

YAKIMA BAIT KNOW-HOW REPORT

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FREE TAKE ONE!

BACK-TROLLING PLUGS FOR WINTER STEELHEAD

Steelhead have been biting plugs for as long as anglers have been fishing them. However, early on, back-trolling plugs in rivers were a closely guarded secret mostly employed by guides as a means of getting their sometimes inexperienced clients into fish. Eventually word got out about the effectiveness of plugs; that, combined with an increase in the number of anglers owning boats designed to efficiently navigate rivers, caused serious anglers to add plugging to their arsenal of tricks for catching steelhead.

Unlike other methods used for steelhead where the bite might be subtle, the strike of a steelhead hitting a plug is arm wrenching. And although it's likely steelhead strike plugs for more than one reason, it's widely believed what makes steelhead hit plugs so savagely is due to them being treated as invaders into a steelhead's territory.

WHERE TO FISH PLUGS

Textbook steelhead water is 4-to-8 feet deep and running at about walking speed. Of course, this isn't the only place you'll find steelhead. Riffles, tail-outs, pools and rapids all hold steelhead at one time or another. In the winter, water clarity can range from crystal clear to muddy with "steelhead green", a light shade of emerald, being the optimum condition for catching steelhead. Generally, this green signifies the stream volume is dropping, or as is sometimes referred, "on the fall", by savvy Steelheaders; a time when steelhead fresh in from ocean or giant lake are eager to bite. When plugs produce best is when the water color is emerald green to clear.

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 rapid. They will often be hugging the deep water side of a tail out where steep bank extends into the river. Other places worth trying are just downstream of large boulders or root wads, immediately downstream from an underwater drop off and along current edges. When rivers are low and clear, fish can 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. And although steelhead will respond to plugs anywhere their found, it's the tail outs where the majority steelhead are taken with plugs.

BACK-TROLLING PLUGS

Just as the technique implies, the goal of back-trolling plugs for steelhead is to slowly back them down the river from a boat moving slower than the current. Begin by positioning your boat upstream from the area you wish to fish by holding your craft (drift boat or jet sled) steady in the current by rowing or with the aid of a trolling motor. Then, free



Effectively backtrolling plugs requires letting your plugs out the same distance for each rod and backing down the river slowly against the force of the current. Notice how the rods are not in rod holders.

spool your diving plug out, downstream behind your boat 30-to-70 feet – depending on water speed and river depth. When you stop letting out line, the current will cause your plug to dive near the bottom. Now, while holding back in the current, allow your craft to slowly slip downstream such that your plug(s) will dive near the bottom while marching downriver at a slow steady pace. This is the basic premise of back-trolling plugs for steelhead. Using this technique allows the plugs to dive and work near bottom through the entire drift. Realize with experience you may begin to slip your boat downstream a little faster in areas where steelhead only sometimes hold, but when you reach an area where you consistently catch fish, hold your boat steady and allow your plugs to wiggle and dive in the same location (the kitchen) for a minute or more before continuing to back down the river.

PLUG TUNING AND FISHING

The first step is to anchor up and check to make sure all your plugs are "tuned"; that is, running straight in the current and not rolling or running off to one side or the other. Most anglers check plug action by pulling their lures next to the boat. It's easy: with six foot of line extending from your rod tip simply pull your plug briskly through the water and observe its action. It should dive down and wiggle straight. This is an important first step; after all, if your lures are going to perform well they need to run straight in order to dive near the bottom where steelhead are most often found. To ensure the best plug action it's important to use the round-eyed connector snap equipped with each lure.

Should you discover an out-of-tune plug you can easily adjust it by bending the pull-point eyelet (with the diving lip or bill facing you) the opposite direction the plug is running. A small pair of needle-nose pliers works best for this fine alteration. You should realize, only a small amount of adjustment is normally all that's needed to make your plug swim straight. Plugs like the FatFish™ and Mag Lip® have fixed eyelets while some plugs, like most FlatFish®, are equipped with screw eyes that can be adjusted by turning, rather than bending, their pull-point eyelet the opposite way it's running.

You should realize the erratic, strike producing skip-beat Mag Lip® action should not be confused with it being out of tune. You will find most Mag Lip® plugs to be straight running from factory when using the included round-eyed connector snap. Rather than pulling this lure beside your boat, to check its action place Mag Lip® in the current behind your boat with your rod tip pointed downstream and observe its wiggle and how it tracks before attempting to adjust the eyelet.

Once your plugs are all running properly it's time to fish. Start back-trolling by holding your boat at the upper end of the run or drift you intend to fish. This means you'll be holding steady in one place as line is paid out from your reel. Under most conditions you'll want to run your lures 40-to-50 feet behind your boat. In shallow water or short runs you may want to fish your plugs only 30 feet back, to facilitate a deep dive or when fish might be spooked due to clear water and/or heavy pressure try fishing them 50-to-70 foot out.

