



*Author Steve Raymond*

### **Steve Raymond's Address to the Wild Steelhead Coalition 11/19/05**

It seems only yesterday that I last spoke to this group, although it was actually nine months ago. But I'm glad to be here again, and I want to thank you for inviting me back; for some reason, that doesn't seem to happen very often. And I'm especially glad you invited me to join tonight's celebration of the miracle of wild steelhead.

For that, as I perceive it, is the reason we are here. We come from many different walks of life and a great diversity of backgrounds, but a love for wild steelhead is the one thing we all have in common. It has given us this opportunity to visit with old friends, hear some outrageous fish stories, share a good dinner, try our luck in the raffle and risk our fortunes in the auction, all to benefit the cause of preserving wild steelhead.

And that's as it should be. But I think there's a bit more going on here than that. The love we all share for wild steelhead is a complex and mysterious thing that defies easy explanation or analysis. After all, what else could compel us to stand for countless hours in cold rivers, often under rain, casting endlessly in the single-minded hope that perhaps the very next cast will result in the thing we most desire: The shock of a heavy strike or the thrilling sight of a graceful rise.

Not very many people understand this. To be charitable about it, most people think we're crazy. And if you're honest about it, you'd probably have to admit there have been

times when you thought so yourself. The truth of the matter is that we don't really understand our own behavior very well.

But I don't think insanity is the answer. I think there are some perfectly rational reasons why wild steelhead have such a magnetic hold over us, why they command us to pursue them with dogged devotion even under the very worst of conditions. And those reasons are what I propose to talk about this evening.

Before venturing any opinions of my own, however, I thought it would be prudent to see what others have had to say about this subject. So I began with a review of the literature of steelhead and steelhead fishing. This didn't take very long because, sadly, there aren't many books about steelhead. In fact, if you compare what has been written about steelhead with what has been written about Atlantic salmon, you quickly find a great disparity. Why should there be such a great difference?

Well, one obvious reason is that the history of fishing for Atlantic salmon goes back much further than the history of steelhead fishing. People have been fishing for steelhead only a little more than a hundred years while the roots of Atlantic salmon fishing date back well before the founding of the republic. So the Atlantic salmon fishermen have had a lot more time to write books than we have.

Another reason is that in the early days of steelhead fishing there was great confusion over the difference between steelhead and Pacific salmon, and those who wrote about it often said they were catching salmon when actually they were probably catching steelhead.

But those aren't the only reasons; the angling historian Paul Schullery has offered a couple of other interesting explanations. He notes that "fishing-book publishing was essentially an Eastern industry; publishers knew the Eastern market and rarely showed interest in the Western market. Something like that may be self-perpetuating; fishermen who grow up with no books about their fishing may well not learn to see fishing as a reader's sport."

Another reason, he says, is that "if you look at the . . . biographies of famous pioneer steelheaders . . . you'll notice that a great many of them were blue-collar workers; this was a different social group than the one that gathered along the shores of the exclusive salmon rivers of Eastern Canada, and it was a group much less likely to have the leisure and inclination to write books, especially books of gracious, companionable prose."

I think Schullery is probably right in his assessments, which suggest that steelhead fishermen have always occupied a lower rung on the social ladder than East Coast salmon fishermen. But I don't think we have any reason to feel badly about that; on the contrary, our Western tradition of public waters has made steelhead fishing available to just about everybody, and ours has become a truly egalitarian sport--which is much more than you can say about Atlantic salmon fishing. If the price we've had to pay for that is fewer books about steelhead fishing, then I still believe we've gotten the better end of the bargain.

But let's take a look at some of those books and see what they say about the appeal of wild steelhead.

The short answer is: Not much. This is especially true in the early days. Most of the first writers on the sport were preoccupied describing the appearance and habits of steelhead and their legendary fighting qualities. For example, Zane Grey, the famous Western novelist, provided this description of the first steelhead he ever saw. It captured by another angler on a visit to Deer Creek in 1918.

"It was a strikingly beautiful fish, graceful, symmetrical, powerfully built, with great broad tail and blunt, pugnacious nose. The faint pinkish color, almost a glow, shone from a

background of silver and green." The fish weighed only 4 pounds, but the man who caught it said "you never could have made me believe he didn't weigh twice" as much.

