One of the biggest hurdles to overcome when getting into steelheading is picking out the right tools for the job. This is especially true if you are coming from spin fishing, where your rods are easily labeled, from light to heavy, and moderate to fast. Then you decide to get your first fly rod and you are hit with terms like 1-12 weight (power of the rod, or weight of the line), weight-forward (a specific fly line taper), tippet (fancy term for “even more leader”), and strike indicators (an advanced air filled spherical device built to sense underwater activity – also known as “a bobber”).

Fly fishing can be thought of as an over-complicated form of spin fishing, so it is only fitting that the terminology is equally as complex.

Everyone has their own ideas on their favorite brands and styles of fishing gear, but for the most part, the equipment used by 90% of anglers on the North and South Shore is all quite similar. In this article I’ll go over rods, reels, line, flies, indicators, nets, and the rest of the gear you should have if you are getting into steelheading, upgrading your current gear, or are looking for a gift for the steelheader in your family!

**Rod**

The most popular rod for fishing steelhead on the tributaries of Lake Superior is a 7wt or 8wt, fast action, fly rod. When I first got into fly fishing, I heard that a 5wt is the most versatile fly fishing rod, but didn’t realize that they meant for trout and not necessarily for steelhead. You can land steelhead with a standard 5wt rod, but it is not easy and is typically not good for the fish to fight it for as long as it takes on such a light rod. On the other hand, a 10wt rod has enough backbone to pull in a hard-fighting steelhead, but when the water clears up you will want to lighten up your line and downsize your hooks, and using a heavy rod is not as forgiving on light tippet.

Fly rods are most commonly found in a 9-foot length. These rods are long enough to allow for mending your line in the current and you’ll have no choice but larger reels will take in line faster and you will need a backing system that corresponds to the specific diameter of the thin end. That diameter of a leader is going to be your most versatile option. These lines are usually labeled as WFsf (Weight Forward, Weight Forward, etc.), that corresponds to the specific diameter of the thin end. That diameter of a leader highly accurate casts. A more expensive rod will have higher quality components, will often be lighter, and often have a better warranty. If you are near or visiting Duluth, the Great Lakes Fly Shop currently has some great rods from Echo and Scott.

I have been using a Redington Behemoth 7/8 Reel and it has been fantastic, offering a large Arbor and extremely smooth drag with a large drag dial. A few other good options are the Echo Ion, or the Waterworks Lamson Liquid.

**Line**

Choosing the right line can be one of the most complicated decisions when outfitting your rod/reel. There are dozens of brands and each one has hundreds of different combinations of weights, tapers, and buoyancies meant for highly specialized styles of fly fishing. If you are just getting started in steelheading, then getting a weight-forward floating line is going to be your most versatile option. These lines are usually labeled as WFSF (for a Weight Forward 8wt Floating line). There are many lines that are specific for nymphing or indicator fishing that are great options. Just match the line weight to your rod. If your rod is longer than 9 feet, consider going up a size with your line. The extra line weight helps throw bulky indicator rigs as well as heavy streamers, which are the most common ways to fish for steelhead.

You will also need backing when using fly line. Backing fills up your reel first, so that you can wind in your fly line faster. Backing also allows a fish to strip more line from the reel than just your fly line. 20 to 30 pound backing is ideal. Although steelhead likely won’t take you into your backing, it is not worth the risk. Similar to the somewhat confusing weight system given to rods and line, tippet (the lightweight line at the end of your leader that you tie to your fly) is measured by its diameter instead of its breaking strength. If you buy a tapered steelheading leader it will be labeled by its length and X rating (2X, 3X, etc.), that corresponds to the specific diameter of the thin end. That diameter of a leader would be a 7 or 8wt fast action fly rod combined with a matching, or one size overlined, reel is one of the most popular setups for steelhead.

