

In low winter water, catch steelhead with a dry fly and dropper

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By John Hayes / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Winter is hard on Lake Erie tributaries. Waters are often blown out with rain and snow melt or so low and clear that steelhead fall back into the deepest pools, waiting for better flow. Just a splash from live bait or a strike indicator and spooked fish scatter, ignoring whatever is thrown to them.

Karl Weixlmann, a steelhead guide and author from Erie, said his technique for low-water steelheading was inspired by studying their actions.

“The behavior of fish determines how you’re going to catch them,” he said. “In early fall and winter when the water level drops, fish get stuck in the deepest pools. I watched guys fish over them, throw a bobber or lure at them and all that did was spook the steelhead. They’re not about to catch those fish.”

A streamer might work — a steelhead’s instinct is to chase and eat it — but Mr. Weixlmann said he has watched savvy steelhead swim away from streamers when angler pressure was heavy.

“When it’s low and clear and they [sense] some type of interference in their environment, they react very negatively. I started thinking about dry fly droppers. I learned that it is the most unobtrusive presentation you can make to low-water, high-pressure fish. Lets you catch fish where other people can’t catch them.”

Mr. Weixlmann is vice-president of the Pennsylvania Steelhead Association, author of “Great Lakes Steelhead, Salmon and Trout: Essential Techniques for Fly Fishing the Tributaries (Stackpole Books, \$34.95) and contributor to “Keystone Fly Fishing: The Ultimate Guide to Pennsylvania’s Best Water” (Headwater, \$22.59).

He described his technique for catching steelhead with dry flies and droppers in Fly Fisherman magazine. He starts with a 6-weight fly rod and 10-foot leader tapered to 3X. He attaches 4 feet of 3X fluorocarbon tippet and ties on a big yellow Stimulator fly, size 8-12.

“I think that’s a good imitation of the hexagenia mayflies that hatch on Lake Erie,” he said.

Chromers can be taken with dry flies, but in low clear conditions, cautious steelhead are generally too wary to rise to the surface. In Mr. Weixlmann’s system, the floating fly becomes a very light, highly visible indicator of what’s happening to the dropper below.

A length of 3X fluorocarbon line is tied to the bend of the dry fly. Mr. Weixlmann said his go-to droppers are Copper Johns and Flashback Pheasant Tails, but many beaded nymphs in size 16-18 will do. Egg patterns can work — he likes a No. 16 Pink Lady — but lighter flies require a microshot weight to sink them.

The key element to Mr. Weixlmann’s system is the length of the line leading to the dropper.

“When fish fall back into deep slow holes, they suspend in the water column. They’re not on the bottom. There’s no current on the bottom, no oxygen passing at those depths,” he said. “I believe they rise in the water column to intake oxygen. I’ve seen big pods of steelhead with their tails and dorsal fins sticking out of the water. They’re coming up because there’s more oxygen in the current than on the bottom.”

Fish will go for the dropper. Mr. Weixlmann said anglers should “play around” with dropper line length to find the right depth. He starts deep and works his way up. Sometimes he adds a microshot weight above the lower fly.

“You have to be absolutely precise in the depth of the nymph,” he said. “Two or 3 inches can make a world of difference in the winter. Sometimes I put the nymph a foot or less under the dry, other times it’s deep. But you never want the dropper to hit the bottom.”

Like all trout, steelhead generally face upstream. Mr. Weixlmann said anglers should position themselves downstream as close as possible without spooking them, which may require a fairly long cast. Cast upstream and across so the fly line doesn’t pass over the fish.

Watch the “indicator,” the surface fly. If it stalls or dunks, the dropper has hit the bottom or some obstruction and the dropper line should be shortened. Remember that surface water moves faster than deeper water, which is slowed by contact with the bottom. Most of the time the dropper will trail behind the indicator and rise in the water column.