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# Steelheader

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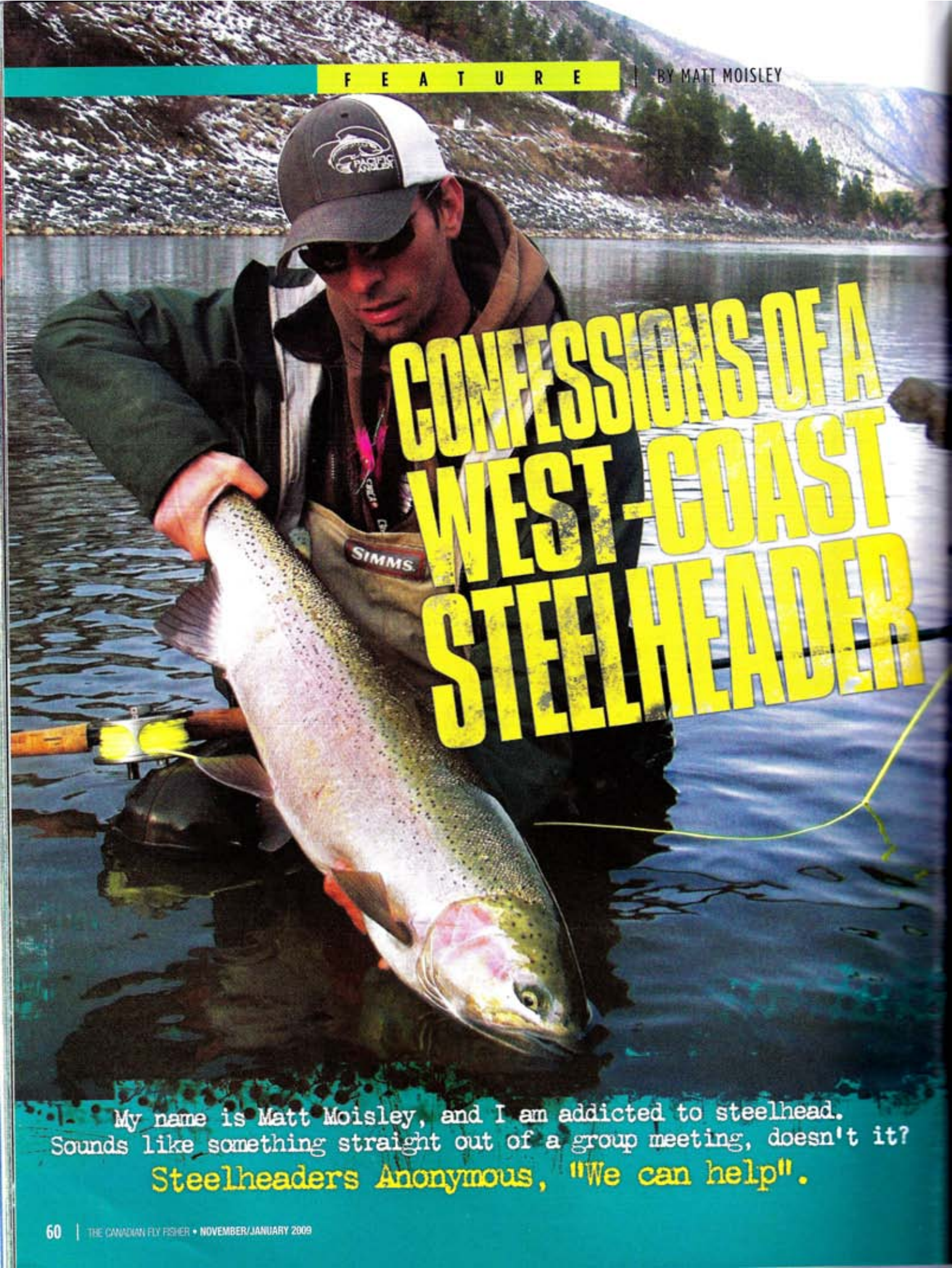
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F L Y F I S H L I K E A P R O

A man wearing a green jacket, a grey and white baseball cap, and sunglasses is holding a large steelhead trout. He is standing in a river with a rocky, snow-dusted bank in the background. The fish is held vertically, showing its silver scales and pinkish-red belly. The man's jacket has a "SIMMS" logo on the pocket. The title "CONFESSIONS OF A WEST-COAST STEELHEADER" is overlaid in large, bold, yellow, distressed font on the right side of the image.