Grey, like most other early writers, seems to have assumed the steelhead's appearance and game qualities were the reasons why people fished for them. Neither he nor they bothered to inquire any further.

In "The Western Angler," published in 1939, Roderick Haig-Brown provided an even better description of the steelhead, but his focus, too, was mainly on its appearance and habits, not on its emotional appeal to anglers.

Another Canadian writer, Francis C. Whitehouse, praised the fighting qualities of wild steelhead in his 1945 book, "Sport Fishes of Western Canada".

"The steelhead is an instinctive leaper, and on a fly it will put up an amazing performance," he wrote. "The wild rushes, as if to leave the pool downstream, however, are usually 'bluff'; but if (the fish) actually does so, in some of our rivers, it is just too bad!"

For Whitehouse, as for other writers, the fight was the thing, and he didn't offer any other explanation for his regard for steelhead.

But a year later, in 1946, Roderick Haig-Brown returned to the scene with his marvelous book, "A River Never Sleeps," which almost single-handedly made up for all the previous void in steelhead literature. This book gives us more quotable passages about steelhead than I think can be found in all earlier books put together. Here's one of my favorites:

"The steelhead, with the brightness of the sea still on him, is liveliest of all the river's life. When you have made your cast for him, you are no longer a careless observer. As you mend the cast and work your fly well down to him through the cold water, your whole mind is with it, picturing its drift, guiding its swing, holding it where you know he will lie. And when the shock of his take jars through you to your forearms and you lift the rod to its bend, you know that in a moment the strength of his leaping body will shatter the water to brilliance, however dark the day."

Nobody ever said it better. But even that vivid description begs the question: What is it, besides the way they look and the way they fight that we love so much about wild steelhead?

John Atherton, better known as Jack, was an artist and angler who published a highly praised book called "The Fly and the Fish" in 1951. Atherton is remembered mostly as an East Coast angler, but he lived for a time on the Pacific Coast and devoted a chapter of his book to steelhead. And he had this to say about them:

"It has always seemed to me that the best fish is the one I am fishing for at the time. But if I could invariably have my choice of locality, river and type of fishing, I am inclined to believe that my favorite would be a fresh-run steelhead in a clear, fast stream. For sheer high-explosives on the rod they can hardly be surpassed and if one eventually beaches this streamlined dynamo, it is mainly due to the grace of the good Lord and a strong wrist."

Again, it was the steelhead's fight that impressed Atherton, and he had little to say about the other qualities of steelhead.

Enos Bradner, my old friend and mentor, was usually more concerned with the nuts and bolts of steelhead fishing than he was with the contemplative aspects of the sport. As outdoor editor of the Seattle Times, he had to be. But in 1960, when he received a letter from a teenage boy named Tim, asking for advice on how to become a steelhead fly fisherman, Bradner wrote a reply in which he came as close as he ever did to describing what it feels like to fish for wild steelhead. Here's what he said:

"Everything connected with this sport tugs at the heart . . . You get out right at dawn, walking up a gravel bar to the riffle you hope holds a fish. Anticipation builds up as you step into the water and start working out your sinking fly line . . . The river pushes your waders tight against the body as you work chest-deep into the current. You are alone with and become part of the stream.

"But, Tim, you must have a mountain of patience . . . You must be willing to take long hours of fruitless casting. Perhaps days will go by without the slightest nibble. But then, some enchanted morning, or perhaps even at midday, there will come with startling abruptness a jolt that almost jerks the rod out of your hand. Your reel starts screaming as the steelhead streaks downstream faster than any other game fish can swim. You become alive in every fiber of your system, with adrenaline coursing through your arteries.

"If you are lucky, you finally lead the fish into the shallows and onto the gravel. It lies there, a silver form with maybe a touch of red, as fine a trout as ever was created."

I think that passage captures the essence of steelhead fishing as well as anything ever written. But even in this case I believe some of the real reasons we fish for steelhead are left unsaid.

Trey Combs, in his fine book "Steelhead Fly Fishing," tells of catching a steelhead and asking it: "Where have you been?" . . . What collaboration of instincts, what fusion of natural forces sends a hundred smolts to sea and returns to me this single adult? Beyond her own good fortune, what special traits for survival has she brought back for the next generation? Her ocean world is alien to me, and she carries few messages hinting of her past. But these have grown into the small understandings that fill me with admiration for her spirit and wandering ways--characteristics at the core of my romance with this gamefish, and why I am jubilant on this dreary winter day." So, perhaps without realizing it, when Combs asked "where" he really came up with an answer that had more to do with "why" he fishes for steelhead.

