

A Great Steelhead Trip!

I may never have another Steelhead fishing trip like the one I had this fall. I heard on a television report in South Bend Indiana that fishermen had not seen steelhead this size for ten years. Someone caught a 17 pound steelhead in the St. Joseph River the day I was in South Bend. I was making a presentation to the St. Joseph River Valley Fly Fishers about the fly fishing opportunities in Missouri. This group of fishermen is a fun bunch with a large membership. The presentation went well, but hearing that report on television got my adrenaline flowing and made me eager to get on the water the next day. Tim Scott told me he would find a club member to take me to a local stream so I could have a chance to fish for some local steelhead. The following morning John Carr took me to the Dowagiac River, which is a tributary of the St. Joseph. On my second cast I had a take and a silver bullet shot out of the water about 3 feet and headed for the far bank. After a short battle the tippet broke and it was gone. I managed one other hook up and worked it down stream toward John. He made an attempt to tail it, but it made one last roll and the hook came out. I fished about 6 hours with two hook ups and a near landing.



© I am pointing to a seam, for John, where I hooked up the first steelhead.

It was time to head to Kalamazoo for a presentation with the Kalamazoo Trout Unlimited club. Terry Wittorp meet me there and introduced me to several of the club members. The Kalamazoo club is very active with community and stream projects. After the presentation I headed north two hours in a driving rain. I was wondering what this would do for the fishing. Normally it means that a fresh run of fish usually enter the river, but too much rain would mean high and dirty water.

I meet Barry, my Michigan fishing buddy, about 8:00 AM. After all my eager anticipation it was pretty slow fishing. The rain would not stop and it made the river banks extremely slick. Barry fell on his butt setting the hook and I had just fell on my side stepping down to get in the stream earlier. Felt soles have very poor traction on slick mud banks. I ended up falling down twice more before the day was over. I managed to go 0 for 2 on Friday and Barry was 2 for 4. I had one hook up in the evening at the lower end of a run that broke me off after a fast and hard run toward the tail out. I did catch several trout in the late afternoon, but no steelhead. Saturday was also

going pretty slow until about 2:00 PM. The river started to rise a little and the fish turned on. I hooked and landed an eight pound hen then a little smaller male out of the same hole. I had another one on in that same hole, for about 2 minutes before it went into a submerged tree and broke off. I walked up the stream a little ways and fished a spot that I usually fish from the other side of the stream. I made a few casts and hooked up, but it didn't last long. This was a big fish that I couldn't stop and it broke off on something along the bottom. I moved up and fished a spot where I can usually find a steelhead holding. After about 5 casts I finally had the presentation where I wanted it. The hookup lasted about 10 seconds, and the hook was out. I crossed the river at a low spot (waist deep) and fish another spot I like. I was able to land an 8 pound hen at the head of the hole and at the tail of the hole a 6 pound hen. I decided to walk back up and try the one I lost earlier. Two drifts and it hit again. But once more I only had it on for about 10 seconds and the hook came out. That afternoon, I hooked up nine times and landed 5...a great percentage, especially for me. The last steelhead I hooked that evening was on a very long drift back under a cedar. After going up and down the hole a couple of times it went on a fast and furious run downstream about 50 yards. It went under a tree that was laying in the stream and was jumping on the other side of the tree. I reeled in line as fast as I could and headed down stream to close the gap. I had to go around a submerged log and just about went in over my chest waders. I got down to the tree in the river and stuck my rod under the tree to clear the line from the branches. The only way I was going to land this guy was to wade out and around the tip of the tree and I didn't know if the rising river was going to go over my waders or not and I couldn't see the bottom in the fading light. I did know that if I could get to the other side of the tree I would be in waist deep water. I had to make a decision and Quick... I decided to take a chance and swim if I had to... I wasn't going to lose this fish. The water was probably about an inch below the top of my waders as I bounced

