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# Pennsylvania ANGLER & BOATER



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### On the cover

This issue's cover shows PA Angler Anthony Workosky with a steelhead he caught in Walnut Creek. Joe Workosky took the photograph.



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with age-based info



# Steelhead on a Dry Fly

BY JOHN DEEGAN JR.

"I don't believe it! Did a steelhead really just take my dry fly?" Fortunately, the words were only thoughts and instincts took over. I raised my rod tip, set the fly, and the water exploded. I had just ignited a 10-pound silver missile, intent on reaching the sky and throwing my fly.

I had arrived at Walnut Creek around 7 a.m. on a Monday with my 6-weight rod in hand, hoping to find both water and fish. The rain had been stingy that year and the Lake Erie tributaries in the fall had all remained low and relatively clear. The steelhead had nonetheless crept in under the cover of darkness or discolored water and had poked their noses as far inland as they dared, flitting from hole to hole. I started fishing in the new holes below the Manchester Street bridge. Pressure on our beautiful steelhead had been very high. With all the publicity "steelhead alley" was getting that year, anglers from far and near had been pounding the water with everything imaginable. The press of too many anglers in a limited area had brought out the worst in both people and fish—boorish behavior and lockjaw.

I had moved from pool to pool exploring the new holding water and looking for some elbow room. I enjoy traditional steelhead fishing and lean toward the use of greased line presentations, Spey-style flies, streamers and wet flies. To me, the quality of the fishing experience, not the quantity of fish caught, is most important. Finding adequate space to fish was difficult and the water flow was barely marginal for the tactics I prefer. After picking up several fish, I had elected to abandon my preferred techniques and try small nymphs and spawn flies. Several more nice, fresh fish came to hand and were released. But the fishing wasn't very exciting. Without sufficient water depth and breadth, the real power and majesty of the steelhead is severely diminished; steelies need water to leap, fight and run!

After lunch, I had debated whether I would stay at Walnut or try somewhere else. Elk Creek always calls to me because of its greater water volume. I decided, however, to try the main pool just above the Manchester Street bridge. Earlier in the day the place had been lined with anglers standing nearly shoulder to shoulder. Not exactly my cup of tea. But when I had arrived, the pool wasn't too crowded. Guys walking downstream had told me the fish had been pounded by many anglers all morning and weren't being very cooperative. Undeterred, I pressed on. When I arrived at the pool, I couldn't believe my eyes. There were hundreds of steelhead in the water and about a dozen anglers were scattered along the western (un-posted) shore. Every once in a while a bait fishermen would get a take and pretty soon another fish would be added to a stringer.

Because I was the only fly fisherman in the group, I had positioned myself near the tail-out water where I had a little



casting room and some current to work. I had fished hard for about an hour and had picked up two fish on streamers worked deeply and slowly. Clearly, the fish were uncooperative, so I switched to a 6X tipper and tied on an assortment of small (sizes 14 to 20) nymphs and spawn flies. As the ranks of anglers thinned, I moved up through the pool and managed to pick up a fish every now and then. The trick seemed to be changing flies and colors often. My challenge was to find and present something to the fish that they hadn't seen recently and to find one that was willing to take my offering.

Around three o'clock I was giving serious thought to moving on to Godfrey Run and fishing in the lake for a while. I had already had a very good day on Walnut, catching and releasing about a dozen fish. Perhaps, I mused, it might be fun to fish the big water where a hooked steelhead could really fight and run and jump as much as it wanted.

As I headed back down toward the bridge, the sun had finally peeked out from behind the clouds. I paused and thought, "Why not try fishing a dry fly for a while?" While I had never heard of Lake Erie steelhead taking dry flies, I had nothing but time to lose and perhaps I might even entice a steelhead to the surface just as West Coast anglers do!" Searching through my dry fly box, I picked out my largest, bushiest-looking fly, a very heavily dressed size 12 Adams. I rubbed some floatant on it and tied it to the business end of some 4X tipper. Fishing near the tail-out, I cast across stream and let the current carry the fly downstream for a while. Periodically, I would "skate" the fly and then let it resume its normal drift. On my second cast, just after skating the fly, it disappeared beneath a bulge of water. Fish on!









After emitting an uncontrollable shout of surprise and joy, I concentrated hard on bringing the fish to hand to prove to myself that it had really taken the fly. Sure enough, the fish was fair-hooked with my fly clearly visible, and firmly lodged, in the corner of its mouth.

Well, one fish caught on a dry fly doesn't prove anything. So I went back to work. On the very next cast, same result: Fish on! Amazing! Even though these fish had been hammered hard all morning, they were still surface-oriented and were willing to come up to take my fly. I had a hard time believing what had just happened. By now, my two in a row had attracted attention and several guys were standing around. After I released the fish, I explained to them, in response to their "what are you using" question, what I was doing. A fly fisherman in the crowd said that he had never heard of our steelhead taking dry flies. I said, "Neither had I."

Perhaps feeling undeservedly confident, I agreed to demonstrate my technique. I again cast across stream, let the fly drift, skated it, let it drift, and nothing happened. At the end of the drift, when the fly was directly downstream and at the edge of the riffles, I twitched the fly and the surface exploded with a savage take! After three spectacular jumps and several high-speed runs up and down the pool, the fish was brought to hand. What a magnificent 12-pound specimen! Beautifully chrome-colored and heavy-bodied, apparently fresh from the lake, the steelhead looked amazingly like an oversized football.

After having caught three magnificent steelhead on three successive casts, I thought that I should rest the pool (and my nerves) for a while. As the ranks of the bait tossers thinned, I slowly moved into position to fish other sections of the pool. Again and again, steelies rose to my dry fly, and with each fish hooked, I marveled at their power and beauty. Although not all rises resulted in takes, I was truly surprised by their degree of surface orientation. Perhaps it was the novelty of the presentation, the sunlight on the water, the clarity of the water, the amount of flow, the water temperature, or perhaps it was some combination of these factors.

Of the six steelhead I caught on a dry fly and released that day, the last one to rise to my fly seared a lasting image in my mind. I was fishing the middle section of the pool and the current flow was relatively slow. I cast to the middle of the creek, let the current carry the fly, skated the fly, then drifted, then skated again, then drifted. Suddenly, as if in slow motion, a large head emerged from the dark-green depths. With mouth open and eyes fixed on my drifting fly, the steelhead porpoised on my fly with about the front third of its body coming out of the water. In hindsight, I still can't believe that I didn't yank the fly away from that fish before it struck. Instead, frozen, I watched in amazement (and with my mouth open, too) as this wondrous event unfolded before me not more than 30 feet away. The take was clean and true; the fight was on; the fish was acrobatic, determined and exhilarating. As I led the fish to hand and then release, I marveled at what a remarkable day and special moment it had been.

What a wonderful new dimension dry fly presentations bring to steelhead fishing in the Lake Erie tributaries. Truly my day on Walnut Creek had been memorable. Twenty-three steelhead played to hand and released; most notably, six of them had proven that our steelhead will take dry flies. Right now, I must get to my bench and try my hand at tying some bombers! ☐

photos by Walt Kunkin