



YAKIMA BAIT® KNOW-HOW REPORT

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FREE TAKE ONE!

DRIFT FISHING FOR WINTER STEEHEAD

Winter steelhead occupy a special place in fishing lore. "Grey Ghosts," "Chrome Torpedoes," call them what you like, but winter steelhead are known for their strength and unparalleled beauty. They are a premium, iconic fish on every level.

Drift fishing is a tried-and-true method of catching these sometimes difficult to capture river fish. Over the years, drift fishing has morphed into other fishing forms like "free or side-drifting," "rolling shot," and "boon-dogging," which in all cases, the principles have remained the same. That is, to deliver your bait, drift bobber (Lil Corky® or Spin-N-Glo®) in as natural a drift as possible along the river bottom.

Just as the technique indicates, the presentation literally drifts with the current of the stream which enables you to quickly cover a lot of water thus increasing your odds of an encounter. How your presentation drifts is governed by how much weight you use and the speed and depth of the current.

WHERE TO DRIFT FISH

Ideal, "textbook" steelhead water is generally 4-to-8 feet deep and running at about walking speed. Of course, this isn't the only place you'll find steelhead. Riffles, tailouts, pools and rapids all hold steelhead at one time or another. Focusing first on the "textbook" water will substantially improve your odds of hooking a steelhead.

Winter steelhead have a penchant for holding in the tail outs. That is, the lower third or downstream end of a hole or drift, which is the first resting water located above fast-water rapids. They will often be hugging the deep water side of a tail out where steep bank extends into the river. Other places worthy of a cast or two are just downstream of large boulders or root wads, immediately downstream from an underwater drop off and along current edges. In high, perhaps off-colored water, they'll hug the river bank where the water is slow moving rather than fighting the heavy current of the main river channel. When rivers are low and clear, fish will move into areas that afford some kind of protection; for example, they may be found in the center or top end of holes, in well-defined deep water slots, and in fast water sections where the current is broken up by bottom ledges or strewn with large rock.

There is no replacement for observation. The most productive steelhead anglers are continually cued into their surroundings and focused on finding fish. They're looking upstream and down constantly for signs of fish rolling, where fellow anglers are fishing and especially places where they see fish being caught. In addition, when rivers are ideal and fish are migrating, accomplished anglers constantly move from one drift to another, making well placed casts in every conceivable fish holding spot.

HOW TO DRIFT FISH

Drift Fishing is easy to describe: cast out, across and up-stream with enough weight so your sinker will bounce the bottom as your outfit drifts downstream in the river current. Your drift is complete when your rigging swings near shore, which is when you'll need to reel in and cast again. Drift Fishing is a series of casts, drifts, and retrieves.

The key to success is learning to differentiate between snag and a fish. It's hard to believe a fish that averages around 7 pounds and grows in excess of 20 pounds can bite so light...but steelhead do. It's important to pay close attention as your outfit drifts along, follow your line with your rod tip as it proceeds downstream and don't be bashful about setting the hook should your line stop drifting. The Golden Rule of steelhead drift fishing is: if your drifting outfit stops, pauses or hesitates, set the hook, and set it hard!



Keeping your rod positioned at a 30° angle while drift fishing will enable strong hook sets.

It's important to use just enough weight so that you can feel it tap bottom every few yards as your outfit drifts downstream. If your weight is continually dragging bottom it means you're using too much. If your weight touches bottom only once during your drift you're not using enough. The goal is to keep your presentation in the strike zone, drifting downstream, usually within a foot or so of bottom.

WHAT TO USE

Fishing rods designed specifically for steelhead are available in both spin and baitcast designs. They come in different lengths with the 8'6" to 9'6" being the most popular for drift fishing. In addition to various lengths, steelhead rods are available in a selection of actions that define their stiffness. Available actions may include: medium light (ML) action rated for 6-to-10 pound line, medium (M) action rated for 8-to-12 pound line, medium-heavy (MH) 10-20 pound line., and heavy (H) 12-25 pound line. The length rod you choose should be based on the size river you fish; for example, if you fish small size streams where brush and short casts are the rule, an 8'6" medium rod action is all you need. If you frequently fish large rivers where long casts and keeping your line off the water is important you may choose a longer rod. If you target rivers when waters are high, fast moving, and employ heavy test line, you likely want a stiffer rod action. Realize that those using spin rod and reel tend to use lighter and longer rod actions than those employing baitcast style rod and reel.

Because sensitivity is so important for success in drift fishing, high modulus graphite is the preferred rod material. Graphite recovers more quickly than fiberglass which improves sensitivity.

