

# THE GEAR YOU NEED TO SWING

## CHOOSING EQUIPMENT FOR FISHING ON GREAT LAKES TRIBUTARIES

By Jason Swingen

If you do a search for the perfect swinging rod or swinging gear you'll most likely find a bunch of information about fishing big West Coast rivers. A rod that works out there can work in the Great Lakes area, but it may not be the best solution. Rivers in the Midwest, like the Bois Brule in northern Wisconsin and tributaries on the North Shore of Lake Superior are not as big, don't have as high of flows, and the fish generally aren't as large as on the West Coast. This means that you will be able to use shorter two-handed rods and lighter lines to swing. Instead of going over every option of rod, reel, and shooting head setup, I will cover the most common setups used in the Great Lakes tributaries and let you custom fit your combo for how you like to fish. Make sure you have the rest of the essential fly fishing gear for Great Lakes steelhead before we cover the gear you will need to dive into the swinging game.

It can be extremely confusing trying to rig up a swinging rod. The length, power, and extra handle of two-handed rods complicate the proprietary weight system, so you can no longer simply pair an 8wt line to an 8wt rod. Instead, weight shooting head systems are measured in grains. So we are no longer talking about an imaginary weight, but instead talking about an actual grain weight of a shooting head and sink-tip. If that isn't confusing enough, you also need to decide what strength running line to use, what types of sink-tips you should have, as well as a vast assortment of flies to use.

Don't worry though, I'm here to try and sort through all the new jargon, explain how to build your perfect swinging setup, and get you out on the water and hooked up to a giant steelhead! I have a couple examples below with a complete list of my current setup, and my recommendation for the perfect budget setup.

### The Eight Pieces of Gear You Will Need to Swing

Other than the basic steelhead gear you should have, this is everything you need to get started swinging flies for steelhead.

#### Rod

You can use nearly any type of fly rod to swing. Single-handed or two-handed, 9-foot or 13-foot. They will all work, but if you are going to primarily swing for Great Lakes migratory fish, you will want an 11-foot 7wt two-handed switch rod (a two-handed rod that allows for spey casting as well as overhand casting). A 7wt will allow you to throw nearly any size streamer and should handle any anadromous fish in the Midwest (except for maybe a king salmon). Eleven feet is the sweet spot for rod length. The longer your rod, the less effort you will need to put into your casts, but going too long can hinder fishing in tighter quarters. So if you are just getting started, get what is proven to work in 95% of the Great



THE FLIES, ROD, REEL AND LINE COMPONENTS THAT ARE AT THE HEART OF AN EFFECTIVE SETUP FOR SWINGING ON GREAT LAKES TRIBUTARIES.

Lakes tributaries: an 11-foot 7wt.

Here are a couple of great switch rod options:

Budget Options (under \$300): Redington Dually, Echo Swing

Midrange Options (\$300-\$550): Redington Chromer, Echo Compact Spey, Loop Evotec, TFO Axiom 2 Switch

High-End Option (\$550 and over): Sage X Switch

#### Reel

The most important factors when picking out a reel are weight, line capacity, and a fully enclosed spool.

#### Weight

You don't need to skimp on weight, and I don't necessarily mean weight as in the size of reel (7-9wt), but in how much the reel weighs. Often a reel on the heavier side will balance out your 11-foot rod better than a lighter one. It can be tiring and out-right frustrating to hold the end of your rod tip up all day long. Each rod balances differently though, and a rod with a down-locking reel seat will often balance better with a lighter reel than one with an up-locking reel seat and longer bottom handle. If you have a 7wt switch rod get at least a 7wt reel, possibly going up to 9 or 10wt reel will help balance your rod.

#### Arbor Size

Mid-arbor reels are ideal for shooting head-style line setups. They allow you to add a decent amount of backing behind your running line, shooting head, sink-tips, and leader, while still allowing for somewhat quick line retrieval.

#### Enclosed Spool

Running line is much smaller in diameter than your typical fly line. Having an enclosed spool will keep your running line from passing in between your reel and spool which can cause your it to kink and weaken or, even worse, get stuck while you are fighting a fish. Spey reels are always built this way, but you can pick up a standard fly reel with an

enclosed spool for not much more than a standard reel. Each of the following reels are fully enclosed except for the budget options. Enclosed reels are not a deal-breaker, but will give you a little extra peace-of-mind.

