

STEELHEAD IN OUR HANDS

“THE FATE OF FISH AFTER RELEASE IS PRIMARILY DETERMINED BY ANGLER BEHAVIOR” — Brownscombe et al 2017

Steelhead are anadromous rainbow trout native to the rivers flowing into the North Pacific Ocean. Like their cousins the Pacific Salmon, steelhead are a cultural and ecological keystone species, yet across their native range, wild steelhead are in dramatic decline.

Recovering wild steelhead populations will require large-scale efforts to address the many threats they face, but one thing we as anglers can control immediately and directly is the unintentional mortality and impacts caused by catch-and-release practices. Even a small improvement in catch-and-release survival can have a big influence overall on a population's ability to sustain, or even grow, their numbers.

With numbers so low, and populations so precarious, it is crucial that every wild steelhead is able to reach their spawning gravel and spawn successfully. As anglers, we have the responsibility and opportunity to reduce our impact on these iconic fish, helping to ensure their survival now and into the future.

If we're going to continue fishing, we must reduce our harm, go above and beyond regulations, and use science-based best practices to create better outcomes for each wild steelhead we catch-and-release.

SEEK COOL WATER

16°C/61°F

Angling becomes increasingly stressful for steelhead as temperatures warm. Mortality can increase exponentially beyond 16°C/61°F. If you can't find water below 16°C/61°F, it's probably time to stop fishing or change to pursuing warm water fish.

AVOID FISHING IN SPAWNING HABITAT

Spawning is the most critical period of the steelhead life cycle. If you see steelhead actively spawning, find a new spot to fish so you don't accidentally wade on redds or disturb spawning fish.

USE SINGLE, BARBLESS HOOKS

Single, barbless hooks have demonstrated lower rates of deep-hooking and mortality for steelhead across several studies.

HOLD FEMALE STEELHEAD BY THE BASE OF THE TAIL AND CLOSE TO THEIR PECTORAL FINS

Do not hold by the belly. Female steelhead carry eggs in their body cavity, and as they near the spawning period, these eggs become loose and can be pushed out with pressure. Never touch the gills of steelhead.

USE ARTIFICIALS

Studies have consistently shown that organic baits (e.g., shrimp, roe) result in considerably higher rates of deep-hooking in steelhead than artificial tackle.

USE A RUBBERIZED, KNOTLESS NET TO LAND FISH

Rubberized, knotless landing nets can shorten fight times, and reduce stress and mortality compared to landing steelhead by hand. Remember to never drag steelhead onto rocks or shore.

MINIMIZE AIR EXPOSURE

Ideally, don't remove steelhead from the water at all. Steelhead lifted out of water for 10 sec or more can experience stress and behavioral impairment. Taking a picture is one of the main reasons steelhead are lifted out of the water, so be ready to use your camera quickly, or opt to take a photo of the fish with its gills fully submerged.

OTHER WAYS TO HELP:

HARVEST HATCHERY FISH

Hatchery fish are produced with the intention that they will be harvested. When wild fish spawn with hatchery fish, their offspring are less likely to survive, and compromise the biology and ecology of wild populations.

AVOID FISHING RUNS WHERE SPAWNING GOALS ARE NOT BEING MET.

Far too often, managing agencies are too slow to protect wild steelhead when the viability of populations are threatened. If pre-season forecasts or in-season counts show that there aren't enough steelhead to meet minimum spawning goals that year, anglers should not fish these rivers. When runs are dangerously low, we need every fish to spawn successfully to rebuild their populations.

CONSIDER LIMITING THE NUMBER OF FISH YOU CATCH

When you're having a good day, think about saving a few fish for tomorrow. Some anglers have adopted a "one and done" steelhead ethic to reduce their impact.

SPEAK OUT AND SHOW UP

In the 21st Century, a steelheader must be an advocate as much as an angler. On the water we work to reduce our personal impacts. Off the water, we must use our voice and resources to support conservation and demand that managers, agencies, and politicians take the actions and make the investments required to restore wild steelhead and their home waters.

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO STEELHEAD DECLINES AND WHAT ANGLERS CAN DO TO HELP RECOVER THESE POPULATIONS:

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