



SURFACE FLIES FOR STEELHEAD

*Waking flies that take
steelhead on top*

DEKE MEYER

MOST FLY FISHERMEN HAVE a secret desire to catch a huge trout and preferably on a dry fly. For many of us steelhead fulfill that fantasy, because these giant sea-run rainbow trout readily take dry flies under the proper conditions. But as any dry-fly fisherman can tell you, presentation of the fly is at least as important as the fly pattern, and in most cases presentation is the most important ingredient for success.

Some fly fishermen see a radical disparity between a dead-drifted dry versus an "active" dry fly that burrows into the surface film, but that is a philosophical issue outside the scope of this article. I consider a steelhead dry fly one that is on or in the surface—a

steelhead dry fly is one that entices the steelhead to the top to take the fly.

Because most long-time dry-fly steelheaders use the terms "skater" and "waker" interchangeably (there is little tactical difference between the two), I consider them synonymous. The flies discussed here deliver a varying amount of wake because of the differences in silhouette, denseness, and flotation of each fly design.

Dry-fly Holding Water

THE BEST DRY-FLY STEELHEADING WATER is of medium depth, three to six feet, and medium current, as illustrated in the Scientific Anglers videos *Advanced Fly Fishing for Pacific Steelhead* and *Fly Fishing for*

Trophy Steelhead. For dry-fly fishing, you can consider steelhead as large trout that tend to hold in many of the same types of water that trout favor. Steelhead-as-trout need rest and cover from the relentless current. Holding areas include riffles, current seams, the middle or the throat of the run, tailouts, in front of and behind rocks and boulders, and along ledges. Steelhead will take a dry in any of those holding areas, and because they favor the same types of holding water in any given river, you can spot those prime areas even on rivers that are new to you.

When you are dry-fly fishing for steelhead, consider steelhead as large trout that tend to hold in many of the same places that trout favor. Concentrate on riffles, current seams, and other places where the steelhead can rest out of the current. Janet Downey photo.

The best water temperatures for surface steelheading are from 45 to 65 degrees; because of this range in water temperature, summer-run fish are more likely surface-fly candidates, particularly in water with good clarity.

Strike Triggers

A RESTED STEELHEAD THAT hasn't been harassed is likely to rise to a dry fly that trips either of two strike triggers: territorial aggression, or a re-activated or remembered feeding instinct.

STEELHEAD

SURFACE FLIES

CLARK'S STONEFLY

by Lee Clark



HOOK: #4-#10.
THREAD: Orange.
BODY: Flat gold tinsel.
UNDERWING: Sparkle yarn, orange or rust-colored.
OVERWING: Deer hair; or substitute elk or moose.
HACKLE: Brown.

HYATT'S STEELHEAD CADDIS

by Leroy Hyatt



HOOK: #4-#10.
THREAD: Color to match.
BODY: Dubbing or sparkle yarn, varied colors.
WING: Separate stacks of deer or elk hair.
HACKLE: Brown, grizzly, or a mixture; or substitute creme. You can substitute a spun-deer-hair head for the hackle.

RUSTY BOMBER

by John Hazel



HOOK: #4-#10.
THREAD: Heavy, color to match.
TAIL: Red fox squirrel tail.
BODY: Spun rusty deer hair.
RIB: Palmered brown hackle to front of body.
WING: Red fox squirrel tail.

WALLER WAKER

by Lani Waller



HOOK: #4-#10.
THREAD: Heavy black.
TAIL: Black moose.
BODY: Spun deer hair.
WING: Calfail or elk hair.
BEARD: Black moose.

WAG'S WAKER

by Bob Wagoner



HOOK: #4-#10.
THREAD: Black.
TAIL: Elk or black moose.
BODY: Spun natural or dyed deer hair; peacock herl; pearlescent Flashabou.
HACKLE: Brown or grizzly, or grizzly dyed brown (one size smaller than usual; you can eliminate the hackle).
WINGS: Elk or black moose (tied in upside down and splayed out).

There are times when the dead-drifted dry works better than the skated dry, but overall the skated fly raises more steelhead, because although you can cover lots of water with either method, the waker has a broader range of strike-inducing appeal to the fish. The dead-drifted fly elicits less strikes because it only activates one strike trigger, the feeding instinct provoked by a topwater insect. But there are times when the dead-drifted fly is more effective than the skater, depending on hard-to-recognize factors including the mood of the fish as affected by shifts in barometric pressure, air or water temperature changes, heavy aquatic insect hatches, or other unmeasurable underwater elements like the whims of individual fish. Besides angler pressure, steelhead are also affected by the movements of salmon, other steelhead, and predators such as eagles, osprey, herons, and otters.

There is no reliable theory for accurately determining when steelhead will prefer a dead-drifted fly over a skated one. In fact, one successful strategy is to first cover the water with a dead-drifted dry, then rework the water with a skater. Another tactic is to fish

upstream or straight across with a dead-drifted fly, then let it skate across the current on a tight line. Sometimes a steelhead will follow the fly as it drifts drag-free but won't hit until the fly begins to wake.