#### Click and Pawl Reels

Many spey reels are built with a click and pawl and do not have a drag system (like the Orvis Battenkill). There is no particular advantage to these reels except that they are louder, "objectively cooler," and more exciting when you catch a fish and have to worry about palming the reel to create drag. They are great options, but if you are new to swinging it is better to stick with a reel with an actual working drag system.

Budget Options (under \$150): Redington Behemoth, Echo Bravo

Midrange Options (\$150-\$250): Loop Q, Lamson Liquid HD, Orvis Battenkill

High-End Option (\$250 and over): Sage Spey

#### Backing

Your standard 20- or 30-lb backing will work just fine. Just make sure you use backing that is heavier than the heaviest leader you think you'll ever use. If you are going to fish for king salmon and may tie on a 20-lb leader, you should have backing that is at least 20 lbs. Fill your reel up with at least 100 yards of backing, then add more to make sure your spool is full when the rest of your shooting head system is tied on. If a fish takes you over 100 yards into your backing, you have more problems than simply running out of backing.

Budget Option: Magreel Backing

Midrange Option: RIO Backing

#### Running Line

Instead of a weight-forward fly line that has a skinnier back end to allow the line to shoot out of your rod, a shooting head system is broken into separate parts: The shooting head is the weight-forward part of your line and the running line takes the place of the skinnier section of fly

line that you hold onto. The skinnier running line is what allows the shooting head to, well... shoot out of the fly rod and across the river.

There is some give and take when it comes to running line. The skinnier the line the further you can cast, but it also makes it difficult to hold onto in the cold months when you will be using it. Alternately, a thicker line is easier to handle, but will not allow for casting quite as far. You don't want to go too light, however, because you do not want to break your running line (especially if there is a fish on the other end). Having thicker line also causes drag on your guides as you cast and will help to straighten out your shooting head at the end of your cast. Having running line that is too light will allow you to cast further, but your shooting head will land in a clump. Generally, 30 to 50-lb running line is used for the majority of setups in the Great Lakes.

OPST's Lazer line is more expensive than regular mono (which you can use), but it will last for years, shoots well, and doesn't tangle.

You should spool up at least 30 to 40 yards of shooting line on your reel.

Budget Option: Berkley Big Game

Midrange Option: OPST Lazer Line

#### Shooting Head

There are two general categories of shooting heads: Scandi and Skagit. As Great Lakes steelheaders, we are more interested in the latter. Although somewhat similar in idea, Scandi and Skagit vary greatly in use, techniques, and applications. Since Skagit is the more popular version, the rest of my gear recommendations will be based on a Skagit style head.

#### Scandi

Scandi heads work well for the tributaries in Scandinavia where there are fewer trees, the water is much wider, shallower, and often clearer. Scandi heads

are much longer (30-40ft) and are typically used with long 13- to 15-foot (or longer) spey rods. A cast known as a "touch and go" cast allows for extreme distances, but the long, skinnier head doesn't allow for the sink-tips or large flies which are often used when fishing the Great Lakes tributaries.

### Skagit

Skagit heads are ideal for fishing migratory steelhead and browns in the Midwest. Skagit heads are far more compact at 15 to 25ft. Compared to Scandi heads, they are easier to cast, and allow you to throw heavy sink-tips as well as large flies.

There are many different brands of Skagit heads these days, each with their own pros and cons. One of the most popular brands is the OPST Commando head. If you want to go a little deeper into the differences in Skagit heads there is a great article from Hatch Magazine, find it on their website.

Budget Option (under \$20): Aventik Shooting Head

Midrange Options (\$50-\$60): OPST Commando Head, Airflo Skagit Scout, Orvis Mission Skagit

Scandi Options (\$50-\$60): Scientific Anglers Scandi, Airflo Scandi Long

The most important factor to consider when getting a shooting head is matching it up with your rod. You need to have the right amount of weight to load the rod and turn that energy into a forward cast. If you are using an 11-foot 7wt rod, depending on the action and power of the rod, a head with a grain weight anywhere between 350 and 400 grains should work. OPST is extremely helpful at getting you the right grain weight head for your rod. Call OPST or find their grain weight chart online.

