

# Seattle Post-Intelligencer

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Guide Mike Zavadlov, right, and angler Mike Naiman make their way through the Hoh River Oxbow rapids. (Joshua Trujillo / P-I)

## Steelhead: Olympic Peninsula is the best place to catch these fighters

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By **GREG JOHNSTON**  
P-I REPORTER

You can't fully know a Northwest river until you've hooked a wild steelhead in one and felt that fish sizzle downstream like a lightning flash of evolution.

At least you can't really know it as a steelhead angler does.

That's why I so much love a handful of rivers on the north coast of Washington that geographically represent the last great stronghold of wild steelhead trout in the continental United States.

When others look at the Sol Duc River, they see a pretty stream that flows green and white from the north Olympic Peninsula west toward the sea. But I see one of the most intensely productive steelhead rivers on the planet, where behind any boulder might lie 25 pounds of Sol-Duc-specific *Oncorhynchus mykiss* DNA.

I see a river where I once crossed cougar tracks and hiked a mile to stand alone on a gravel bar playing a frenzied 12-pounder that jumped six or more times. Or a river where I spent several fishless hours one day, but finally as daylight faded on the very last cast hooked a chrome-bright gem of 14 pounds, a pretty hen with rosy gill plates and a snow-white belly.

While others consider the Hoh River and think of its magnificent temperate rain forests, I contemplate a big, meandering, blue-green



Joshua Trujillo / P-I

river that flows out of Olympic National Park, where I've landed many steelhead, and had a huge one get away.



Tom Mathews, left, and fishing guide Mike Zavadlov net a steelhead caught by Mike Naiman, background, on the Hoh River.

I recall a day my late father hooked a bright Hoh River hen a mile upstream from the sea, kept it from dashing into a root wad while battling it for 10 minutes, then cursing when it came unhooked three feet from the bank.

I remember a time long before that, as a kid spending a day fishing with him along the spruce-lined banks of the Queets River and finding two shed elk antlers in a meadow on our hike back to the truck.

"These rivers are so precious. We are so lucky to have them in this state, and to have their headwaters protected in the park," says Tom Mathews, a rabid steelhead and salmon angler and great fishing buddy. "Habitat is the key. I think it's essential for everybody who fishes out here to care about that, and to take care of these fish."

These views were affirmed once again earlier this month during two days of fishing on the upper Hoh with Mathews and his friend, Mike Zavadlov of Forks, one of the better fishing guides on the north coast. Despite low, clear flows after two weeks with no rain and during one of the worst winter steelhead seasons in Washington in recent memory, we managed to renew acquaintances with one of America's great rivers and its wild, native constituents.

For those who have not had the good fortune to know the steelhead trout, it is a unique creature, physiologically the same as a rainbow trout, but with a diverse life history like that of a salmon. Wild steelhead are born in the gravels of cold-flowing rivers from California north to Alaska and across the North Pacific on the Kamchatka Peninsula.

Like salmon, they leave the rivers as juveniles and go out to sea, where they pasture for one to six years before returning to spawn. But unlike salmon, they do not all die after spawning, but go back out to sea and return again to spawn, sometimes two or more times. Although most steelhead spend two years at sea ("two-salts") before their first return, many spend three years ("three-salts"), and a few even more.

Zavadlov, who holds a bachelor's degree in biology, voluntarily takes scale samples for the state from the wild steelhead he catches and releases. Last year he caught a fish in the Hoh that -- scale analysis showed -- had spent six years at sea before its first return. It measured 41 inches long, weighing about 22 pounds.

"That's the only six-salt steelhead the state has ever sampled," says Mathews, who works as a catch sampler for the Department of Fish and Wildlife. "It stayed out for six years! These are such diverse fish; they're just such a unique fish. And the populations here are still fairly healthy, because we still have the habitat in place."

Steelhead are a challenge to catch, although with modern techniques and the right river conditions they will bite readily. But what is so stunning about these fish, other than their sheer beauty, is their strength and canniness when hooked, often using the current and structure of the river environment to get away.

"They're big, hard-fighting, chrome fish," says Zavadlov. "But they're fish you've got to work for. It takes some skill to catch them."

Wild steelhead have declined almost everywhere in California, Oregon and Washington due to habitat loss from development, dams, forest practices, flood control measures and water withdrawals, pollution

and overfishing -- the latter more a problem of the past. Many runs, across most of their remaining range, are protected by the Endangered Species Act.

Although steelhead anglers debate this incessantly, spawning surveys show they are stronger on the north coast than anywhere else.

"I don't think there's any doubt that those north coast streams are the healthiest steelhead streams in the state," says Bill Freymond, a senior fish biologist for the Fish and Wildlife Department's coastal region. "Statewide, and I think damned near worldwide, you're going to have a hard time finding better steelhead fishing than what we've got on the north coast of Washington."

The aboriginal Quileute, Hoh and Quinault tribes hold treaty rights on these rivers and conduct fisheries on them as they have for thousands of years, now using gillnets. That remains a source of frustration for anglers, who fish upstream of the nets and now must release nearly all the wild steelhead they catch. But by and large, enough steelhead get through every winter to maintain healthy wild runs.

The Quillayute system, which includes the Sol Duc, Bogachiel and Calawah rivers, year-in and year-out exceeds the state and Quileute Tribe's escapement goal of 5,900 wild steelhead, averaging an estimated 10,485 spawning fish each year from 2000 through 2008.