# CONFESSIONS OF A WEST-COAST STEELHEADER

My name is Matt Moisley, and I am addicted to steelhead. Sounds like something straight out of a group meeting, doesn't it? **Steelheaders Anonymous, "We can help".**

## Confessions of a West-Coast Steelheader

The truth is, chasing wild steelhead has brought me so many highs and lows throughout the years, that I often wonder how long I have until my friends and family decide to call an intervention.

For the past decade, lack of money, sleep, nutrition and companionship has officially summed me up as an authentic fishing bum, but I'd be lying if I said I wanted it any other way.

It was the Fall of 2000 when I received an excited phone call from my good friend and long-time fishing buddy, Scotty Young. Always a character, Scotty was notorious for his wild stories and even wilder fishing excursions. Fifteen years my senior, he had a respectable amount of notches in his angling belt and had become one of my best friends.

"Wanna make a trip?" he asked.

I was interested, "Where?"

"Up North for some monster steel."

He was referring to the famous, world-class Bulkley River and its seasonal migration of west-coast steelhead. He had known my answer before he had even asked the question.

Two weeks later, we loaded up Scotty's new truck, put on the camper, and hitched on the boat trailer. Fuelled up solely on gas and coffee, we prepared to make the twelve hour drive from Vancouver to Houston, B.C. and, by noon the next day, we had arrived.

Nothing could have prepared me for the scenery. The river was breathtaking, and

steadily flowing runs stretched as far as we could see. Snow-covered peaks towered high in the background, while autumn colors danced through the air on leaves falling to settle gracefully on the water.

We drove to a beautiful stretch of river appropriately named "Field and Stream". It meandered smoothly down the valley through wild meadows, providing shelter for waiting steelhead, teasing us with every riffle. I couldn't wait to wet a line.

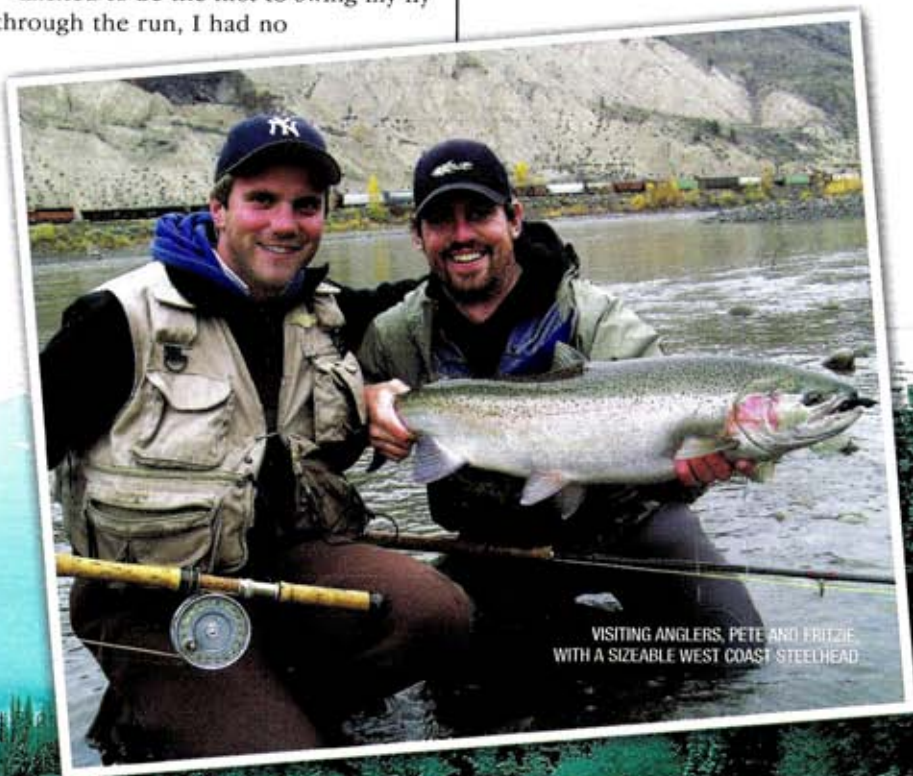
"You first," Scotty offered.

