanging up. You should occasionally feel the weight “ticking” along the bottom. Hits can be detected by any slight tug on the line, hesitations, or upstream movement.

## Float Fishing

Float (bobber) fishing is very effective for catching steelhead as it allows an angler to make long, snag-free drifts with the bait remaining in the strike zone. Having a properly weighted float is critical for proper bait presentation. Various size split shot sinkers are used, ranging from BB to size 6. Position split shot on the line with the heaviest on top and smallest on bottom (hook end). You want to use enough weight to sink 3/4 of the float and to obtain a drift that presents the bait ahead of the float (J-shaped drift).

## PLAYING AND LANDING STEELHEAD

The explosive power and speed of a steelhead when first hooked can take an angler by surprise, but during the first crucial seconds, any little mistake or equipment flaw can result in a lost fish. Don't try to stop or turn the fish on the first long run—you can't. Hold the rod tip up and let the reel's drag do the work. It should be set tight enough to put some pressure on the fish without breaking your leader. If the steelhead gets a long distance downstream from you in fast water, you usually must follow and try to get below it. Keep the pressure on the fish and fight it by holding the rod tip up. Don't play the fish to exhaustion, especially if you intend to release it. If the fish is to be released, try to keep it in the water while you remove the hook. To release the fish, hold it upright facing into the current until it regains its strength and can swim away.



## SAFETY

Wading rivers can be dangerous, especially during the winter months. Anglers are advised to be cautious and take safety precautions: wear spiked footwear, use polarized glasses, always fish with a buddy, and wear a life preserver.

## REGULATIONS

For current regulations for the stream you are fishing, consult the New York State Freshwater Fishing Guide. The guide is available where licenses are sold and at: <http://www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/7917.html>

## FISHING OPPORTUNITIES

DEC's Fishing Hotlines <http://www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/fishhotlines.html>

Great Lakes/Niagara River/St. Lawrence River Fishing  
<http://www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/47535.html>