

April 1997



Root River steelheads

The spring action for rainbow trout is hot in southeastern Wisconsin.

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My wife, Rita, and I took our 12-year-old daughter, Laura, and our 10-year-old son, Luke, on a fishing trip that turned our Easter weekend into a real holiday back in 1994. We had terrific luck fishing for steelhead, the migratory rainbow trout that enter Great Lakes tributary streams each spring on their annual spawning run. On this outing, we fished the Root River in Racine, and we are definitely going back again.

I had heard stories about hooking 25 or more trout in a day from others who had fished the Root, but I assumed they were fish tales. My previous trips to fish in southeastern Wisconsin were enjoyable, but only modestly successful. This time we really hit it right.

I knew from previous experience on the Root that nice fish were taken from the deeper pools using wax worms or spawn, especially if the bait was suspended by a "strike indicator" -- a fifty-cent term for a bobber or float. I rigged up spinning rods for Laura and Luke, and positioned them near deep, slow runs or deeper pools in the river. Rita and I fished the faster water using yarn flies, spawn bags, and yarn/spawn combinations.

Rita landed the first fish. "I picked some deep water, and after a few drifts I decided to add a little more weight to the line," she said. "I figured if the bait dropped a bit deeper, maybe I would get a big fish." Sure enough, she cast the line upstream and a fish hit right away.

"I pulled up fast, setting the hook, then I noticed a family just upstream was watching me take the action," she said. "I felt really nervous because so many people were watching and I probably overplayed the fish. Some other anglers fishing downstream offered to net my catch. After a hard fight, we got it in, a beautiful six-pound, 26-inch male rainbow. I was so excited I put the fish in my creel while it was still connected to my line."

If you have ever taken youngsters fishing, you know how discouraged kids can get when the fish don't bite. In two or three previous weekends of steelheading we had managed to catch only small trout, and the kids' enthusiasm was on the wane. Both children are experienced anglers who have fished walleye, smallmouth bass and panfish, but steelhead fishing was another matter. Each of them had hooked several steelhead and fought them briefly, but the fish either spit the hook or broke their line. Like Laura said: "The fish would hit so hard and so suddenly that I really didn't have time to think and the fish got off."

With practice, and a move to shallower pools, the disillusionment soon turned to excitement. "We found some fish in the shallows that hit the yarn fly on Dad's rod," she said. "He hooked the fish and handed the rod to me. He showed me how to lean into the fish when it jumped, and to walk downstream with the fish to let it fight for awhile, and to keep just enough tension on the line so the fish couldn't get off, but not too tight or the trout would easily snap the line. It took about five to 10 minutes to let the fish go downstream, then upstream, jumping in the air. I had to move with the fish. I landed a 26-inch rainbow, about six or seven pounds. It was silvery and beautiful."

Luke landed a four- to five-pound, 23-inch male. "The fish were really coming on strong and we found some real good spots," he said. "It was lots of fun!"

I was having my own mix of fun and frustrations. I'd hooked eight or 10 fish that second evening, but I made a number of mistakes, either horsing the fish in the thrill of the moment, or trying to retrieve them upstream, which is almost always a bad idea. In most cases the fish broke water and spit the hook, occasionally breaking the line. Somehow, I managed to land a few and take pictures before releasing the fish.

The last morning we were at the Root, I probably hooked 20 fish in about a three-hour period. We had a ball! Sometimes the fish would strike at the yarn so hard and fast that by the time I set the hook, I had snagged the steelhead in the pectoral fin, the tail or even the head. One fish I caught fought for 15 minutes. I could see that it had two yarn flies stuck to its back and my fly hooked in its mouth. This fish got away, but was caught and landed later in the day by another angler.

All but one of the fish we landed were males. The one female was ripe with spawn. We milked a few of her eggs for spawn sacs before releasing her.

All in all, it was a memorable occasion. We hooked about 30-40 fish that weekend and landed eight or 10. Our average wasn't the greatest, but we had a fantastic time.