But again it was Haig-Brown who first really addressed that question squarely, and his answer left us with one of the most familiar quotations in all of angling literature:

"I don't know why I fish or why other men fish, except that we like it and it makes us think and feel. But I do know that if it were not for the strong, quick life of rivers, for their sparkle in the sunshine, for the cold grayness of them under rain and the feel of them about my legs as I set my feet hard down on rocks or sand or gravel, I should fish less often. A river is never quite silent; it can never, of its very nature, be quite still; it is never quite the same from one day to the next. It has its own life and its own beauty, and the creatures it nourishes are alive and beautiful. Perhaps fishing is, for me, only an excuse to be near rivers. If so, I'm glad I thought of it."

That paragraph, I think, goes a long way toward explaining what motivates us as anglers, and we all share Haig-Brown's excuse: Fishing gives us a reason to be near rivers, and we love wild steelhead because they come to us in rivers.

But even as hypnotic and attractive as they are, I don't think rivers are the sole explanation for our passion. If it weren't for wild steelhead, I'm sure we would all spend less time around rivers. There's something more involved here, some other reason why these fish have such a powerful attraction for us. What is it that we find so compelling about them?

Most of the writers I have quoted remarked on the beauty and fighting qualities of wild steelhead, which are obvious things. But there are other things about steelhead, less obvious, that I think appeal to us on a deeper, perhaps even subconscious level. One of

them, I believe, is that we intuitively realize steelhead are the most honest and uncompromising creatures we will ever meet, and we can meet them only on their terms. No steelhead has ever been indicted, and I daresay none will ever be. If only we could say as much for the members of our own species.

Yet there's even more to it than that, some other quality about these fish that makes them almost irresistible to us. I have thought deeply about this, trying to figure out the nature of this powerful attraction, and I think for the answer we must ultimately look to ourselves, not to the fish. And if we do that, I think we will find that deep down, at some primal level of our being, we share a powerful emotional link with wild steelhead.

How could this be? How can we, as intelligent, warm-blooded, air-breathing beings, have some sort of deep-seated connection with an instinctive, cold-blooded creature that dwells in a world completely different from our own? The answer is that wild steelhead possess the very qualities we most deeply admire among ourselves: Perseverance, courage, and lonely survival against great odds.

Consider: A steelhead born of the river, who lives long enough to escape to the sea, who makes his way a thousand miles or more across the trackless ocean, stalked by predators every inch of the way, who survives to return and find the river of his birth, and who then fights his way upstream against the relentless weight of water that opposes every millimeter of his progress, and who finally spawns and fulfills the purpose of his life--such a creature is a hero, an inspiration, a model for us all. Small wonder that we should admire it so, or seek, even subconsciously, to emulate its virtues. Small wonder that we should marvel at its achievements, especially during a time in our history when wild steelhead are threatened over so much of their native range.

So that, I think, is what really brings us together here tonight: Our common devotion to a fish whose virtues we not only admire but wish we shared. And that devotion, I believe, is what drives our efforts to preserve wild steelhead, the noble purpose to which this organization has dedicated itself.

I need not tell you that the task of preservation will be difficult, because we who love wild steelhead represent the very smallest minority of society. We face the hostility of all who would destroy steelhead habitat for personal gain, plus the vast apathy and indifference of the great majority of our fellow citizens, people who have never known the excitement or experienced the emotional voltage of a connection with wild steelhead.

Yet that's no cause for discouragement; instead, we should feel grateful, for we are among the few who have been fortunate enough to catch a wild steelhead, to experience one of life's greatest thrills, one that most people will never know. It would be well to remember that on those occasions when it seems as if all the world is indifferent or opposed to us.

And there will be such occasions. The road ahead will offer defeats as well as victories, and defeat often brings despair. But this organization cannot afford the luxury of despair, because there is only one way the battle to preserve wild steelhead will ever end--and that is if you surrender.

So let the steelhead be your example. When things get tough, when the situation seems hopeless, remember the qualities we most admire about wild steelhead: Perseverance, courage, and lonely survival against great odds. Without such an inspiration, you cannot succeed; with it, you cannot fail.