

Steelhead Trout feat. Roger Harding and Mark Hieronymus

Hey to all you fish enthusiasts out there. Whether you're an avid angler just curious about fish, we'd like to welcome you to Fish of the Week! It's Monday, April 26 2021 and we're excited to talk about all the fish. I'm Katrina Liebich with the US Fish and Wildlife Service in Alaska,

and I'm Guy Eroh, a traveling fisherman.

And this week's fish is the steelhead trout. And our guests are Roger Harding, who's a retired fish and game biologist and also a trout researcher in Southeast Alaska and Mark Hieronymus, who works with Trout Unlimited as the community science coordinator. When people refer to a steelhead they're actually talking about the sea run version of a rainbow trout.

The first three years of their life are pretty much identical. They live in the same habitat and are feeding on the same things. But in the third year, the steelhead will start smolting and go through a physical process that makes it like more silvery looking your typical small looking fish and then they head out to the ocean in early spring. And from there, they move out into the...may travel 1000s of miles and go out into the deep ocean, where they get big, eat lots and then before they typically spend two to three years in salt water before returning to their natal streams to spawn.

Now, I've read in the literature that even within a single, I don't know if clutch is the right word, but redd of eggs that some of those can become steelhead that are anadromous and some of those will stay river residents. Is that true?

Absolutely. So there's no...there's there has to be some kind of environmental trigger or something to make them go out. Sometimes you'll actually there have been reports of some of the smaller rainbow trout, especially the males, primarily the males will actually build the called sneak spawn. They will sneak in when the big steelhead are spawning, and I'll actually contribute a little bit of that. So there actually may be eggs in a redd that were fertilized by a rainbow trout

those little sneakers.

So some people I know like to classify steelhead salmon, others like to classify them as trout. There is some debate out there. Where do you guys fall on this?

I guess this debate has been going on for quite a while especially just in the scientific basis for their names of genus and species. And so finally they after doing some genetic work and pausing a little bit and thinking about it, they group the trout including the coastal cutthroat trout and steelhead rainbow in with the genus *Onchorynchus*. So they are grouped in with the Pacific salmon.

If you were to lay a steelhead between a mature rainbow and an ocean bright salmon, how would you describe the differences to somebody just to get a sense,

if it's over 23 inches, it's considered a steelhead, that's how you would tell the difference between the steelhead and the trout. However, there are populations rainbow trout in Southeast Alaska that exceed that size, but don't actually have any anadromy in their life history. Steelhead tend to be long and skinny when you're looking at them in comparison with say like a coho or a king. You know how those are kind of plump looking, steelhead are a little, you know, there's I, one of my friends derisively calls them pencil fish, because they're not big and fat like kings. And that's the biggest difference, their tails tend to look a little larger for the same size fish than a salmon, their heads look a little smaller. Steelhead often have that cryptic coloration that that line that runs down almost in sync with the lateral line where it's very dark above and very bright or white below. And, you know, most salmon, you'll see that but it's silvery across the whole fish. And so those are the ways that you really you know, that you can just kind of point out and say, Oh, that's steelhead right there. And most often, with both sexes, they'll have a rosy patch on the cheek as well.

And they retain that in the ocean too, when they're out at sea, as well as in freshwater, kind of that rosy coloration?

Now that rosy you rarely see incoming fresh fish, you know, a lot of times these fish will hold off the mouths of rivers, the spring fish will hold off the mouths of rivers starting in February, and they'll just kind of idle around especially the bucks, they generally come in first. And some of those guys are already pretty colored up when they're coming in. But for the most part when they're on their way and when they're right in that interface between salt and fresh, they're pretty clean looking without that rosy patch but as their you know, as their residence time goes in the river, they develop that.

There's lots of differences, but the big thing between the trout and the salmon is that trout spawn more than one time instead of dying like salmon do after spawning only one time. So we have had fish that's that one of the creeks in Southeast Alaska that has spawned five times. So this fish is 10 years old. It was in freshwater for its first four years of life, then went to the ocean for two years, came back and spawn successfully five times

Hey out there everyone. One thing that we always want you to keep in mind regardless of what it is that you're fishing for is safety. Every week we're going to give you a tip or two that you can use to stay safe while you're fishing. Let's talk about wading. Wade-fishing is one of my favorite types of fishing and there are plenty of things that can go wrong while you're doing it. If you are alone, be as cautious as possible and don't cross if you cannot find a stay stretch to do so. Look for parts of the river that are wide and shallow. These are often the safest to traverse because the water will be moving slower, and exerting less force on your body because it's a smaller surface area. A wading staff can be useful feel ahead of where you're stepping in, avoid large holes or rocks. If you're traveling in a group, lock, arms, communicate and move slowly. It's hard to sweep away multiple people that is one. Lastly, turn back if you get to a point that is too difficult. I recall a time where we had a group of four people crossing the snow melt river, we got about 90% of the way across the river. But then the thalweg proved too much of a challenge. And we had to spend about 10 minutes getting back to where we came from. It was what it was and there were no shame in it.