Steelhead fishing has taught me the value of persistence. You need to try the same river several times. I hear the Root River has a nice run of Skamania trout during the summer months. We'd like to try that too, though it is trickier fishing because the water temperature gets quite warm and you can't play fish very long if you are going to successfully revive and release them in hot weather.

Select just a few fish to eat

I really enjoy eating fish, as does my family. We particularly like to smoke larger fish and fix the smaller fish in several ways. We also know enough not to overdo a good thing. We know the trout migrating in from the Great Lakes are exposed to pollutants, and we know rainbow trout are relatively fatty fish that accumulate these contaminants as they grow. So we follow the recommendations from the Department of Natural Resources and health officials. We don't eat more than a meal a month of the larger steelhead (bigger than 17 inches) caught from these tributary waters and we eat less than a meal a week of the smaller fish.

If you do decide to eat these fish, follow the trimming, cooking and eating warnings in the booklet "Important Health Information for People Eating Wisconsin Fish," issued by the Department of Natural Resources and the Wisconsin Department of Health. You can get a copy by writing to: Fish Advisory, Wisconsin DNR, P.O. Box 7921, Madison, WI 53707; by visiting a DNR Regional Office; or by retrieving it from the DNR's web site:

[HTTP://WWW.DNR.STATE.WI.US](http://www.dnr.state.wi.us)

Whether you eat the fish or not, the Root River offers fantastic spring steelhead fishing. While the fishing pressure can be considerable, the migratory rainbow trout using the Root are abundant and the resource seems to stand up quite well to heavy fishing. There are quiet moments too, especially if you can avoid the weekend crowds. That last morning we fished the Root, we pretty much had the entire stretch to ourselves, despite the

fact that we were hooking fish, squealing, whooping and carrying on throughout the morning. You can bet we'll be back, and those of you who are even closer to the action than we are should consider a trip, too.

Gearing up for spring steelheads

Many anglers successfully fish the Root River's deep runs and pools with spinning gear and float rigs. Choose a longer, stiffer spinning rod to play and manage these strong, large fish. I recommend an eight- to 10-foot spinning rod with a 4 or 5 to 1 ratio spinning reel, spooled up with six- to 10-pound test of a stout abrasion-resistant monofilament line.

Terminal tackle should include a sensitive float, split shot and a size 4-8 steelhead hook tied without a leader directly to the fishing line. You can tie or purchase bags of spawn or use wax worms. Both are available at local bait shops. Also ask the bait shop owner to show you some tube jigs -- soft plastic bodies of various colors that slip over small lead-headed jigs. Tube jigs work well when tipped with wax worms.

Fly-fishing for steelhead

Most steelheaders use fly rods to pursue rainbows in medium or fast water. Load the fly reel with 100 yards of fly line backing (20-30 pound test dacron line) then 100-200 yards of six- to 10-pound monofilament line. Fly line is rarely used because you are typically casting only 10 to 20 feet of line upstream and drifting through runs and rapids. Rainbows prefer to lie in current breaks near fast water.

The fly rods we see anglers using for steelheading are nine- to 10-feet long and usually seven, eight or nine weight. Remember, fishing the Root might yield a 20-pound trophy fish and the odds of landing such a huge fish are greatly increased if you have a stout rod. Also consider a fly reel with a disk drag and multiple retrieve. These reels can be pricey. An affordable favorite I've seen on many rigs of experienced steelheaders is the Martin, Model 72R. The disk drag will allow you to play a large fish with one hand while freeing up the other to help you keep your balance and wade downstream.

For tackle, try yarn, egg imitation flies, spawn and various streamers, nymphs and wet flies. We like to drift a homemade yarn fly, a piece of colored yarn tied to a size 4 or 6 steelhead hook. Varying amounts of split shot are added to make sure the yarn fly drifts through the run near the bottom, in the zone where the steelhead lie.

As a general rule, fish yarn early in the season and when sight-fishing for trout near their spawning beds. I prefer brightly colored yarn unless the water is very clear, which is rare for the Root. Productive colors included chartreuse, orange and hot pink. You can combine one of these bright colors with a softer color in infinite combinations. I pre-cut one-inch pieces of several yarn colors and compose new flies as I go. Some folks use a vise and pre-tie the yarn on the hook shank. I use a snell knot and slip the yarn through the loop as I fish to find combinations that produce strikes.

