

The Fish Journal

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Meeting Mr. Ironhead, an introduction to steelhead trout"
by Dallas Cross

The common and Latin names of Ironhead and *Salmo mykiss* have been changed to Steelhead and *Oncorhynchus mykiss*. However, they all designate one, native, sea-run rainbow trout found in rivers of the Northern Pacific Ocean. I still like ironhead because of the rugged fight they give and their stubborn ability to hang in there despite habitat loss.

I had never fished for steelhead before I moved to Washington. In Idaho three private dams on the Snake river had stopped historical steelhead runs in the lower Snake River, The remaining runs up the main Salmon River were too far away for a reasonable day trip. So, when I moved to Issaquah my new friend, Ed Polf, encouraged me to fish the nearby rivers for this large and beautiful rainbow trout.

Ed had introduced me to sockeye fishing in Lake Washington from a leaky row boat with a cranky motor we rented near where the Renton Airport adjoins the lake. We were marvelously successful. Thus, I had confidence in Eddie's fishing prowess when we set off for the rivers after steelhead.

After trips to the Snoqualmie, Green and Cedar Rivers using salmon eggs and yarn bumping along the bottom, I didn't get a steelhead. Eddie fared no better. Seeking advice from fishing books I decided try for my first fish by appealing to their aggressive nature rather than their appetite.

Ed and I climbed down into the Green River canyon at dawn planning to fish and return to the tavern just above on the rim for lunch. I used a bass spinning rod and started throwing lures to ply waters behind logs and rocks where I understood the steelhead hung out. Not getting a strike I searched my tackle box and tied on a large Bomber bass lure that I had used in the Midwest. Encouraging me, as usual, Ed laughed and remarked, "It can't do any worse than what you have been using."

After several casts a V-wave moved from the bank towards the lure and the rod tip bent violently. I was on to what was potentially my first steelhead. The fish immediately headed down stream and turned. I fought it back up to where it started. With ten-pound line I played it gingerly and finally brought it to the gravel bar where Ed was standing in the water without the net which was still in the car.

As I knelt in the shallow water to grab the fish, it flopped suddenly leaving me holding the line with only a dangling lure on it. I was shocked having just bungled the landing of my first steelhead. Ed, not giving up, swiftly executed a field goal kick and the rainbow, along with a shower of river water and gravel, lay shining in the weeds on the bank.

Later, Ed and I planned a more aesthetic approach to steelhead catching. We were going after them with flies. Having fly fished most of my life I was more comfortable with this approach and tied up some classic steelhead flies, skunks and Skykomoish sunrises. We decided to fish the well known Fortson Hole on the North Fork of Stillaguamish River before it opened to bait fishing in December.

After several wrong turns and bush whacking we arrived at the famous steelhead hole and were surprised to find we had it to ourselves. Fortson Hole has a long, deep run in moderately flowing water. In it we could see some fish lying quietly on the bottom all around a sunken log with its adornment of gaudy flies and bright lures.

With the help of sinking fly lines we felt we were making acceptable presentations to the dark shapes that moved enticingly on the bottom. So we cast, lost and changed flies, but frustratingly did not get any interest. Ed swore he could feel the line moving across the backs of the fish.

Across the river from the hole a hill rises up abruptly. I waded across and climbed to the top of it to get a better view our quarry. I was amazed because I could see at least a dozen big trout on the bottom of the river. I yelled to Ed and he started casting according to my directions.

Watching the trout open their mouths and close them when Ed's fly approached, I started signaling for him to set the hook. The problem was that the fly line had slack in it to get to the bottom and was not firmly connected to the fly. Thus, the gentle change in feeling when a fish mouthed the fly wasn't being transmitted to the pole. Also, the slack made the delay in setting the hook too long. No hook ups. I waded back and didn't get any fish on either. In frustration we muttered about using a duPont spinner (dynamite) and finally left. I had more to learn about Mr. Ironhead, much more.

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