

STEELHEAD ON THE SWING

Learning the Art of the Spey Cast and Swung Fly

by Paul Sandstrom

Simply catching a steelhead is a challenge. Catching one on a swung fly, even more so. There's a special thrill when you feel the line going tight, hard and fast in a straight link from your hand to the fish. The grab, that's what it's all about. There are other methods to take steelhead very effectively and efficiently using floats, bobbers, lures or bait with spinning gear or centerpins. Make no mistake, each method is fun and has its devotees, but put a fly rod with just a line, tip, leader and fly in anyone's hand and have a big hot steelhead take that fly hard on a straight line, they will reevaluate their devotion.

There's a long road between holding a rod and having a big silver fish grab the bits of feather and fluff on the end of the line though. The road takes you on a journey of equipment selection, casting prowess, learning the ways of the swing, and learning the ways of the fish. This story is just an introduction to some of the fun parts of the journey, the ways of the fish and the swing.

The Ways of the Fish

You'll never stop learning the ways of the fish unless you quit trying. After 50 years, I'm still trying. There's a school of thought that steelhead don't feed when on their spawning run and that they only bite out of instinct and reaction; maybe so. The important thing is that they will bite. Trouble is, finding the fish willing to bite may take just a few, or more likely a few hundred, casts. What generates the reaction that drives a steelhead to chase a fly? Good question. I like to think some are like cats that can't help themselves stalking and striking a feather on a string.

Steelhead are the most likely to bite when they're on the move and resting during their migration. Seems like a contradiction, on the move and resting, but that's exactly when they're most apt to bite. A fresh fish resting in a new spot after a move or position shift is often the one that will chase and grab. They move at dusk, at night, early in the morning or on a rainy cloudy day. They move when the water is rising or falling. They move when the water temperature goes from cold to warm or from too warm to just right. They move when the sun swings around and shines in their eyes.

Steelhead will grab a swung fly when they're triggered. Fly selection for swinging and tripping the trigger runs a spectrum from classic traditional patterns like the "Lady Caroline" to Dave Pinczkowski's modern, innovatively-wild creation named "Bad Hair Day." The most important fly selection criteria? Use a fly that you like and have confidence in. I don't think the fish care all that much. If they're in the mood and you make a good presentation, they're going to nail it. That said, water conditions and weather have the greatest impact on which fly I pull from the box on a given day. High, colored water: Go with a large dark pattern. Cloudy day: Smaller dark fly. Bright day:

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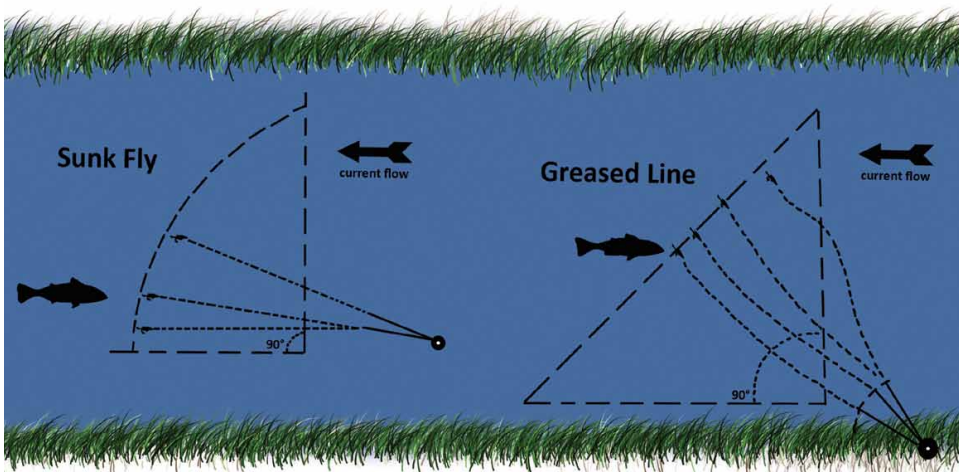


ILLUSTRATION OF THE "SUNK FLY" AND "GREASED LINE" METHODS FOR SWINGING FLIES. NOTE THAT THE "GREASED LINE" METHOD PROVIDES THE FISH A BROADSIDE ANGLE OF THE FLY WHILE THE "SUNK FLY" TECHNIQUE PROVIDES A REAR VIEW OF THE FLY. "SUNK FLY" SWINGING ALLOWS FOR CASTING IN TIGHT QUARTERS WHILE THE "GREASED LINE" CAN ELICIT MORE STRIKES.



A HEFTY STEELHEAD HOOKED ON THE SWING.

Bright fly. Clear, cold water: A smaller fly. Whatever the fly though, the presentation you make or the swing of the fly rules.