Excited to be the first to swing my fly through the run, I had no

objections and anxiously rigged up my Spey rod.

My first cast swung through the water perfectly and I waited until it swung in close to shore before stripping it back in and recasting—further out this time. As the fly swung tantalizingly through the water, my confidence soared.

The line tugged softly, and then, like a minnow pecking at my fly, two more tugs followed. I remembered Scotty's words. "Don't pull back on the rod when you feel a bite."



VISITING ANGLERS, PETE AND FRITZIE,  
WITH A SIZEABLE WEST COAST STEELHEAD



Let the fish take the fly hard before setting the hook". Following his advice, I waited patiently while my fly was chased. Suddenly, the line was ripped out of my fingers.

Fish on!

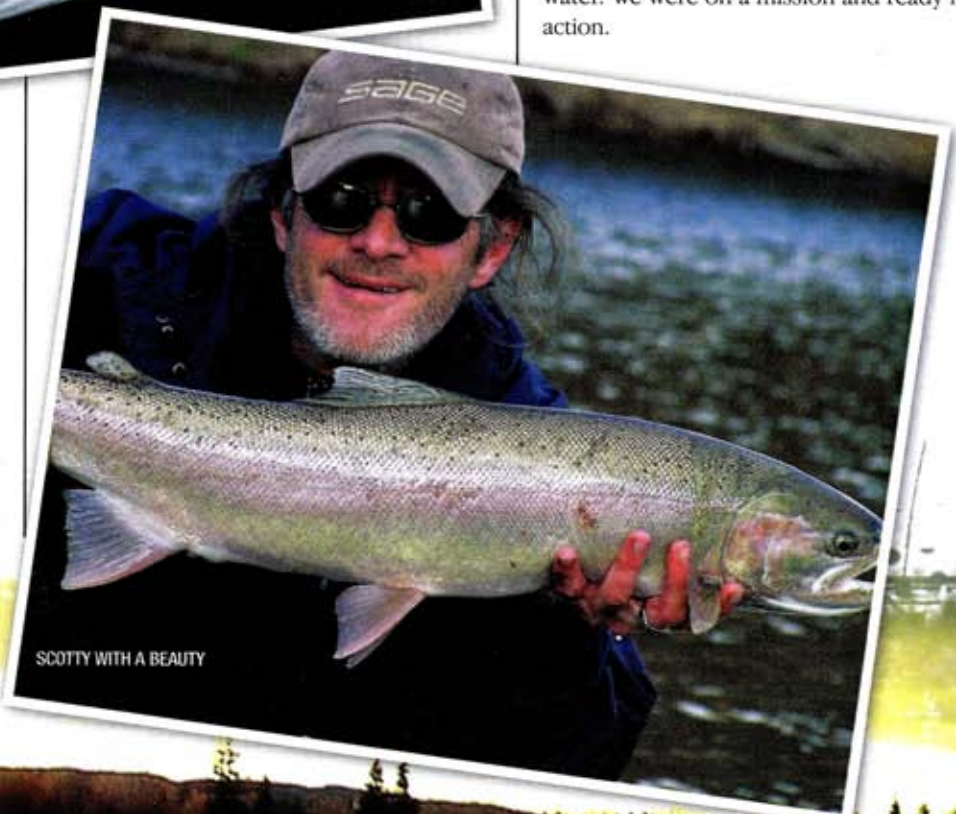
I set the hook and raised my rod to prepare for battle with one of the most magnificent manifestations of heart-stopping, tail-walking chrome I had ever seen.

