

## Olympic Peninsula Steelhead

By Nick Somogyi

Romantic as hell is how I would describe it. The conditions favored die-hard winter steelheaders only, rotating between hail, snow, rain, sunshine, wind, and more rain. The rivers were also cold, as in 38°F, yet fishing the Hoh River within the largest temperate rain forest remaining in the lower 48 left us with a sense of awe, a feeling of serenity, and a need to return in the future.

Late-winter and early spring on Washington's Olympic Peninsula herald the arrival of one of the last fishable runs of wild steelhead in the country. These "natives" grow large (a 30-lb giant was netted by the Quileute tribe this year), and those that return from the Pacific represent less than 1% of the eggs laid each year. As Thomas Pero said in his introduction to Dec Hogan's *A Passion for Steelhead*, they are a "migratory wonder".

Angela and I made the 4-hour trip from Seattle to the Miller Tree Inn Bed and Breakfast in Forks, WA, on a Sunday afternoon. The trip was a culmination of weeks of preparation, including traditional and spey casting classes, nightly fly tying, custom line preparation, and doing our part to stimulate the economy at our favorite fly shop. Thank goodness the airline tickets had been free!

Standard tackle for this game includes 8 and 9-wt rods, either single or double-handed. We decided early on to fish exclusively with the double-handed stick, using the traditional wet-fly swing. Flies were Spey and Glasso-style, marabous, General Practitioners, and others. Multi-tip and Skagit lines are best to throw the 10 to 15-foot long sink tips required to get the fly down. Leaders were simple 3-foot long sections of 25-lb test monofilament knotted to 2-foot tippet of 10 or 15-lb test.

We met our guide Doug Rose the next morning (Doug is a celebrated author who has written many books and articles on fishing the Peninsula). He guides on foot, and this appealed to my need to get to know a place from the ground rather than shooting by in a drift boat.

The first stop was on the lower Sol Duc River and our first steps were anything but smooth. The pebble-sized hail began as soon as we left the jeep making my wife's eyes grow large and her curses colorful. In addition, my new Ross CLA-6 reel would not engage and Doug's spare reel was missing a handle. Yoi! Given these road blocks we fished the run poorly, attracting no fish despite one boiling in a little slot at first light.

Our second stop was higher in the drainage, on a 50-yard long run between two rapids. It was here we began our schooling in finding and fishing good swing water. The run provided a respite to fish running the downstream rapids, and to those preparing to continue through the next set. Overhanging firs and spruce trees on a high clay bank provided overhead cover. The surface was relatively smooth, with a midstream rock garden providing some turbulence. The speed of the current was that of a fast walk.

Casts were made straight and quartering downstream. A very early upstream mend was sometimes needed to straighten the line the entire way to the fly. With tension between rod and fly, the

rod followed the line during the swing. This was very important and slowed the swing way down allowing the fly to cross seductively in front of any fish. One step was taken downstream, and the cast was repeated. Despite getting the hang of fishing the swing, we raised no fish on the Sol Duc or on the Bogachiel. A low temperature on the Sol Duc, and turbid water from an active mud slide on the Bogey contributed to the tough conditions on these rivers.

Given the conditions, Doug's good humor and knowledge made for a very enjoyable day. He also did not disappoint by introducing us to the prettiest water I have ever fished. The glacially-fed Hoh runs aquamarine through a wide valley. Its gravel bars are hundred of yards across, and its runs are picture perfect. We finished the first day there, but didn't raise a fish. Our reward was cheap Chinese food, Pacific Northwest microbrews, and great company at the Inn.

The second day dawned to more of the same in the weather department. I fished the Sol Duc again, solo this time, and hit some excellent swing water. I feel I may have actually beaten other anglers to it, including the drift boat flotilla. Unfortunately no fish were raised. In retrospect a dead-drifted yarn egg or nymph may have been deadly in some of the rock gardens and pocket water, but I stuck with the swing.

After lunch, Angela and I fished at an undisclosed location on the Hoh. She spied it after a long walk past several fishless washboard riffles. We effectively ended our trip at the spot, and it provided us with memories that will last a lifetime. As for the catching, we'll have to take the road of our forbearers, all gentleman fly-fishers, who qualified a day successful if the angler "fished well". I think we did.