The Swing

The book "Greased Line Fishing for Salmon (and Steelhead)" is Jock Scott's compilation of Arthur Woods notes on fishing for Atlantic salmon in Scotland from 1914 to 1934. Reprinted in the U.S. by Frank Amato Publications, this book is considered by many of the old masters to be the Holy Grail of technical instruction to the art of fly presentation. The illustration "Sunk Fly vs. Greased Line" shown above is an adaptation from this book, and shows a comparison between the two techniques. This drawing cap-

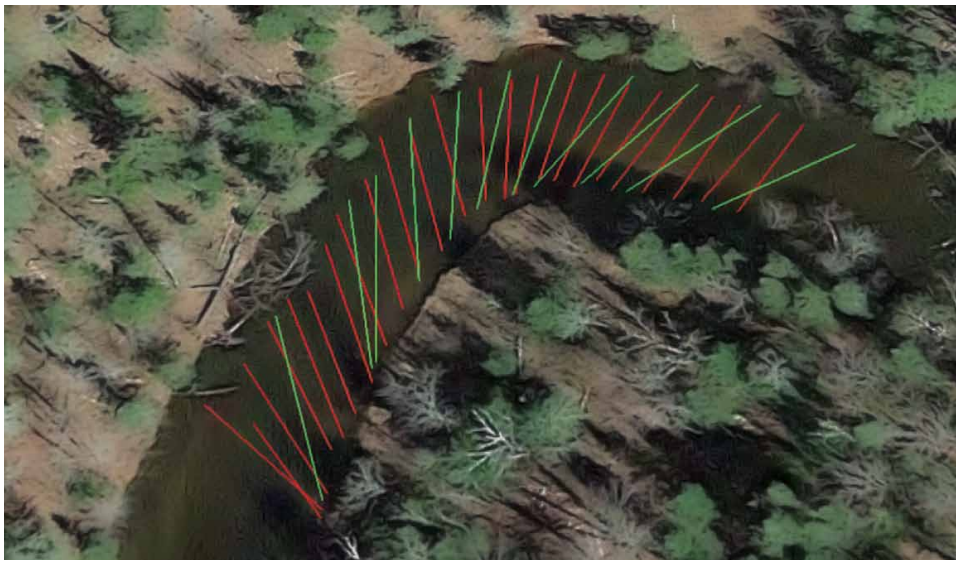
tures the essence of the art. Both presentations will prompt a strike; the greased line, however, will trigger more.

On our small Midwestern steelhead streams like Wisconsin's Brule, the sunk fly method is the most common technique you'll see swinging anglers use. The caster stands out in the stream away from the bank. The fly is cast at a tight angle nearly paralleling the flow. A very long cast downstream may even cross the river. The signature of this presentation is that the fish see a rear view of the fly as it swings across their vision window on a straight line. It works and a fish in the mood will be triggered to grab.

In contrast, an angler on the illustration employing the greased line technique

stands on the bank, casting across the stream with a much wider angle across the flow. Line control and mends are employed minimally and only as needed to present the fly under control at more of a broadside angle, offering the fish more of a side view of the fly. Fly control is maintained with a straight line from the angler's hand to the fly. The fly swims slightly slower than the speed of the current. The window of opportunity to trigger a fish is wide and a broadside exposure of the swimming fly is very tantalizing to the fish.

So why not use the greased line presentation all of the time? The answer is usually trees. Add trees on both sides hanging out over the banks to the illustration and you'll see that standing on the bank



A BEND OF THE BRULE RIVER IN WISCONSIN IS SHOWN ABOVE WITH LINES DEPICTING THE PATTERN OF CASTS TO BEST COVER THE STRETCH OF WATER. RED LINES ARE CASTS LESS THAN 50 FEET LONG WHILE GREEN LINES ARE CASTS GREATER THAN 50 FEET.

and casting across the flow can often be impossible. Trees hanging over the opposite bank block fly placement. Trees on the bank you're casting from interfere with the back-cast or D-loop. It's rare in our region to find a place where you can stand on the bank and cast across the flow to the opposite bank.

A hybrid of the two methods is often the one to strive for. Try to stand in the water as close to the bank as you can to make the cast. Unnecessary deep wading is always counterproductive. You'll find spots where a classic greased line swing is possible: Places where you can stand in the water close to the bank and cast across the flow where there are gaps or clear zones to place a fly on the other side. Learn to go with the presentation the river will allow, but try to present the fly as close to greased line as possible.

Laying the cast out straight is the most important element of success. The fly should land at the end of the cast and

be the most distant point laying on a straight line from the tip of your rod. The fly should start swimming and fishing as soon as it hits the water; again this is one of the most critical keys to success. A mend to straighten out your line as a result of a piled cast is counterproductive. A mend to maintain a straight line that was laid out right to begin with is the essence of the greased line art.

Swimming the fly through the swing is important; think of yourself as a horizontal puppeteer. You can give simulated life to the fly with very subtle movements of the hand and arm. If you've ever fished through the ice with electronics and a jig you know what I'm talking about. Wild motion often scares fish away; subtle movement draws interest and triggers strikes. Be ready when the fly reaches the end of the swing or the dangle and when cross-current movement stops, especially when the stop occurs in holding water. A fish that's interested often grabs as the fly stops. A little swimming action

at the dangle is a powerful trigger.