around the tip of the tree on my tip toes... if the hooked didn't pull out and if the line held I knew I had a good chance to land it here. When I got around the tip of the tree my line was under another submerged snag, so I waded out and reached as far as I could to get my rod tip around the snag. It was a good thing I was using a 10 foot rod, because a 9 would never have reached and it was deep and fast at the snag.. it would not have been an area that I would have been able to get around. Once I cleared the snag I was in good shape if the hook and line held. This guy didn't give up for another five minutes up and down the hole. I fumbled for my landing glove and guided it over to the bank. I had it! What a great fight and what a great fish. The Boga Grip measured 12 pounds. I took several photos, but all of them clumsily, because I was using one hand on the Boga and one on the camera and I couldn't see if the camera was focused. I had hooked this fish in the exact same location I had one break off on me the evening before and there was a piece of tippet hanging out of it's mouth, but it must have thrown the hook by the time I tried to get a photo or my line caught it or something, because it was gone. By now it was pushing 7:00 PM and getting dark. I released her and thanked her for a wonderful memory, one I will keep the rest of my life. I broke the rod down and headed back to the truck. I was without a light and I had close to a half mile hike through the woods to the truck. I knew the trails pretty good after fishing here for the past five years, but it was going to be a little different in the dark. The first thing I did when I got to the truck was make a couple of phone calls.



© Not a

great photo. That's a size 12 boot for comparison.

Sunday the river was running about 8 inches higher than it was on Saturday and I wasn't getting any hits in the holes where I usually find them. I had to add more split shot to get down and keep it where I wanted it. I fished about 6 hours before I made, what I considered a terrible cast, to a shallow sandy flat. I had a take, but it turned out to be brown trout. I decided what the hell, if the trout are over there, maybe a steelhead would be there. The following cast, another brown trout. I didn't think anything would be on this shallow sand flat, but the trout were there. Two more casts and I was into a good steelhead. With lots of room to play it I had a pretty good chance to land this one. She was a fresh hen that weighed 8 pounds. Three more casts and I had another steelhead, but this one was smaller. Another fresh hen that was probably about 5 or 6 pounds. The rest of Sunday afternoon I managed to land exactly zero and lose two.

You can tell from the photo how dark (tannic looking) the water was when I took a photo of this fresh 8 pound hen.



Monday the river was still running dark, but I was going to fish with Barry and he knows the river extremely well and where they hang out, so my hopes were high. The fresh dark water gave the steelhead some cover and the rainy cloudy day would really help. They were on a feed and we were the only boat on the river. Sometimes it works out that way, but not very often. Usually a lack of fishermen means the fishing is terrible, but it would not be the case on Monday. We drifted the first good looking spot, nothing. The second stop also produced nothing. BUT the third stop was the honey hole. We found some salmon on gravel, which is always the first place to look for steelhead in the fall. Barry lost one after a quick, but short fight. I hooked up next and I lost one. Then Barry was into a big one that ripped line and finally got off. I landed the first steelhead, in between several trout hook ups, but it was only about 7 pounds. Barry landed one that looked like a cookie cutter to the one I landed. We moved a little further down the hole and found more salmon on the gravel so we dropped anchor. Barry was into a

heavy brute on his third cast. The fish was getting a lot of line and headed for a log, but turned and moved back into the current. After about a 10 minute battle I netted it and we weighed it with the Boga. A hefty 10 pounder. Our first double digit steelhead of the day. We released her and moved further down, but Barry didn't like the location and tried to move the boat over. Pulling back hard on the current the right oar broke at a spot that had been worked on to steady the oar in the oar lock. We managed to get close to the bank and Barry jumped out to find a branch that we could attempt to splice to the bottom half of the oar. Fortunately he is good with his hands and he is creative. He lashed the branch to the bottom section of the broken oar with his spare anchor rope. It ended up getting us down the river and actually worked pretty good under the circumstance.



I made a cast to a seam on the far side of some gravel and the float went down. I knew it was big when I set the hook because it was solid... like hooking a rock. The line took off down stream and the steelhead came up. Barry was pretty excited and said that is looked like a toad. I managed to hold on as line peeled off the reel. Then it made a turn and headed up stream. I reeled in as fast as I could to keep the tension. After a deep hard battle it came up and Barry

made a pass with the net. Back down it went, but seemed to lack the strength it once had. The "toad" headed down stream, but without the energy it once had. Pretty much dead weight now I was having a difficult time gaining line, but it finally got close enough for the net and we had it in the boat. I quickly grabbed it with the Boga to make sure it didn't thrash around in the boat and put him back in the river so he could begin to relieve the lactic acid. I gave him a couple of minutes and pulled him up to get a weight. 13 pounds! He would probably be a steelhead of a life time for me, so we took several photos, with lots of dips back in the stream between shots.