The skated fly ignites more strikes because it works on both triggers. A moving fly simulates lifelike animation. The fly trespasses on contested territory. The steelhead responds with an open-mouthed attack on the intruder waking crosscurrent over its head. The dead-drifted fly presents little threat to the fish because the fly passively drifts downstream. If you impart movement to the fly, making it hop or scoot while it floats downstream, it probably isn't seen by the steelhead as an aggressive movement but as an insect struggling in the stream. The skated or waked fly also appeals to the trout's remembered feeding drives because many insects hop, skip, and struggle as they swim crosscurrent the surface.

The First Steelhead Dry Fly

RODERICK HAIG-BROWN WAS PROBABLY the first to design a dry fly specifically for steelhead. Like many anglers

before and since, he made no distinction between a dead-drifted dry and an active dry fly but explored various topwater tactics with diverse flies—with mixed success.

Haig-Brown first wrote of a prototype for the Steelhead Bee in 1959 in his book *Fisherman's Summer*. He said, "This was an early September day, still in 1951, bright and sunny and with the river in perfect shape. I started in at the lower end of the bar in the Main Island Pool with 2X gut and a new fly pattern—a variation of the McKenzie River Brown and Yellow Bug, tied Wulff fashion with fox squirrel wings and tail on a No. 6 hook."

With *Fisherman's Fall* in 1964 Haig-Brown presented a firm dry-fly steelhead pattern: "Most of my fish have been taken on a No. 8 hook with a dressing I now call the Steelhead Bee. There is nothing sacred or mystic about this dressing, except perhaps its general shape and coloration. Other brown hairs than fox squirrel may be used, and I have used them. The body could be made of fur dubbing instead of silk, and the

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STEELHEAD BEE

by Roderick Haig-Brown



HOOK: #4-#10.
THREAD: Black.
TAIL: Red fox squirrel tail, quite bushy, slightly longer than the hook shank.
BODY: Equal sections dark brown, yellow, and dark brown silk or dubbing.
HACKLE: Brown, sparse.
WINGS: Red fox squirrel hair, quite bushy and slightly longer than the hook shank, tied forward, divided and straightened back within about ten degrees of upright.

DRY-FLY TACTICS

Dead-drift and skating presentations

TROUT-FISHING TACTICS are the most straightforward way to take steelhead on a dead-drifted dry, mending your line to achieve an effective drift without lining the fish with the line or leader. Like trout, steelhead can be spooked in low, clear water by the

passing shadow of the line. Whether you are fishing your dry fly dead-drift or skated, you can have maximum line control and be most effective at distances of 30 to 60 feet.

Steelhead will rise to oversize trout patterns such as the Clark's Stonefly, the

Wulff flies, the Steelhead Bee, and dry Atlantic salmon patterns like the Bomber. Flies that float lower in the water (the Bomber and the Steelhead Bee) attract more steelhead on a dead-drift because the fish sees the fly more clearly, thus its strike trigger is pushed strongly.

The technique for skating flies is simple: Just cast down at a 45-degree angle, tighten the line enough to put tension on the fly so it resists the current without sinking, then guide the fly with your rod tip so the fly skates crosscurrent. Mend when necessary.

Before moving downstream, vary the fly's speed from slow to fast. Although steelhead usually prefer a slow presentation, they can be fickle. When the waking fly has crossed over and is directly below you, let it hang there for a moment—steelhead often follow a fly into shallow water before nailing it.

When a steelhead rises for the fly, try not to jerk the rod—wait until you feel the fish pulling on the line, then set the hook; otherwise, you'll lift prematurely and take the hook away from the fish.



Steelhead strike dries because the flies activate the fish's feeding instinct or trigger its territorial jealousy.

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hackle could equally well be ginger or honey. In heavy water a #6 hook is not too large; in very low water #10 or even #12 may be a little better. But after using this fly in various forms for more than ten years I feel that if a steelhead can be persuaded to rise to the surface at all he will come to this pattern just as surely as any other."

Rusty Bomber

GUIDE JOHN HAZEL SAYS, "The Bomber has been around since the mid-1960s on the Atlantic coast; my variation, the Rusty Bomber, came about in 1979 when I was experimenting with different pattern variations, trying to depict the emerging *Dicosmoecus* caddis. Although the *Dicosmoecus* typically crawls out to hatch on available structure, in larger rivers where there is less midriver surface structure, they also swim to the surface and struggle to break the surface film, where they are extremely vulnerable to steelhead.

"The Rusty Bomber proved very effective, particularly in the manner in which the water resistance pushes back on the forward wing, creating a lifelike impression of the natural. The Rusty Bomber fishes very well if you hang the fly into boulder-strewn pockets, letting it simply bobble and sputter, and also if you use the more traditional greased-line technique in the riffles and tailouts."

Hazel says, "The Rusty Bomber has been unbelievably effective as a dead-drifted dry fly in autumn's low water flows with an up-and-across technique. I originally tied it to suggest the October Caddis, but I now use the pattern effectively throughout the spring, summer, and fall seasons from southern Oregon to the northeastern British Columbia coast and on both sides of the Cascade Mountain Range."