The mighty Hoh, with a goal of 2,400 fish -- which most anglers believe is far too low -- has averaged 2,492 wild steelhead spawning over the past eight years. But the runs did not reach the goal in the 2003, 2004 and 2005.

"We hear the uproar about the Hoh," Freymond says. "Those were the years we were battling with the tribe (over sharing the catch) and frankly, as co-managers we didn't do a very good job. We didn't meet the goal."

This year the state and the Hoh Tribe has agreed to increase the escapement goal to 2,540 fish, and the tribe has reduced its net schedule to one day per week during the key wild period of February through April, with no netting the first two weeks of April.

"I feel pretty good about what we've got going with them this year," Freymond said.

On the beautiful Queets, the Quinault Tribe and the state remain in dispute over steelhead escapement, with a tribal goal of 2,600 fish and a state goal of 4,200 fish. Yet spawning estimates over the past eight years -- which are admittedly hard to gauge due to often murky flows -- have averaged 5,525 fish.

All of these rivers are known for large wild steelhead, often in excess of 20 pounds.

But very few wild steelhead are killed by anglers these days, at least compared to years past. Today the kill of wild steelhead in Washington by sport fishermen is heavily restricted -- and rightly so, most believe. Anglers must release unmarked, wild steelhead year-round in all but 12 rivers in the state, and all but one of those on the north coast. In those 12 rivers, an angler may legally kill only one wild steelhead per year -- not one from each river, but one per year, period.

During our recent trip down the Hoh, we killed one marked hatchery steelhead, but caught and released seven gorgeous wild steelhead, ranging from a 3-pound "jack" -- a one-salt -- to a luminous hen of



zoom

Joshua Trujillo / P-I

The steelhead is physiologically the same as a rainbow trout, but with a life history like that of salmon.

perhaps 14 pounds.

"The experience is still there," says Zavadlov. "We still get 20-pounders. In every pocket on these rivers, you've got the chance to catch a 20-pounder."

Zavadlov began fishing these rivers in the 1980s, and says what has changed most is an increasing number of guides and "improved fishing techniques."

Back when I first fished these rivers with my father, the primary and most popular method of steelheading was "bottom-bouncing" with roe, usually with a small, colored bobber above the hook and yarn of pink, orange or green tied to the shank. Using varying lengths of thin lead weight to get down, the technique was to cast upstream into a drift and let the bait/bobber and yarn bounce along bottom into and through the hole.

Nowadays there are three more popular methods: back-trolling plugs that dive in the current, casting colored jigs or rubber worms below a float, and "side-drifting" from a boat moving downstream using bait or bobbers on light lines, with long leaders and long spinning rods.

The affable and ever-enthusiastic Mathews is a master at back-trolling plugs, sometimes taking pains to row or even walk his drift boat into position above even the shortest drifts and small pockets that will hold fish.

"Slow and methodical, that's how I fish. I see good water and I about have a heart attack," he says with a trademark belly laugh. "I cannot blow over good water!"

His fishing buddies are accustomed to getting off the river well after dark.

Zavadlov also is known for fishing long days and is a superb oarsman and fine plug fisherman. But he prefers float and jig fishing, or side-drifting when flows are up. He is very effective with all those techniques. But I took great delight -- while floating the Hoh with him -- in demonstrating that the old-school technique still works quite well, hooking three steelhead while bottom-bouncing with bobbers and yarn, losing one and landing two beauties.

What would he change about wild steelhead management if he could?

"My first answer would be get rid of the nets," he said. "That would definitely help. But I know fishing is their right. They have been fishing here for thousands of years. The main thing is, I think all the user groups need to get together: the fly fishermen, gear fishermen, guides and everybody working together."

Judging by the past, the Sol Duc, Hoh and Queets might all freeze over first. But it is an idea whose time must one day come, among those who know these rivers as only steelhead anglers can.



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## IF YOU GO

- You need a state freshwater fishing license to fish for steelhead in Washington if you are older than 15, and steelhead anglers of all ages are required to obtain a catch report card. The card comes with your license and is free for younger anglers. To purchase a license online or find other details, see [fishhunt.dfw.wa.gov/wdfw/licenses.html](http://fishhunt.dfw.wa.gov/wdfw/licenses.html).
- To review the Department of Fish and Wildlife's statewide steelhead management plan, go here: [wdfw.wa.gov/fish/steelhead/index.htm](http://wdfw.wa.gov/fish/steelhead/index.htm).
- Many wild steelhead runs in Washington are listed at varying levels of protection under the Endangered Species Act. For more information, see the Web pages of the federal NOAA Fisheries at [goto.seattlepi.com/r1980](http://goto.seattlepi.com/r1980).
- Several anglers' groups are working to protect Washington's steelhead runs, including the Wild Steelhead Coalition ([wildsteelheadcoalition.org](http://wildsteelheadcoalition.org)), the Coastal Conservation Association Pacific Northwest ([ccapnw.org](http://ccapnw.org)) and the oldest, the Steelhead Trout Club of Washington ([steelheadclub.com](http://steelheadclub.com)), founded in 1928.
- To contact guide Mike Zavadlov, see [mikezsguideservice.com](http://mikezsguideservice.com).

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