If you can find a run or pool unoccupied by other anglers during the steelhead season, you're either lucky or have walked a good distance. Start your casting and swinging at the top of the pool and work your way through. Cast and swing, then take a step or two down and cast again. Cover the pool working your way downstream. Steelhead like to hold in certain spots that change with flow level, water temperature, and water color. You'll find over time that certain zones are the prime holding spots, and excitement builds when you swing through a prime slot in a pool that regularly produces.

The above Google Earth photo illustrates the casts one would make when working through a pool on the Brule. The red lines are all casts less than 50 feet long and the green lines are casts all greater than 50 feet. Look at the angles and study the greased line illustration again. This is important when picking out the fly line,

sink tips, and leaders you plan to use. My favorite combination has evolved to a 12.5-foot rod, 15-foot shooting head, 12-foot sink tip, with a 4-foot leader to the fly which totals about 41 feet from your hand to the fly when ready to start a cast. I don't have a favorite rod brand to recommend, they're all good. Olympic Peninsula Skagit Tactics (OPST) shooting heads are, however, the gold standard as far as I'm concerned, as are their sink tips.

One should have an arsenal of sink tips. A steelhead in the mood will move to a fly it can see and will move farther in 50 degree clear water than in 34 degree colored water. In general, use a slow sink tip in warm, clear water and a fast sink tip in cold, colored water. Success is often fly presentation at the right level in the water column for given conditions and moving through the holding water.

Years ago, Midwestern steelheaders traveled to the West Coast where they were introduced to the techniques and methods that had evolved and developed for ocean-run fish. These "Old Masters" refined the techniques, developing versions that fit our smaller Great Lakes tributaries. Drifting small yarn flies became a local angling art and specialty of western Lake Superior steelheaders. A key method these masters brought back to the Midwest was to fish holding water from top to bottom, working their way downstream through the pool or run. Moving through holding water is also the key to success when swinging a fly. Moving will help you learn the river, find new spots, and find those special fish who want to play. Consider trying the ultimate challenge with the greatest reward: Swing a fly, and you'll reevaluate your devotion.

Paul Sandstrom is a guide and custom rod builder from Duluth who operates PVS Angling. Catch his spey programs coming up at the Great Waters Fly Fishing Expo on all three days of the event. More information on PVS Angling can be found at www.pvsangling.com

REMEMBERING MARY OLIVER

By Bob Wagner

Mary Oliver, winner of the American Book Award, Pulitzer Prize, and one of America's all-time great poets, would enjoy how I was introduced to her, I humbly believe. This introduction, rather appropriately, happened four years ago, on the morning of summer solstice. My wife Val and six other summer solstice ladies always paddle canoes and kayaks at first light, June 21, to the north end of Long Lake to greet the rising sun. It's an annual event the ladies enjoy to celebrate our longest day. The women knew I had an ulterior motive (fly fishing), when I suggested Jim and I would be the rescue boat on the lake, in case a canoe flipped over.

I was excited to share some excellent top water bass fishing with Jim, who was new to the lake. The ladies paddled two miles north, to a favorite spot to celebrate sunrise. Jim and I ran the 30-horse Johnson to my favorite bass spot. Large-mouth were shallow and hungry and gave our poppers several eats in the first half hour. About the time we realized it was going to be a great bass morning,

we noticed a small rowing pram heading north to catch up with the ladies. Surprisingly, it turned 30 degrees and headed straight towards us. We were frustrated and surprised because when catching bass, especially on top water, the last thing you want is a boat approaching your boat. Jim and I sat, holding our fly rods, quite perplexed, when the pram pulled up to our boat. I recognized Diane, a petite elderly lady, as one of my wife's friends. She quickly handed Jim and I an energy bar and a card. Diane simply said, "I thought you would enjoy this," and immediately rowed away. The card contained the poem "Why I Wake Early" by Mary Oliver. Our early morning frustration turned to amazing surprise, as we both read the poem and realized the act of kindness and appreciated the illuminating words by Mary Oliver. That morning was my introduction to the words of Mary Oliver, an unexpected catch, if you will. This poem, like all great poetry, opens a door to your feelings and soul. Mary Oliver's words have opened a door that has brightened my life and added layers of enrichment to my fly fishing adventures.

"WHY I WAKE EARLY"

BY MARY OLIVER

Hello, sun in my face.
Hello, you who make the morning
and spread it over the fields
and into the faces of the tulips
and the nodding morning glories,
and into windows of, even, the
miserable and the crotchety--

best preacher that ever was,
dear star, that just happens
to be where you are in the universe
to keep us from ever-darkness,
to ease us with warm touching,
to hold us in great hands of light-
good morning, good morning, good morning.

Watch, now, how I start the day
in happiness, in kindness.