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**FROSTY PURSUIT:**  
Test your angling mettle with B.C.'s winter-run steelhead.

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**Hey, not everything ices up in the winter. And when it comes to B.C. steelhead, that's a good thing**

» BY GEORGE GRUENEFELD

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**S**TEELHEAD, THEY SAY, are fish of 1,000 casts. And while I've never stopped to tally up my casts, I know it certainly helps to enjoy the act of fishing as much as the act of catching in order to be counted as a steelhead angler. But to be counted as a *winter* steelhead angler, you must also be impervious to numbingly cold water, icy shorelines and sleet—or worse. And, of course, you must have faith that, provided you do everything right, there will come that electrifying moment when the line stops its mesmerizing drift and tightens up against the weight of a fish.

An anadromous evolution of rainbow trout, B.C.'s steelies begin to nose into rivers in early summer, when the snowmelt from the high country begins to swell the flows. These are the summer-run fish, and their numbers grow with every rise in the water. Come late November and early December, however, the winter-run steelhead start entering the rivers, continuing to trickle in right through to the early-spring spawning period.

And because winter steelies have been gorging themselves for an additional six months out in the ocean, they are that much bigger, longer and stronger than their summer-run siblings. Despite water temperatures just shy of freezing, winter steelhead are also more aggressive, making them great sport on the end of the line.

CHRIS CIESLA

## » When to fish

**ANY TIME THE** rivers are in good shape and the thermometer lingers above freezing is a good time to be fishing for winter steelhead. The first few hours following a particularly high tide will mark the arrival of fresh fish from the ocean; rising water will also wake up fish already in the pools.

On southern rivers, frequent downpours will blow out the rivers for weeks on end, but if you can be there when the water recedes, the odds of hooking up on a fresh run are better than average. On northern rivers, mild weather in the mountains can also blow out rivers with runoff; watch for cold nights, which tend to stem the flow.



**SEIZE THE MOMENT:** If a winter steelhead river isn't blown out, get on it and get fishing

## » What to fish

**THAT STEELHEAD WILL** move to a lure at all in this numbingly cold water is remarkable, yet move they do, occasionally snatching some morsel from the flow. But they rarely venture far from their lies to do so. As such, the secret is to drift your presentation a hand's width off the bottom.

Drifting bait under a float is often the most productive tactic, probably because the offering can be worked through the lies more efficiently than a swung fly. The set-up consists of a float, a piece of pencil lead—heavy enough to submerge all but an inch of the

float—and a three-foot, six- to eight-pound-test monofilament leader tied onto a size 4, octopus-style steelhead hook (see diagram below). Use heavier, shorter leaders and larger hooks in low light or coloured water.

For bait, artificial eggs—clusters or singles—work well, as do pink worms, yarn and Spin-N-Glos. Where permitted, cured roe and ghost shrimp often produce better than artificials. As for gear, a 12- or 13-foot rod is typically used, although I've also seen 14-footers. And while a free-spooling centre pin reel is best, a level-wind reel can work, too.



## » How to fish

**START WITH A** short cast slightly upstream and maintain a straight line between the rod tip and the float without restricting the free float of the rig. Let it drift downstream through the holding water to the end of the pool or until you can no longer control the drift and maintain an effective presentation. Then, pick up and cast a bit farther across and repeat.

Keeping a straight line to the rig requires practice. If the running line is slack, the float tends to drift ahead of the bait, making it impossible to get a good hookset. If the running line is cinched too tight, however, it slows the natural drift of the float, allowing the current to carry the leader and hook up out of the strike zone.

The drift and the action of the float are indicators of what's going on at the terminal end. Watch closely for any change in the rate of the drift, or for the float to dip into the water, submerge completely or rise unnaturally. Any of these indicators could signal a strike—or a snag. If your running line is straight to the float, it's simply a matter of raising the rod tip slightly to find out. But if the running line is slack, you'll miss an awful lot of fish—and that's definitely not worth freezing for.

VANCOUVER FIELD EDITOR **GEORGE GRUENEFELD** IS AN AVID YEAR-ROUND STEELHEADER.

### ON THE FLY

WINTER STEELHEAD will also take a fly, provided it's presented within the strike zone. Run it too shallow and the fish will snub the offering; run it too deep and the riverbed will snag one fly after another. Because not all lies are at the same depth, use an interchangeable sink-tip system. And keep the leaders short to ensure the fly runs at the same depth as the line. As for the best flies for winter chromers? Favourites include egg patterns, leech dressings and gaudy marabou concoctions.



ANNE DEL RIZZO (DIAGRAM); PAUL HODGSON (ANGLER); WWW.FLYFISHUSA.COM (FLY); WWW.NOELGYGER.CA (SKEENA ANGLER)

## » Where to fish

**WHILE THERE'S CERTAINLY** plenty of good steelheading in Great Lakes tributaries, nothing compares to fishing the wild rivers of B.C. Here are some of the best.



» **CHILLIWACK** Better known as the Vedder, this Lower Mainland river is the province's most heavily pressured yet productive winter steelhead water. It has mixed runs of wild and hatchery fish—as many as 10,000 in some years. The fishing kicks off in early December and peaks in mid- to late January. The fish typically vary between five and 15 pounds. Road-accessible runs are pounded; walk-in pockets, less so.

» **SQUAMISH** Coursing south from the Pemberton Icefield through the rugged Coast Mountains, the Squamish and one of its major tributaries, the Cheakamus, are highly regarded winter steelie streams, with respectable chromers in the low teens. The first winter fish trickle in during mid-December, with the run peaking in early February. Beware of warm Pacific weather systems that can blow out the system for days on end.

» **THOMPSON** The 18-kilometre stretch of the Thompson from Rock Run to Big Horn Pool is legendary among steelhead anglers around the world. This is huge water with precarious footing at the best of times, which gets even worse when the shoreline boulders ice up. But the fish are big and they're aggressive, despite the cold water. The season typically ends on New Year's Eve.

» **SKEENA** With 30 tributaries, including world-class rivers such as the Babine, Kispiox, Bulkley, Morice, Kalum and Copper, this is hallowed steelhead water. While 10-pound chromers abound, fish weighing 20 pounds and more vary throughout the system. These are wild fish—steel-bright, hard and powerful. And if you're lucky enough to hit the river between rain-gorged spates and subarctic cold snaps, the water runs clear, with winter's steelhead staked out in the soft runs.

» **GOLD** Emptying into Nootka Sound on the west coast of Vancouver Island, the Gold is undammed and home to truly wild steelhead. The fish vary between six and 25 pounds and come in from December through to April. However, the fishing is chancy due to frequent washouts.

» **STAMP/SOMASS** Upward of 2,000 steelhead stack up in this Vancouver Island system, most of them below Stamp Falls, 16 kilometres from the Alberni Inlet. The fish are typically in the seven-pound range, though double-digit steelies are here as well. The best sport is below the Bucket, where the Stamp and Sproat meet to become the Somass. Natural bait is allowed below the Bucket, but artificials only above.

» **COWICHAN** Emptying into the Strait of Georgia on the east coast of Vancouver Island, this is prime winter steelhead water with mixed runs of hatchery and wild fish of eight and nine pounds. The water flow is controlled by a dam and, for most of the middle to lower portion, it's an urban river. **OC**