When starting out, the right rod choice might be a medium (casting or spinning) or medium-heavy (casting) rod action; however, for most winter fishing, at least when using a baitcast style, I use either the medium-heavy or

heavy action rod. Why? Most fish are lost or not hooked because of a poor hook set. The medium action baitcast rod might shake nice at the store but may not perform well when it comes to getting the hook set. With a medium-heavy or heavy rod action, I can set the hook hard and then back off and let them run. This helps me land more fish.

"An excellent drag system," effectively applies consistent, even and smooth pressure over a wide range of settings that will capably tire a large fish over several long runs. Reel drag failure is not an option when it comes to choosing one for steelhead. A benchmark to consider when choosing a quality reel is one having drag washers cut from sheet graphite (like the Carbon Matrix drag system offered by Abu Garcia) that will hold its adjustment and maintain absolute smoothness.

When it comes to fishing line for steelhead, 10-to-14 pound test monofilament is what most anglers use. Although not mandatory, river conditions might suggest stepping outside this range; for example, light action spin rod and reel combined with low, clear water might dictate dropping down to 8-pound test mono combined with a less visible fluorocarbon leader. Twenty pound test monofilament combined with baitcast rod and reel might be right when rivers are running high and turbid.

Micro fibers, manufactured from gel-spun Polyethylene, are what superlines are made of and allows them to be stronger than other line types; for example, 14-pound test FireLine® is the same diameter as 8-pound monofilament and will cast much further than mono of equal test. Due to high-tech braids having almost zero stretch, they offer increased sensitivity. In addition, they float better than monofilament and are more tolerant of line twist, which makes them a dream come true for use on a spinning reel.



Be sure to match your hook size to either your Corky® or Spin-N-Glo® along with the most effective color for the water condition you're fishing.

When choosing pound test superline for a spinning reel, my advice is to use one test higher than the monofilament you'd normally use. It's different with baitcast reels, where stepping up two pound test categories is advisable; for example, if you've been using 12-pound test monofilament on a baitcasting rod and reel, I would encourage you to select 20-pound test superline, which will be thinner than the monofilament you were using and provide increased strength and durability.

Leader length is determined by water clarity, the clearer the water the longer the leader you should consider. In very clear water that may mean a leader that's 30 inches long as compared to the more normal 18-to-22 inch leader. Fluorocarbon leaders add considerable stealth to your presentation. Fluorocarbon is virtually invisible in the water making it an ideal leader material for steelhead. Because of this quality you can bump up in leader weight making 10-to-20 pound test the preferred range for fluorocarbon leaders.

Single hook size can range from as small as a 6 up to a size 3/0, but most anglers prefer to rig a size 1 or 1/0 combined with a size 10 or 8 Lil Corky® for average river conditions. You'll want to match your hook size to the drift bobber size you're using being careful not to combine too small a hook with too large a drift bobber. If you do, the result will be missed fish as the hook will be overshadowed by the drift bobber making hook-ups difficult at best.

The "egg loop," is the standard knot used in attaching your hook to your leader. This snell creates a "loop" that can be easily opened and closed by pushing the line back through the eye of the hook and used to attach bait, like an egg cluster or spawn bag to your offering. You can tie your own or purchase pre-tied leaders at most sporting goods stores that service steelhead fisheries.



Using hollow core weight requires you pinch weight onto a dropper line off your swivel. Rig weight on upper end of swivel when using a baitcast reel or anytime you're using a Spin-N-Glo®; lower end of swivel when employing a spin reel.

There are several different weight options available for river anglers. Pencil weight is sold in coils so you can cut off the right amount based on water conditions; it's quick and easy to use and will take your outfit to the bottom quickly and transmit bottom tapping signals to you better than other weight styles. Pencil weight is available in either hollow core or solid. The hollow core allows you to slip a dropper line extending from your swivel into the hollow opening and pinch your weight onto it. Solid pencil weight is either attached by pinching down the top of your weight and then punching a hole in it so it can be attached to a snap swivel or by using a short piece of surgical tubing and threading it up your main line, above your swivel, and jamming the weight into the tubing for a friction fit. Both rigs are designed so the weight will pull free should it get hung-up on the bottom allowing you to retrieve your outfit minus your sinker.



A slinky makes an effective drift weight rigging that reduces hang ups. If you're using spin gear you'll want to rig the weight on the leader side of the swivel to prevent excessive line twist.

Slinky sinkers are a lot less likely to hang on the bottom than pencil weight, which consist of a section of parachute cord filled with lead shot or several short sections of pencil weight. You can make your own with a slinky making tool or purchase different length slinky sinkers at stores specializing in river tackle.

I rely on pencil weight in 1/8, 3/16 and 1/4 inch diameters, using the eighth inch diameter or a short 6 or 8 shot slinky when rivers are low and slow moving. Under normal or average water conditions a combination of 3/16 inch pencil weight and slinky style sinkers in various lengths performs best. You should realize that nothing will get you to the bottom in high, heavy current like employing 1/4 inch pencil weight.