©This was brute to land



©Pine Squirrel

We ended up getting 15 hook ups out of that single hole. It was simply amazing. We figured that the high water from the all day rain Friday pushed up a much of steelhead, because this hole was packed. We continued down the river and picked up some more steelhead at a couple more stops, but had to row out to make it by dark. We took out at 7:00 and immediately started making plans to get some oars for Tuesday. All in all we had 21 hookups on Monday and didn't see another fisherman all day.

Tuesday it started about the same as Monday with sprinkles and some wind. We got on the river about 7:30 and headed for the honey hole where we had 15 hookups the day before. As Steelheading goes and migratory fishing goes Tuesday wasn't the same as Monday. We had to work hard to find them, but the trout were cooperating. Barry hooked and released a couple and I lost a couple. I managed to get an 8 pound hen in the net and we moved down a little in the hole to where we had hook ups the day before. I made about 3 casts to where I thought they would be and then Barry made a cast just a little more inside from where I was fishing and he was into a big one. And this guy was headed for the timber. Barry turned it and had it headed up stream, but the steelhead had other ideas. Once again it headed for the timber and this time it was going to make it. Barry could feel the head shakes on the other end of the line and the line rubbing on the timber. There was no way it was coming out. He decided to give it some slack line, but that didn't help... he was hung up. We fished that hole pretty hard, but didn't have near the day we had the day before. Tuesday would turn out to be a good percentage day for me going 3 for 3 with the largest the 8 pound hen. Barry would hook and land what he called a Skamania, a summer run steelhead which had a lot more color than the fresh steels. On Tuesday we had 14 hook ups and Barry had 11 of them landing 7. His experience over mine was pretty easy to tell in the last two days of our fishing together. While I'm flogging the same water he covered some places that I didn't even think about fishing and it paid off. Barry, please apologize to

John for me, for that little white lie I told him about how many steelhead we had hooked. I made my confession for forgiveness yesterday in church. I have to get better with tactical answers about fishing success.



Wednesday was the about the same scenario. We were on the river by 7:30 and headed to where we knew they would be holding. Just like Tuesday, it would be all Barry and very little Sam catching fish. I managed to get some trout, but I was having a pretty rough morning hooking any steelhead. We drifted down to where Barry lost a very big one on Tuesday and remembered exactly where that fish was holding the day before. I probably made a dozen casts to that seam without a take. Barry decided to try the far seam and it took on the first drift. The water exploded and he was into a very big steelhead. This guy made a couple of long pulls down stream and decided to head for the timber once again, but stopped a little short when Barry put as much strain on the line as he could. The steelhead decided to head up stream and swam next to the boat and netted it. A short and surprisingly quick fight we just got lucky

that he decided to swim up stream right next to the boat. This big ole boy weighed in at 12 and half pounds and had a hook mark in its mouth from a previous encounter... we figured it was the same fish Barry lost the day before... it was in the exact same location.



© 12 and half pound

male



© Males seemed to be more

prevalent on Wednesday

We continued down the river and made three more stops. I finally managed to get some hook ups in the afternoon, landing a couple and a pretty nice 22 inch brown. We had three very big ones break us off in some timber, and we had some get off the hook. Which is exactly what you can expect with steelhead and all of the timber that is down in the river. Barry once again kicked my butt with 11 out of the 15 hookups we had on Wednesday. All in all we counted at least 70 hookups between the two of us. I fished 7 days and Barry fished 4 and half days and out fished me every day but one. If I had not meet Barry on the river when he helped me land a very nice 30 inch male in 07, I wouldn't be half the steelhead fisherman I am today. With the very limited success I was having before I meet him, I may not be fishing for them today. I have a huge amount of gratitude for his patience and guidance over the seasons.



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Not a heavy one, about 7 pounds, but very long and very fresh. This brown was laying right next to a steelhead I had just hooked.



I thought this was a great departing shot on our last day, of a lodge what was along the float and up stream from a location that we fished pretty hard each day.