Line peeled out, and the fish performed cartwheels and back flips. Finally, the adrenaline in each of us was exhausted, and a

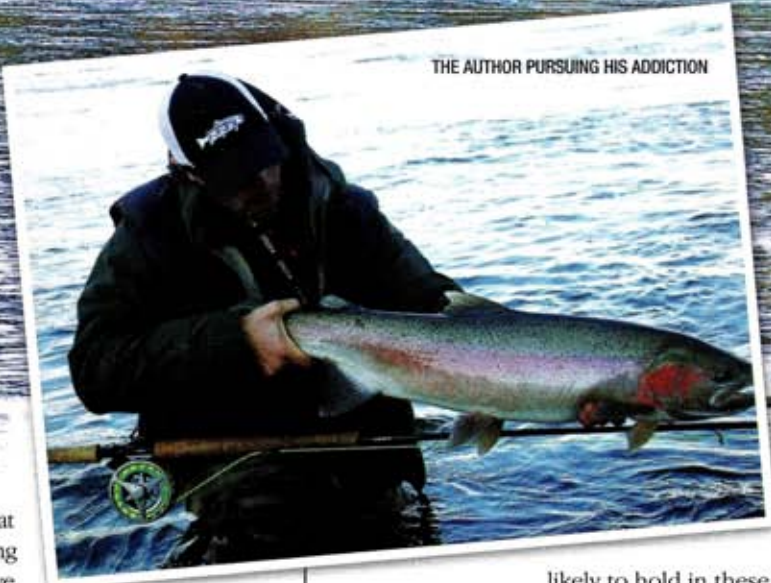
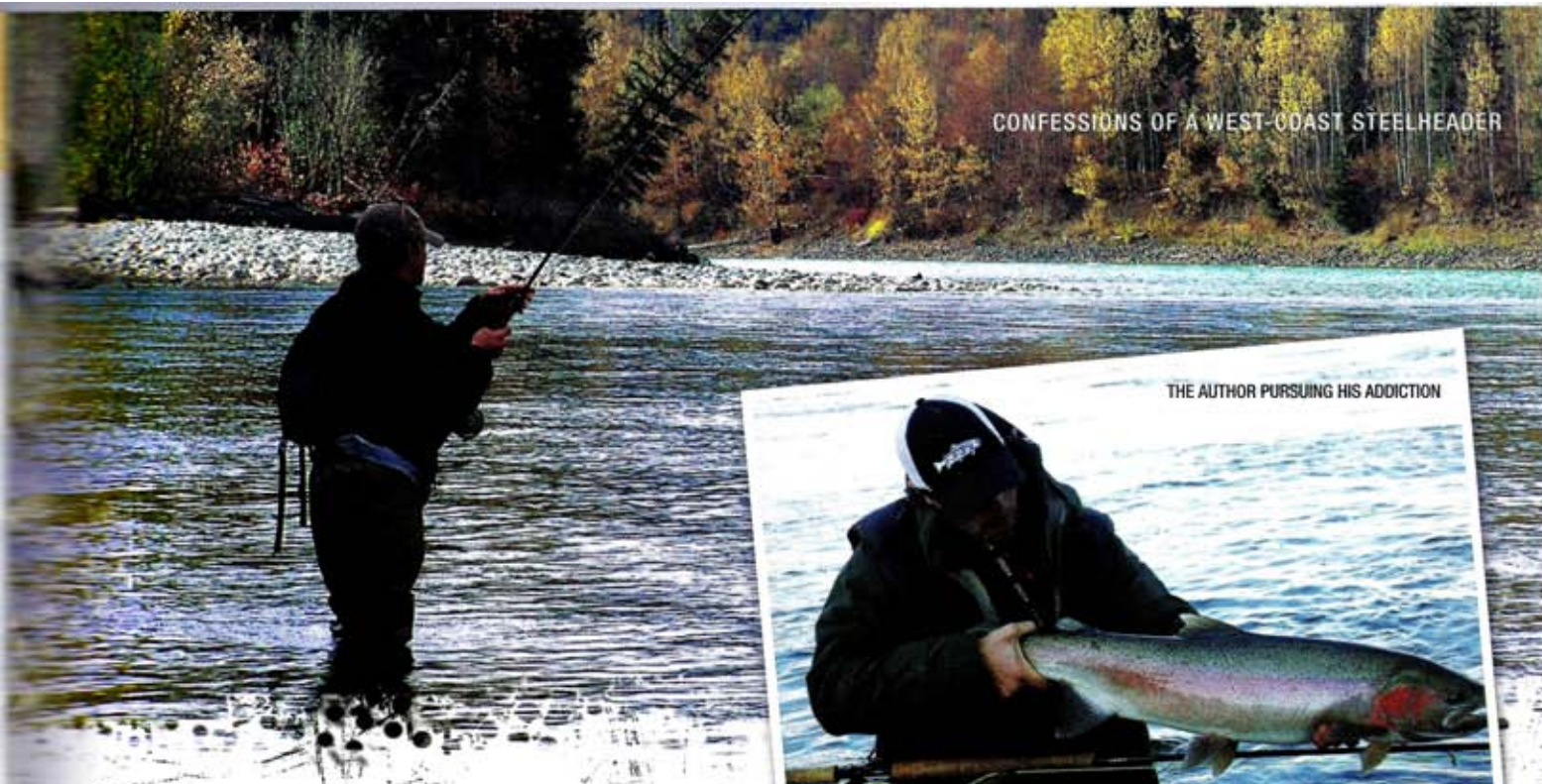
beautiful silver doe lay in the water at my feet, ready to be released back into the wild. She had traveled hundreds of kilometres to reach this place, and I didn't want to delay her any longer than I had to.