### Sink-Tips

Skagit heads aren't meant to have a leader tied directly to them. No matter what Skagit head you buy, you will need to add a tip to the front of it. There are a handful of different brands you can choose from, but the best options, in my opinion, are from RIO and OPST.

You can buy a larger section of T8, T11, or T14 sinking line and build your own sink-tips by cutting down to length. This is the cheapest option, but you will need to be able to tie your own loops at the end of each tip.

Midrange Options (\$25/tip): OPST Sink-Tips, RIO Sink-Tips, RIO's iMow Tip Kit (6 tips)

RIO's Mow tips are all 10 feet in length with different lengths of sinking line integrated into the tip. They also make iMow tips that start with an intermediate section instead of floating, and have also recently come out with a multi-density tip with three different sink rates built into each tip.

I would recommend getting at least two tips when starting out. Either a Run and Bucket from OPST, or a 5-foot float/5-foot sink and 10-foot sink from RIO.

Example: If you are using a 300 to 400 grain head with an 11-foot 7wt rod you will want to use the medium Mow or iMow heads or the 168 grain Commando Tips.

Ten-foot PolyLeaders and VersiLeaders can also work, but are better suited for lighter fishing applications.

### Leader

Your leader may change depending on water clarity and what type of sink-tip you are using. However, the majority of the time you will want a 3- to 5-foot section of 10- to 15-lb monofilament. If you are fishing heavier sink-tips, a shorter leader will keep your fly down, but if you are fishing shallower runs with a lighter sink-tip or the water is extremely clear you will want to tie on a longer and lighter leader. You don't need to overthink it too much. Just pick up a mini spool of 12-lb Maxima Ultra-green, and you will be covered for most situations. Since the fish usually come up from behind a swung fly, you don't need to worry as much about using up your expensive fluorocarbon line. Using monofilament for a leader can be beneficial since the vicious strikes can be somewhat absorbed by a leader with a little more stretch like a mono leader.



THE AUTHOR WITH A GREAT LAKES TRIBUTARY STEELHEAD CAUGHT ON THE SWING.

### Don't Ruin Your Sink-Tips

To make a loop-to-loop connection from my sink-tip to my leader, I like to tie a short section (less than a foot) of 25-lb pound mono using a non-slip mono loop knot. The heavier line will not cut through your sink-tip's end loop like a lighter 12-lb mono will. Next connect your 12-lb leader to the heavier section using an ant swivel or blood knot.

### Flies

Sorry, there aren't going to be a ton of secrets divulged here. That may seem like a generic statement to keep my favorite flies to myself, but honestly, the best fly you can use is the one you have the most confidence in. I understand that it can be difficult if you are just starting out, but you don't necessarily have to begin filling up a new box full of swinging flies. Although after you start swinging, filling a box or two with swinging flies is the next natural step (and part of the fun).

It is a good idea to start out with a fly that you can cast. You aren't going to catch a fish if the fly you have is too heavy or bulky to cast effectively. Start with a Woolly Bugger, Slumpbuster, Muddler

Minnow, or Egg-Sucking Leech. It can be easy to get caught up in the hype, that swinging flies automatically means you need to tie on a giant intruder, but using smaller flies will make it easier to catch more fish, and eventually, you can start experimenting with bigger and more intricate intruders.

For choosing colors, I use the same basic color selection system as any type of fishing. On dark days or in dirty water use a darker fly, and on a bright day or in clear water use a brighter, more natural fly. Eventually, you will find flies that work for you and give you confidence.

Yes, certain patterns will outfish others, but they can change day to day, and none of that is important if you aren't getting your fly in front of a fish and presenting it in a way that entices a fish to eat.

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



THE AUTHOR SPEY CASTS ON THE BRULE RIVER IN WISCONSIN. MIDWEST STREAMS ARE SMALLER THAN THOSE ON THE WEST COAST AND REQUIRE A DIFFERENT GEAR SETUP FOR SWINGING.