Clark's Stonefly

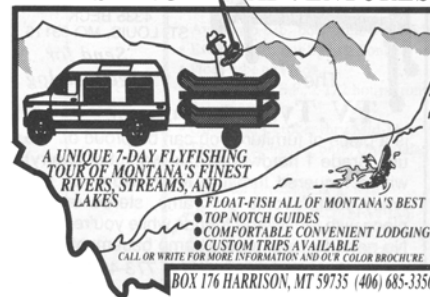
ALTHOUGH LEE CLARK'S STONEFLY is hackled like a traditional dry fly, the design element that sets the Clark's Stonefly apart is its body/yarn/wing reflection component. The body is flat gold tinsel. The wing is two layers: The bottom is strands of yarn in yellow, brown, or rust; the top is deer or elk hair, which helps it float and gives the appearance of the large dark wings found on big Western stoneflies or large October Caddis. [See "Clark's Stone," by John Shewey, in FLY FISHERMAN, December 1991. THE EDITORS.]

Waller Waker

THE SCIENTIFIC ANGLERS VIDEOS showing Lani Waller raising and then hooking a

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steelhead on his Waller Waker are some of the most exciting fly-fishing footage on film.

Cinematographer John Fabion says his crew shot 850 feet of film to record that steelhead taking the fly right off the top of the water. That footage ignited a minor revolution in steelheading—dry-fly steelheaders now are commonplace on many rivers that previously only hosted anglers using wet-fly strategies.

Waller says, "While on the Dean I began to think of a dragging, or waking, dry fly as a tiny speedboat that had to skim, wake, or plane across the surface, just like a ski boat.

"So I designed the fly with materials that were very buoyant, and with a high wing so the camera and the angler could see it easily. I used two wings instead of one, which is a design flaw in the Bomber, because two wings balance the fly. Having only one wing tends to flop the fly on its side when it gets wet, thus making the fly sink.

"The other secret is that the front of the fly is trimmed so that the entire front surface slants forward at about a 45-degree angle. This reinforces the tendency of the pushing current to run under the fly, instead of pushing and rolling over it, which makes a fly sink.

"I added a very stiff throat, or beard, on the fly of untanned moose. This acts as a miniature hydrofoil, and when the current hits this hydrofoil, the fly is lifted up and begins to plane just like a ski boat.

"The Waller Waker is very effective in rough and deep water, and my friends and I have raised steelhead on it in water that was over six feet deep. I have seen Howard West of Scientific Anglers use it with me on the Babine and get steelhead up in seven feet of rough water. The beard also makes the fly look very buggy in the water, and the Waller Waker takes steelhead dead-drifted, too."

Waller has designed three different Waller Wakers, all with black tails and beards. The Standard Waker has a mixed gray-and-black body with white calftail wings. The Bee has a black deer-hair body with a band of orange in the middle and tan elk-hair wings. The High Visibility Moth has fluorescent yellow calftail wings and a banded deer-hair body (from the back: white, gray, white, then gray deer hair).

Wag's Waker

THE MOST UNIQUE FEATURE of Wag's Waker is its skilike downrigger wings that are slightly splayed on the bottom of the fly like the legs on a water strider. By substituting spun deer hair for the original body of peacock or pearlescent

Flashabou, Leroy Hyatt has added perhaps the final touch to the fly. The deer-hair body is tied in tan, orange, black, yellow, or olive deer hair.

Wag's Waker is palmered with brown, grizzly, or grizzly hackle dyed brown, with additional hackle wrapped in the front of the fly. Bob Wagoner says, "The hackle on a size 6 fly is size 8 hackle, to keep the hackle inside the wings. You want the fly to float on the wings, not on the hackle. The hackle is not a critical thing; it's really for decoration, to make it look nice."

The wings on the original Wag's Waker were tied with elk, but Wagoner has now switched to moose. "You can



Steelhead dries (clockwise from upper left): Rusty Bomber, Hyatt's Steelhead Caddis, Wag's Waker, Clark's Stonefly, Steelhead Bee, and Waller Waker Bee. See page 54 for the recipes for these patterns.

use either one, but I prefer the moose because it's tougher," he says. "It doesn't break off as easy, and it floats better."

Hyatt's Steelhead Caddis

LEROY HYATT DESIGNED his Steelhead Caddis around the principle of separate stacked deer-hair wings, an idea he developed in 1985. Separated by dubbing, each wing extends to the rear of the fly. You can dub the body in a variety of colors or use the sparkling acrylic yarns with Antron, finishing the fly with hackle or a spun-deer-hair head à la the Muddler. You can add strands of fluorescent calf tail, bucktail, floss, or yarn as bright wing locators.

In the future we may see other innovative dry-fly designs for steelhead, such as those that use Evasote closed-cell foam material for the body or incorporate rubber legs for dry flies like a Steelhead Madam X. As more steelheaders are finding out, nailing a steelhead "on top" is exciting—all it takes is an effective dry fly, a well-planned strategy, willing fish, and a fly fisher with patience.

DEKE MEYER is a steelheader from Monmouth, Oregon. His latest book is *Advanced Fly Fishing for Steelhead*.

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