If you're going to fish for something, if you're trying to conserve something, you have to understand what kind of habitat it's using. So you know someone's fishing, what kind of habitat should they be keying into, I guess maybe starting in the in the spring.

When you're fishing from the rivers in the spring you're looking for slow deep pools with cover. Because you got to remember, you know, they spawn more...steelhead spawn more than once they have the ability to spawn more than once, right? And so unlike salmon, they don't lose that oceanic wariness that they have. They don't you know you see salmon, they just turn into total spawn-zombies, right, they're just crowding in there just like "must make babies." Steelhead are creatures of the deep until that really brief period, it might only be a day that they're actually engaged in spawning behavior. But they tend to they tend to love cover. I mean, steelhead's kind of an inappropriate name from them out here in Southeast Alaska. They should call them "woodheads" because they're under log jams. They're next to downed trees. When you see him out on a flat like a tail out. That's probably a fish that's getting ready to spawn and so that's the one that you don't want to fish for, you know you want to be you want to be sticking for, you know for the bulk of your season, you want to be fishing that deep cover that doesn't look like spawning water.

What are some of the favorite ways to fish for steelhead, you know, as a fly fishing, what kind of lures are people using in Southeast Alaska this time of year?

Well fly and spin is you know, fly or conventional gear are both really popular. I prefer the fly fishing, it's actually easier. And if you fly fishing, you can break all presentations down for steelhead into two groups, you're either fishing a tight line or you're fishing a dead drift. And so that would be nymphing for swinging. And the difference there is nymphing is usually done upstream or across from you where you're casting your offering upstream and then allowing it to drift dead, you know at the same speed as the current down through a run and then when it gets down to the bottom you just stripping it back in and throwing it back out. Whereas swinging you're casting, you're generally fishing below you and you're allowing the current pull your line straight, tight and that swings your fly across the current in front of the fish and then when you're done, you strip it back in then you step down a couple feet and throw it back out again. Steelhead eat everything. They're naturally curious and some of the steelhead flies you know that I've seen people throw I'd be curious about it too because it's kind of like "what the hell is that?" Let's go take a look at that. But generally speaking, roe. You know egg looking flies are a good place to start. Beads are a great place to start. For swinging flies you want something that's got inherent motion built in on the fly by inherent motion I mean you can hold it in the current in the fly flutters or moves it looks like ocean food. You know it looks like shrimp, a squid, because those are the two you know there's your two really big food groups they utilize in the ocean. And so things that kind of you know things that move around. Colors you know you can catch steelhead in any color, but the closer they are to salt water and this the newer they are in the ocean orange and black is tough to beat. Black is tough to beat anywhere in that you find steelhead. The further along they go in the spawn especially for box pink and Cerise start becoming go to flies. There's a bunch of theories about that. But uh, we'll just leave it at that level.

Yeah, in terms of like, you know, your rod and your line as well. Like what, what kind of test? How big are these fish? What weight of rod would you be putting behind those lures?

Well, you know, they're anywhere from anywhere from 26 to 40 plus inches and the environment that you're fishing for them in a lot of wood, you know a lot a lot of obstacles and so you want to be geared up so that you can get these fish in once you once you hook them you know you got to remember that all these fish are on their spawning ground, right and it's all almost all catch and release in Southeast Alaska. Very little opportunity to actually keep a steel which is great because there's not a whole lot of right. So you want light enough capital to make it fun for you, but stout enough tackle to make it okay for the fish right? and so I generally use an eight weight rod, I use a nine or 10 footer. I use 16 or 20 pound test fluorocarbon for my tippet because I want to be able to get that fishing you know, once the initial hook set, you know, the taken the hook set and about the first 30 seconds of the fight after that, it's like alright, clock's ticking, you know, we need to get this fish in and and get it revived and get it back out there to spawn. And so I've generally fish heavy gear, anything a 7-9 weight fly rod, or a medium action spinning rod, you know, 14 to 20 pound test is great at anything lighter and you're it's, you're kind of doing a disservice to the fish at that point,

what kind of landing gear should someone be using to ensure that they're given this chance this fish the best chance of survival,

