

OUTDOORS

Paul Bruun

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Steelhead success late in coming
with pix

In mid November the fish gods were smiling...really. I'd been sucked in to a trip for a species that hates me and that I'd sworn I'd never bother again...ever.

But Barry County Judge Jim Fisher and his henchman Jon Kolehouse had different plans. Since Judge Jimmy began teaming with Stan Chatham and Peter Moyer in the One Fly celebration, he discovered my Achilles heel and repeated Friday the thirteenth bad luck involving steelhead. As torture he subjects me to a continuing e-mail barrage of his grinning hero shots involving these magnificent ocean going rainbow trout.

A determined sort, Fisher had deluded himself into believing that even Bruun's bad karma and traditional torments couldn't prevail in the face of a banner Great Lakes' steelhead run that populates western Michigan tributaries with the eruptive chrome bombshells.

Over the last dozen years the pursuit of steelhead nationwide has wildly raged through the fishing world. From coast to coast across our country's northern tier a growing number of anglers ignore weather better suited for big game and waterfowl hunting to freeze in their favorite rivers on the trail of the elusive steelhead. Much like salmon, steelhead return from several years of bulking up at sea, to spawn. Unlike salmon, steelhead usually don't die and will grow larger before returning to spawn again.

British Columbia, parts of southeast Alaska, Washington, Oregon and northern California are resident steelhead headquarters. Specialized spinning, baitcasting and fly tackle has been developed to probe deep and fast northwestern rivers for these jumbo rainbows. After years of successful trans-basin stocking and the solving of numerous environmental hurdles, the Great Lakes are home to Pacific Coast steelhead strains whose river presence from October to April regularly delights Midwestern and eastern anglers. Wildlife commissions and fishermen in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota and New York welcome steelhead not only for recreation but as a huge economic cash infusion.

With only one exception in 30 years, my steelhead experiences have been gruesome. They began with a life saving Oregon hospitalization in 1973 during my initial Umpqua and Rogue River exploits and followed through to my last daring episode that included torn waders, a game violation warning ticket, swimming and losing engine power above a major Salmon River Canyon rapid. Long ago I decided I wasn't tough or smart enough to chase steelhead!

From his Hastings headquarters outside of Grand Rapids I joined the judge for a whitetail deer dodging 65 mile ride to Newaygo. Just before light invaded the banks of the Muskegon River we met Jon Kolehouse and his 16' Rivermaster outboard jet sled. It was a misty 18 degrees as Jon diverted us from the remaining guide outfits to a portion of river he shares with few others save wild turkeys, geese, falcons and some ducks. Deer season was a few days off, so the riverfront cabins and modest camps were mostly empty. In two days of fishing we saw perhaps a half dozen other occupied angling craft.

Midwest steelhead fly technique continues to evolve, but generally requires a 9 1/2 to 10 ft.

, 6 to 8 wgt. rod and a reel featuring a smooth drag loaded with a lot of high viz monofilament line. Great Lakes steelhead regularly follow the earlier spawning chinook salmon into the rivers and thus become fond of gobbling drifting eggs. Various colored glo bug (egg) patterns, small caddis, stonefly and Hexagenia (mayfly) nymphs and occasionally sculpin-resembling streamers are regular Midwest steelhead fly fare. All can be fished on regular floating and fast sinking fly lines, but serious bottom hugging presentations are usually the key.

Behaving anonymously, I took absolutely no tackle other than warm clothes and waders to subdue the early a.m. chill. Jon handed me a 10-ft. Orvis 7 wgt. rod with a large Vortex reel filled to the rim with bright green 25 lb. Berkley Big Game line. A swivel and snap slid freely on the mono above a fixed barrel swivel. The swivel snap allowed for quick addition or subtraction of a variety of different pencil lead weights waiting on the steering console. A 10-foot fluorocarbon leader of 2X (about 8-10 lb.) and a pair of different colored eggs trailed from the bottom swivel.

On my previous Midwestern steelheading attempt, I was wading and had to make only short lobs of the weight and twin flies. Utilizing an effortless and necessary 24-volt electric anchor system, Jon secured his jetboat into the current, almost perpendicularly to the deep runs, dropoffs and river bends he planned for us to probe. A firm, quick fore or backhand rod flip sent the lead/twin fly package anywhere from 15 to 40 feet slightly upstream.. Following the highly visible line with a low rod position let the lead quickly find the mostly sand bottom and gently ticka-ticka-ticka downstream. The lead's hesitation allowed the glo bugs or nymphs to stretch out and precede the weighted rig semi-drag free through the runs.

Jon Kolehouse has been pursuing the entire range of Michigan's numerous Great Lakes tributary species for the past 18 years. He began on the famous Pierre Marquette and regularly worked on the Little and Big Manistee, the Grand River, Muskegon Lake and Lake Michigan itself. Depending on the time of year, his fishing trips (float, jetboat and offshore trolling) pursue everything from smallmouth bass, walleye and perch, browns, rainbows and lake trout as well as chinook salmon.

I enjoyed Jon's quiet confident manner sprinkled with humor especially when Bruun found new ways to snag flies and break fish off due to a healthy dose of excitement. He continually located new fish-holding runs. On Thursday Jim and I hooked over 20 steelhead and both lost our share. In the boat a portable Sunbeam propane unit grilled chicken and steak lunches that Jon completed with cheesy pasta vegetables, garlic bread and dessert.

The judge had to return to the bench on Friday so he turned me over to his private investigator, retired Michigan State Police commander Ron Neil. We adequately entertained Jon while also landing some highly acrobatic fish.

Occasional breezes briefly added a chill to this Michigan outing. But magically absent were the prerequisite continuous drizzle followed by screaming wind driven sleet and snow of a standard Bruun steelhead adventure! Jon Kolehouse, the judge and Ron are excellent Wolverine State ambassadors. And if Bruun can land 13 steelhead in two days without being befouled by disaster, these guys qualify as certified magicians as well.

Contact Jon Kolehouse in Newaygo, Michigan at River Bend Guide Service (stlhed18@thinkextreme.net); 231-652-4967. He creates as close to a sure bet for a steelhead experience as is possible with these grand fish.

CUTLINE:

Notice the sunny background surroundings during a typical Lake Michigan fall run steelhead day on the Muskegon River. River fish average seven to 10 pounds. In mid-Nov. Jon Kolehuse of Newaygo helped Bruun avoid his normal steelhead snafus. (Photo by Ron Neil).