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Arming yourself with a variety of plugs and colors to fish various depths, water clarity and current speeds is essential. Line counter reels enable precise and consistent line measurement when letting your plugs out.

An important element in back-trolling plugs for steelhead is to be sure all your plugs are running the same distance from the boat which, as the theory goes; will stimulate territorial fish into striking. This is the opposite of when forward trolling in a lake (open water) where running your lures at different distances will increase the number of times fish will see your lures. With a baitcast reel style, you can determine distance by counting the passes of the level-wind bar across the face of the reel; for example, an Abu Garcia 5500 reel will pay out seven feet of line with each pass of the line guide – so seven single passes of the line guide will be the right amount of let out for most conditions. While you can count line guide passes to determine distance, the easiest and most accurate way of gauging the distance is to use reels equipped with line counters.

While you can employ rod holders when back-trolling, I believe you will hook and land more fish per strike by holding your rod at a low angle with the rod, between the reel and first rod guide, resting firmly on the boat gunnel. When a fish pulls your rod down violently, your response should be to set the hook as the rod bottoms out (is fully bent over) from the strike, and by having your thumb firmly planted on the reel spool when setting the hook. After the hook set you should let the reel drag take over.

WHICH PLUG WHEN

Plugs designed for steelhead vary in their size, shape and action; for example, a FatFish plug, as its name implies, has a wide lip and body. FatFish is available in three sizes with the 1/4 (1-3/4 inch length) and 1/2 (2 inch length) sizes most used for steelhead. The Mag Lip 3.5 (3-1/2 inch length) has a narrow body shape making it capable of diving extra deep. Both feature a strike producing skip-beat action when trolled or back-trolled in medium to fast currents, come with rattles and a two part urethane overcoat impregnated with ultraviolet (UV) pigment. Ultraviolet occurs at the “beyond violet” end of the color spectrum and is visible to fish (not humans), and something steelhead respond to especially well in low light conditions. Mag Lip will handle current speeds up to 4 MPH, while the small and medium FatFish have a maximum troll speed of 3 MPH.

You should realize steelhead will react to different plug shapes, colors and actions depending on water color, amount of available light and the big unknown, their mood. An advantage of back-trolling all your lures the same distance from your boat, besides intimidating territorial fish into striking, is you will give the fish a choice between different plug shapes, sizes and colors. The general rule in regard to plug size is to run normal steelhead size plugs, FatFish 1/2 and Mag Lip 3.5, the majority of the time and small plug sizes, like FatFish 1/4, when rivers are low and clear. Don't discount on-the-water experience; what I do is try different plug colors and shapes based on conditions and let the fish tell me what they like, which they will quickly do.

Although capable of diving deep, up to 14 feet, Mag Lip 3.5 is a great all around lure. Although current speed and line diameter influence a plug's diving capability, by regulating the amount of let out you can adjust the diving depth of your Mag Lip from shallow to deep.

The top producing steelhead finishes include any and all of the metallic silver, gold, blue, green, red, and pink colors and combinations like the Green Pirate or Double Eagle. In clear water you should not overlook the

natural crawfish, shrimp or dark patterns like black glitter. When waters are less than clear, try flame (fluorescent red) or any of the chartreuse color combinations. A finish to not overlook regardless of water color is the mother-of-pearl with black lip.

THE GEAR

There's a wide set of choices related to the gear you can use when back-trolling plugs for steelhead. While virtually any commonly used steelhead rod, reel and line choice will work; serious back-trollers employ bait-cast rods and reels.

When it comes to rods 8 to 8-1/2 foot models having a soft enough tip to reveal plug action are the most popular. For this reason, some top guides prefer fiberglass rods over graphite. I've always preferred magnum taper graphite rods having a light tip that will yield plug action and heavy butt for strong hook sets.

A bench mark to consider when choosing a quality bait-cast 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, 8-to-15 pound test monofilament is what most anglers use. And while the thin diameter super-lines can facilitate a deep plug dive and their lack of stretch can produce deep penetrating hook sets, I prefer hi-vis monofilament combined with a clear, low visibility green monofilament, or invisible fluorocarbon leader of about three feet.

HOT TIPS

- Sharp hooks are essential to success in catching steelhead. You want your hooks so sharp the fish cannot let go.
- You can add to the effectiveness of your plugs by adding a positive scent. Shrimp or egg scents are the most popular for steelhead. Tipping your plug with a scent-filled worm is an enticing option and one I often employ. Try tipping one prong of your trailing treble hook with a 3 inch trout worm in pink or orange.



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 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.

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