Choosing the right line can be one of the most complicated decisions when outfitting your rod/reel. There are dozens of brands and each one has hundreds of different combinations of weights, tapers, and buoyancies meant for highly specialized styles of fly fishing. If you are just getting started in steelheading, then getting a weight-forward floating line is going to be your most versatile option. These lines are usually labeled as WFSF (Weight Forward, Weight Forward, etc.), that corresponds to the specific diameter of the thin end. That diameter of a leader highly accurate casts. A more expensive rod will have higher quality components, will often be lighter, and often have a better warranty. If you are near or visiting Duluth, the Great Lakes Fly Shop currently has some great rods from Echo and Scott.

I have been using a Redington Behemoth 7/8 Reel and it has been fantastic, offering a large Arbor and extremely smooth drag with a large drag dial. A few other good options are the Echo Ion, or the Waterworks Lamson Liquid.
typically falls within a range of breaking strength. A 9-foot 6X tapered nylon leader has roughly 15 pounds of breaking strength at the tip and will work great for many different applications. I prefer to build my own leaders for steelhead fishing that consist of 6 feet of 20 pound mono, and 3 feet of 15-pound fluorocarbon. I tie on a small barrel swivel or tippet ring, then tie on tippet depending on water depth, speed, and clarity. The tippet length and size I use can vary greatly. Generally 2-3 feet of 1X-4X (6-12-pound) fluorocarbon to my point fly, and if I can use a dropper fly, I will tie on roughly 2 feet of tippet from the hook bend of my point fly. Remember to use lighter tippet on your dropper fly, so that if your bottom fly gets snagged, you won’t lose both flies.

*Remember that you can only use one fly on the North Shore of Lake Superior.

**Flies**

Compared to trout fishing, selecting flies for steelhead is somewhat simpler, since steelhead aren’t in the rivers as long as trout, and there aren’t specific hatches that you need to match your flies to. Primarily, steelhead are eating eggs, nymphs, and stoneflies. So load up a box with any combination of glo-bugs, beads, pheasant tails, hare’s ears, frenchies, stoneflies, x-legs, wooly buggers, or really anything that looks like a pink or orange fish egg or a bug. I prefer using bright eggs and dark “buggy” nymphs in sizes 6-12.

Other than flies, you’ll need two things to nymph effectively. The first is a strike indicator. I have bought every size and style of strike indicator, but I currently change out to a different size or style of indicator. They also are not as durable asThingamabobbers or Airlocks.

The second piece of equipment you’ll need is an assortment of split shot. I use round split shot in sizes B, BB, 5, and 7, depending on the water depth and speed, as well as the type of technique you are using. I like to leave a long tag end on the knot connecting my leader to my tippet. I crimp the split shot onto the tag end instead of the leader itself. That way you won’t accidentally create a weak point in your line from crimping on split shot.

**Everything Else**

That’s everything you need to actually catch a steelhead, but if you are completely new to fly fishing you will need a few more things to stay dry, land more fish, and release them healthy, and quickly. These basics include waders/boots, a fishing license and trout stamp. Just make sure your boots are grippy, your shades are polarized, your hooks are sharp, and your net is big enough to land a giant. Now go catch some steel!

**Rigging Pro-Tip**

Pre-rig your dual flies on a Lindy Rig holder. If you want to change both flies quickly, or you break off both flies, you won’t lose precious fishing time re-tying flies. Try a loop-to-loop connection or use a no-knot fast snap to quickly snap onto a tippet ring at the end of your leader.

---

**SELECT POETRY**

*Imagine It*

Imagine it a stream that flows from the north somewhere, another state perhaps, and it appears beneath the county bridge suddenly, like a phone call late at night, from someone you once loved, years ago, when those things mattered. It flows still, winding slowly and intimately among the cows and the barbed wire and the switch grass. Imagine its fish are friendly, hugging the bottom in riffles and runs, rising excitedly for hatches as predictable as sunset. Now imagine it all means something with gravity as baseline data and love waiting at the end of facts. Then a stream again, searching out the meaning of words, and geology, and life; truths - as persistent as the steady tug of a fish resisting the inevitable coming to hand.

---

Larry Gavin is a poet from Faribault, Minnesota. He is the author of four books of poetry. His fifth, A Fragile Shelter: New and Selected Poems will be available in 2019 from Red Dragonfly Press. www.reddragonflypress.org