Lil Corky® and Spin-N-Glo® make excellent drift bobbers, often imitating egg cluster or other forage. The round egg image the Lil Corky® provides is a proven fish catcher, while the sonic vibration produced by Spin-N-Glo® is what makes this buoyant spinner so enticing to fish. Their buoyancy resists the current so they float within easy reach of steelhead and keep your hook just above bottom resulting in fewer hang ups. When rivers are

running turbid you may increase your odds of success by giving the fish a larger offering; for example, something they can see, by stacking two Lil Corky® in tandem or stepping up to a larger 6 or 4 Lil Corky® size and corresponding larger hook. Likewise, when rivers are running clear a size 14 or 12 Lil Corky® may be all you need to trigger strikes.

LIL CORKY® HOOK SIZE CHART

Size 14	#4 or #6 single hook
Size 12	#4 or 6 single hook
Size 10	#2 or 1 single hook
Size 8	# 1 or 1/0 single hook
Size 6	#1/0 or 2/0 single hook
Size 4	#3/0 single hook

The same is true with Spin-N-Glo® with the size 12, 10 and 8 being the most popular. You might find success during high, turbid water conditions using a size 6 or 4 Spin-N-Glo®. When waters are clear as gin you may find that a small size 14 Spin-N-Glo® will trigger strikes better than a larger offering.

With Spin-N-Glo®, it's best to use a little heavier leader than you might with a Lil Corky®. A heavier leader offers stiffness that can help prevent line tangles associated with the spinning action of a Spin-N-Glo® on cast or drift. Also, you'll find casting straight out, rather than angling your cast upstream, will keep your Spin-N-Glo® from tangling around your main line.

Adding sand shrimp or nickel-sized cluster of cured salmon or steelhead eggs further enhances the appeal of your Lil Corky® or Spin-N-Glo® offering. There are several ways to rig these baits. With eggs, it's as easy as placing your egg cluster inside the egg loop, cinching it down, and turning your hook into the bait. Sand shrimp are normally rigged head down with the hook going through the tail first before piercing the chest cavity with the egg loop capturing the shrimp body.



Although not a guide, Buzz is considered a sport fishing authority for salmon, steelhead, and trout. He writes a regular outdoor column, is a seminar speaker and has appeared on many TV fishing shows. He is a hall of famer for The Association of Northwest Steelheaders and The National Fresh Water Fishing Hall of Fame. Berkley offers a line of Air IM-8 rods that Buzz Ramsey designed for salmon and steelhead. Currently, Buzz is Brand Manager for Yakima Bait Company and a member of the management team – www.yakimabait.com.

An enormous advantage of fishing a Lil Corky® or Spin-N-Glo® is that if your bait comes off, you're still fishing effectively. Countless winter steelhead have been caught using only a Lil Corky® or Spin-N-Glo®.

KNOW - HOW TIPS

- Whenever you're using a Spin-N-Glo® always rig one or two beads between it and your hook so the Spin-N-Glo® can easily spin on your line. Although employed more by those plunking or still fishing, some anglers will use a small bead above the Spin-N-Glo® as well to prevent debris from getting into the top hole, which could cause it not to spin freely.
- In selecting colors for average, perhaps green water conditions some of the more popular finishes include: Pink Pearl (PLR), Flame (FL), Egg Fluorescent (EFL), and Pink (PK).
- In selecting colors for clear water conditions, in addition to the above, you should try metallic finishes like Metallic Orange (MORA), Metallic Pink (MSPK), Patriot (PAT) or Misty River (MR). Other clear water finishes you should try are the UV finishes and dark colors like Black (BL), Black Silver Flake (BS), or Glitter Purple (GPUR).
- In selecting colors for off-color, stained or muddy water try chartreuse patterns like Clown (CL), Red Hot Tiger (RHT), or any of the high contrast patterns like Flame Chartreuse (FLCH) or Flame White (FLWH) or glo-in-the-dark patterns like Luminous Slant (LUSL), Luminous Pink (LUPK).
- Scent products, especially sand shrimp and egg scents can eliminate human odors and enhance your presentation.
- Learn how to "extend your drift." That is, you'll cover more water and increase the number of encounters if you pay out line at the bottom of your drift. It's easy to do, especially with a baitcast reel, just thumb out three-to-five foot sections of line, several times to extend your drift.

Winter steelhead fishing is one of the most rewarding fishing experiences known. The pay-off, if you're successful, is indelible lifetime memories that are sure to fire future trips. Please be safe. If you're wading, use a wading staff and stay clear of wading in water that's swift or over your waist. If you're in a boat, always wear a PFD/life vest – inflatable life jackets are a great way to go.



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