

# EQUIPMENT AND RIGGING FOR STEELHEAD

## Preparing for the Spring Fishing Season

by Jason Swingen

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 fly 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 on the water, but short enough to fish smaller sections of rivers. I started with a 9-foot and recently switched to a 10-foot. The extra length makes it slightly more tip heavy, but it allows for better mends and easier high-sticking.

Most anglers don't only fish for one species, and it is not necessary to have a different rod for each one. If you want a rod that will allow you to throw streamers for bass and pike as well as steelhead, you may want to get a 9-foot 8wt. Although, if you mainly fish for steelhead and want an ideal rod for nymphing and possibly swinging flies on the North and South Shore tributaries, I would highly recommend a 10-foot 7wt or even a 11-foot 7wt, switch rod.

You don't necessarily need an expensive rod for steelheading since you are typically fishing in smaller waters and don't need to rely on delicate,



TOP: A FEW KEY SUPPLIES INCLUDING AIRLOCK INDICATORS, STEELHEAD NYMPHS AND A DEPENDABLE PAIR OF WADERS. MIDDLE: ADD SPLIT SHOT ONTO THE TAG END OF YOUR TIPPET-LEADER KNOT TO DECREASE THE CHANCE OF A WEAK SPOT. LEFT: WRAP UP YOUR STEELHEAD RIGS ON A LINDY RIG HOLDER TO HAVE FAST FLY CHANGES IN THE FIELD. RIGHT: 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.

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 are visiting Duluth, the Great Lakes Fly Shop currently has some great rods from Echo and Scott.

### Reel

Simply pair your reel size to your rod weight or go up a size. Most fly reels come in a 5/6, 7/8, or 9/10 sizes, corresponding to the line weight they hold. 7/8 reels are the most common, depending on the size of fly line you are using, but larger reels will take in line faster and can balance out a longer rod better.

Make sure the reel you choose has a good drag system. Steelhead will rip line from your reel and can sometimes get caught in the current and you'll have no choice but to chase them down. Use the money you saved on a rod to buy a nice reel. 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 WF8F (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

typically falls within a range of breaking strength. A 9-foot 0X 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 steelheading 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 I have narrowed it down to two, Airflo Airlock strike indicators (3/4 inch, 1 inch), and Thill ice/fly bobbers. Airlocks are durable, easy to see, easy to adjust

depth, and easy to change between sizes and colors. The only cons are that they are relatively heavy making them harder to roll cast than other strike indicators. Thill bobbers are two-tone color of bright orange and bright chartreuse. This can be extremely helpful when nymphing, because the bobber will lay on its side until your weight and nymph are pulling straight down. This way you can tell exactly when you are fishing the correct depth. The main downside is that you need to string your leader through them, which makes it more difficult to change out to a different size or style of indicator. They also are not as durable as a Thingamabobbers 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 pack, a net, nippers, hemostats, as well as 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



THE AUTHOR WITH A CHROME STEELHEAD HE CAUGHT THIS FALL.

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.

*Editor's Note: Jason Swingen is a Gitchie Gumee Chapter board member and resides in Duluth. Check out his outdoors blog at [www.js-outdoors.com](http://www.js-outdoors.com)*

## SELECT POETRY

By Larry Gavin

### 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](http://www.reddragonflypress.org)*

Featuring a series of local short films brought to you by

**HIAWATHA TROUT UNLIMITED**

# Annual Film Festival

Join us for food, film and conversation while supporting your local chapter of Trout Unlimited

**Saturday, MARCH 30th, 2019**

**at the VFW North, Rochester, MN**  
VFW North, 2775 43rd St NW, Rochester, MN 55901

MINNESOTA TROUT UNLIMITED

Plus **RAFFLES** many great items to win!

**Doors open 6:30 - 9:00 pm**