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Steelhead & Salmon Warfare

Using this information, Anglers can Specifically Target Species of Fish even in the presence of multiple species that frequent the same water at the same time.

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There is a battle that takes place beneath the river surface that only fish scientists (Ichthyologists) have known for years. There is a genetic warfare between salmon and steelhead. The winner is decided by the species that successfully leaves the most fertilized eggs that hatch. It is the clash between salmon and steelhead that make it possible to legally extend the fishing season of many areas that are largely ignored by fishermen. Anglers that fish systems where the battling fish are have an opportunity to specifically target each species; but to do that fishermen need to be aware of how salmon and steelhead attack each other, or rather, their offspring. There are two fronts of attack that salmon use during the silent war: First, they overwhelm steelhead by inundating the redds with so many eggs that they couldn't possibly all be destroyed; second, they will destroy any steelhead eggs they are fortunate enough to come by. In some cases redds that are formed by steelhead are dug up by salmon that make redds on top of the steelhead sites sending loose steelhead eggs downstream to be picked up by trout and bottom feeding fish.



The size and color of the corkies match the size and color of the salmon eggs found in this hen.

I go to the rivers every year and watch as hordes of fishermen throw out giant gobs of salmon eggs (not steelhead) to catch salmon. If anglers are going to drift eggs they are much more likely to hit into fish using salmon eggs on steelhead, not the other way around. Salmon egg users are likely to debate the issue, but I have seen salmon caught on salmon eggs by those fishermen that floss (snagging); that is not to say that they purposefully snag fish, rather, just an honest observation.

Steelhead eat salmon eggs therefore it makes sense to use salmon eggs. Remember, what works for one species does not work for the other; which is why these fish can so easily be targeted while they inhabit the same areas. It is about propagation and idea of cannibalism doesn't work on these fish during spawning cycles. One of the fronts for steelhead include punching females in the underbelly to force out eggs when the pickings are slim. "Can you believe it?" They will target those females that are mature, with loose skeins, and hit them in the sides and underbelly forcing out eggs. This is a critical piece of information for the intrepid drift-fisherman. Match the size of corkie to the species of fish and you'll hit into steelhead all day long. A second front of

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steelhead is to wait below the redd of mating salmon and catch the eggs as they are being laid. Because the spawning salmon are occupied they are largely unaware of the marauders. The third front is on the basis of waiting further downstream for loose eggs that make their way to the end of a pool where the tail-out begins to form; this is where drift-fishermen should concentrate their efforts to catch steelhead.

There is a scent that is used for salmon that steelhead will not care about. W-D 40 is environmentally safe since it breaks down in the water and then evaporates; this is called “distillation”, the neutral odor of an artificial offering is ignored by steelhead and picked up by salmon when using corkies, spinners, and cheaters. It’s important to note that migrating salmon are oxygen deprived and in this deprivation they open and close their mouths to wash water over the gills more so than steelhead, it is this struggle of breathing that initially aggravates them while objects in their direct path aggravate them further. It is the triggered involuntary response that garners the strikes from salmon to be harder than that of steelhead. The moment they strike they will either hold where they’re at or immediately tear downriver in the main current or head for shore.

The basic premise for steelheading is the use of salmon milt as part of the corkie setup. Fishermen are assured that any strikes felt will come from steelhead; and usually the takes are “mouthed”, so be ready to set the hook. Drifting anglers that prefer to use eggs for steelhead should either use eggs that are loose with smaller profiles on larger hooks, or single eggs on smaller hooks. Because the mouth of a steelhead is much softer than that of salmon using smaller hooks will not risk throwing the hook any more than a larger one. Make sure to stroke the leader with egg scent but don’t clean it off from your hands; transfer scents will either pressure fish out or bring them in; your body odor will push them out.

It is entirely reasonable to expect that the adventurous drift-fisherman will never see a steelhead, but any system that produces these two species will have them. You’re more likely to see hordes of salmon without ever seeing a steelhead. Take care not to be seen and approach the water carefully from the bank. Boaters should make as little noise as possible when boon-dogging the drift; make sure to have carpet on the deck. Steelhead will be on the prowl but will go off the bite the first time they see or hear anything they perceive to be a predator.



This steelhead was taken amongst many hundreds of Chinook. It was patrolling the riverbed looking for eggs to steal from females that had not yet spawned. The corkie was orange and the scent was salmon milt. The strike of this fish was so subtle that the only indication of a hit was my mainline hesitating during the drift.

Because of the attack tactics that both species use, anglers will always be able to specifically target both; and in doing so, will extend fishing seasons when others are likely to hang up their

rods and call it a year.

Further Reading:

Collin, Shaun P., and Marshall, N. Justin. *Sensory Processing in an Aquatic Environment: Retinal Sampling and the Visual Field in Fishes*. New York: Springer-Verlag, 2003.

Levinton, Jeffery. S. *Marine Biology: Tides, Estuaries, Bioluminescence, Physiological and Behavioral Response*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

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