

Steelhead: Not just the name of a fish!

Drive by a steelhead river this time of year on a pleasant sunny day and you might just see a steelhead angler. Drive by the same river on a cold, blustery, rainy, snowy, miserable, mother-of-all-cold-fronts day – and you will see a steelhead angler. Up to his or her thighs in ice cold, swift-flowing water, bracing themselves against relentless, cutting wind. That's because the people who pursue steelhead are steelheads themselves: rugged, determined, masochistic sons-of-bucks that suck up tough situations like cotton candy.

So as not to create confusion, a steelhead is a rainbow trout that lives in the ocean or the Great Lakes and migrates up tributary rivers to spawn and feed at certain times of year. Because they live in the big water they are larger than most rainbow trout. On the west coast of North America steelhead can weigh in excess of 20-pounds, and on the best rivers in British Columbia they can achieve well over 30. In the Great Lakes they are somewhat smaller, especially in Lake Superior. They sometimes attain weights of 10- to 12-pounds, but usually are around 5. But don't let this small size fool you. Lake Superior steelhead are probably the most hearty and strong rainbow trout you'll find. In fact the steelhead on the north shore of Superior survive in the coldest climate in North America (colder than coastal Alaska) where these fish can naturally reproduce. And because of the steep, fast flowing rivers they spawn in they are very powerful swimmers and jumpers. I have literally chased 6-pound steelhead for nearly 100-yards as they peel off line and swim down a set of rapids with me running along the bank.

Recently my good friend Terry Kluge, owner of Merkel's Camp on Wabigoon Lake www.merkelscamp.com, came up to fish with me on the northshore. My crystal ball (also known as the 14-day weather forecast) was a bit off the mark: I told him that the fish-

ing would be awesome as a solid two days of rain was coming on the weekend, which would naturally make steelhead fishing fantastic. But as luck would have it we got snow - not rain. Enough wet snow that conditions dictated closing schools and highways. Somehow, we managed to squeak through to my cabin during a brief interval between road closures. We slept in the cabin with the heater turned full-bore and in the morning the thermometer read -12. We headed out fishing anyway and Terry caught his first steelhead on a fly rod.

Terry is definitely a guy worthy of the name "Steelhead". We played highschool football together in Dryden and Terry had a tryout with the Sault Greyhounds just prior to the Gretsky era. I knew then that he was a tough guy. But what really makes him worthy of the name, is the fact that he shouldn't be fishing at all. In fact, he's one of those guys that you might think has nine lives like a cat. In 1989 Terry took a near fatal fall from a hydro pole while working as a lineman in the Dryden area. The pole actually broke at the base with him at the top – and nearly fell right on top of him. Just as the pole was about to smash down to the ground with him underneath it, he managed to maneuver the pole to the side. Terry has all kinds of back, neck and head problems as a result; but nevertheless he is active and vigorous, smiling and laughing through the pain so that he can continue enjoying the outdoors. His family and his camp on Wabigoon Lake are his passion, and all of his life is connected to the outdoors in one way or another.

I know a few other steelhead fanatics that share the same aches and pains as Terry (you know who you are!). I too have a chronic, work-related back injury that will never go away. But the rush of having a strong steelhead pulling on the end of your line in cold, swift water is enough to make all the pain go away. At least temporarily. After that, well, that's why God invented Advil!

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Terry Kluge with his first steelhead on a fly rod.