How to tie a yarn fly

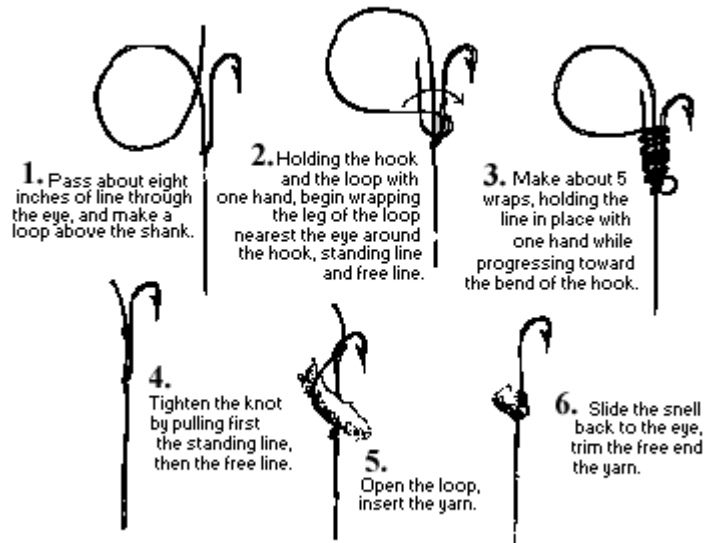


Illustration courtesy of Burger Brothers Sporting Goods, © 1997

Popular flies for steelhead include Woolie Buggers, stone fly patterns, mudler minnows and Woolie Worms among others. Local patterns vary, but I've learned that darker patterns work well on the Root. Fish nymphs, streamers and wet flies later in the spawning run, in deeper pools and especially after the suckers enter the river. Suckers will dominate your catch when fishing yarn once they move into the river.

Whatever your methods, you're bound to have action if you can find fish in the river and you are persistent. The Root River and other Lake Michigan tributaries offer wonderful opportunities to teach kids the thrill and satisfaction of hooking, playing and landing a silvery, magnificent steelhead.

Eye-to-eye with trout and salmon

Throughout much of the year you can stand toe to fin with big trout and salmon on the Root River, even if you never wet a line. At the Root River Steelhead Facility, northeast of Racine in Lincoln Park, two 5x6 foot viewing windows thrill visitors who watch fish migrate upstream on their spawning runs.

Steelhead are not native to Wisconsin. These rainbow trout were imported from the Pacific Coast and planted in tributary streams of the Great Lakes. They migrate into the Great Lakes and lead a nomadic life in search of food. As the rainbow trout mature, their skin turns a lustrous silver color and earns the name steelhead. The fish migrate back to tributary streams like the Root River, but fertilized eggs would not survive the natural conditions in the tributary streams.

At facilities like the one on the Root River, spawning fish are blocked from upstream migration by a dam. The urge to migrate forces them up a fish ladder and then into a holding pond. Eggs and sperm (milt) are collected. Fertilized eggs are taken to the Kettle Moraine Springs Hatchery for incubation, hatching and rearing until they reach stocking size.

Each strain of steelhead migrates at a different time of the year, so there are several peak times for viewing fish at the Root River Facility. You'll see the Ganaraska strain of steelhead in March and April; the Skamania strain in July, August and September; chinook salmon in September and October; coho salmon in October; brown trout from October through December; and the Chambers Creek strain of steelhead from November through March.

To visit the Root River Steelhead Facility, follow I-94 toward Racine. Take the Highway 20 exit eastbound to Highway 31. Travel north on Highway 31 to Highway C (also called Spring Street). Turn right on Spring Street to Dominick Drive. Turn left on Dominick Drive. Follow the signs to Lincoln Park and the steelhead facility.

About the author

WALLY and RITA BALCERZAK are psychologists in private practice in St. Paul, Minnesota. Their love of fishing takes them to many parts of the Midwest, but especially to northwest and southeast Wisconsin to fish for trout and salmon.