Not the beach. That's the number one. That's the number one you know thing, keep in the water, try to keep them in, try to keep them in as much water as they have body depth. So they're not going to turn on their side and hit their head on the rocks and brand themselves. Landing nets are great. I know that folks have occasionally used gloves, but the use of gloves unless you really, you're holding it in one specific place with as little pressure and a smaller footprint or a handprint as you possibly can. Gloves can remove slime. So you probably should avoid those. If you're going to use a net use a rubber net, that's a great idea. Oftentimes, I'll just grab the I'll just grab the leader and run my hand down the leader as quick as I can to get the hook. And maybe with my other hand I'll grab by the tail, especially if I fought a fish for a while I'll grab them by the tail so I can buy by the peduncle. By the by the tail wrist, and then I'll turn them back into the current until they swim free of my hand just because you don't you know, you never want to turn a fish way and have it glide into deep water and then all of a sudden be in need of reviving. Right? So but yeah, you know, generally speaking, if you got a net, it's a great place a great place to use it is when you're steelhead fishing.

Okay, so if somebody were to retain a steelhead, you know, based on the regulations that we heard about, maybe it's un-releasable. If you open up a steelhead, you know to the fillets like more like a salmon? Or does look more like a trout? Have you guys cooked or eaten steelhead?

I hate to say it but they're excellent eating and they're very very good smoked. They don't have strong flavor as they do the salmon they do. But they are similar in color to they're a little whiter than the salmon a little lighter in color than then most of the salmon would be so yes if you have an opportunity to eat one legally, please enjoy it. They're really good eating.

Yeah, I grew up in Washington State killing hatchery fish and so I've eaten a bunch of steelhead. They have a cantaloupe colored flesh. It's a slightly orange than Dolly varden but not as orange as my shirt which I just

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realized that nobody can see on radio. But they're like, thresh, they're they're a little bit if you guys are familiar with a lot of fresh Pink Salmon on ocean bright pink salmon flesh looks like if you take out one rose tint, or one rose tone out of that into orange. That's pretty much what it looks like translucent, oily, greasy and man tell you out there the single best fish to smoke.

And then once it comes out of the smoker, how do you eat it you eat it on crackers cheese or just straight down?

I can. I would encourage anybody that was coming down to Southeast Alaska to read the regs very thoroughly. There are I know the Juneau regs are where I'm at in Juneau, it's all catch and release on the road system, there is no retention. But as you move around in southeast there are places where retention is a possibility. I would just strongly discourage it for most folks. One thing that I would say is that, you know, there's about 330 known steelhead streams in Southeast Alaska, I would put that number closer to maybe 550-600 streams or so I think less than 50% of steelhead runs have been identified. And I think they deserve a little bit more respect than that, since, you know, part of my job with Trout Unlimited, is doing habitat surveys and one of the things that I do is steelhead surveys and since 2018, I've added both with my directed observations and then assisting with others. We've added seven new steelhead streams to Southeast Alaska. And so I I would say that if somebody was out fishing and they wanted to, you know they wanted to do right by these fish...if the stream that you're fishing on doesn't have steelhead listed in it, take a couple pictures you know you need to fish in hand and nominate him for the catalog but take a couple pictures and then take them into your local fish and game office and say hey, you know, they're steelhead in this creek and they deserve to be the same conservation measures that all the other salmonids have.

Well it's been great having you two on the show, Roger and Mark, thank you so much for joining us.

Thanks Roger, thanks Mark.

Thank you, no problem.

We hope everyone gets out there and enjoys all the fish! Thanks for listening to Fish of the Week! My name is Katrina Liebich, and my co-host is Guy Eroh. Fish of the Week! is produced by David Hoffman of Citizen Racecar, assisted by Garrett Teidemann and Kelsey Kohrs. Fish of the Week is a production of the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Alaska Region, Office of External Affairs. As the Service reflects on 150 years of fisheries conservation, we honor, thank, and celebrate the whole community – individuals, Tribes, the State of Alaska, sister agencies, fish enthusiasts, scientists, and others – who have elevated our understanding and love, as people and professionals, of all the fish.