With the fish back on its way, I took a deep breath, embracing the moment that I immediately knew would change me forever.

For the next five weeks, armed with a fourteen foot inflatable jet boat, we became two of the biggest steelhead menaces in the Bulkley Valley. The days usually started out early, well before sunrise while the river still slept and the fog began to lift. After a bowl of oatmeal and a cup of coffee we set out dodging logging trucks on a mega dirt highway that paralleled most of the Maurice river. Upon reaching our launch location we guided the boat down the ramp into the water. We were on a mission and ready for action.



SCOTTY WITH A BEAUTY



THE AUTHOR PURSUING HIS ADDICTION

Eight years later I still remember that five week adventure as if it were yesterday.

All fly fishers develop personal mental highlight reels of their favourite moments. These are the moments that begin to define us as anglers and become the cornerstones of our life-long angling journeys. For, without a doubt, that was what this trip was for me.

Today, I am just as addicted to chasing wild steelhead as on the day I first began. Despite being fortunate enough to have fished for monstrous steelhead on some of the most well regarded rivers in the world, I still feel as though I have so much to learn. Each season, my time on the water allows me to hone in on new fishing patterns, methods and runs,

reminding me that I am still travelling the learning curve.

One of the most important things that I have learned over the years is how to read water.

Steelhead are creatures of habit and can typically be found in water that flows at a medium pace (often referred to as "walking pace".)

This speed ensures that the fish doesn't have to exert any more energy than it has to and can rest comfortably in the current without exhausting itself.

It is crucial that the current flows in a steady, consistent direction. Large, "boiling" tanks should be avoided, as steelhead are not as

likely to hold in these waters. More importantly, however, the angler's fly is unable to swing and present itself effectively.

Depth is also an important factor. Though fish may occasionally be found in shallow riffles, it is far more likely to find them in depths from three to six feet.

They tend to prefer structure and opt to stay away from sand bottoms and barren runs. Examples of structural habitat include rocky bottoms, ledge rock and boulders.

As important as water speed is when determining where a steelhead may be hiding, it is

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## Confessions of a West-Coast Steelheader

equally as important that angler set a speed for themselves when working through a run.

As a general rule of thumb, every cast the angler makes should be accompanied by two steps down river. This rule however, is open to exceptions, depending on how "fishy" the run looks and feels.

When swinging a fly through a single run, there will be areas that flow smoother than others. It is in this part of the run where the fly will swim through the water at just the right speed, the right depth, and at the right angle. The correct procedure is to slow down, making a single shuffle rather than two full steps. In essence, enabling a run to be worked slowly when angling instincts scream that a fish is close by. Always cast and fish with confidence in such places

Last but not least, there is one particular unspoken rule of etiquette that all anglers, neophytes or veterans, are expected to abide by. A typical run on a West-Coast river consists of a head, a middle and a tail. Steelhead can often be found holding in any of these



A SELECTION OF WEST COAST SPEY FLIES

spots, so it's no surprise that most anglers make their first cast at the head and work their way downstream. By fishing the run this way, the angler is able to cover the most amount of water and have a fair chance of hooking into a fish, regardless of where it might be holding. Therefore, other anglers wishing to work the same run, should either wait their turn or come back at a later time. Butting in to fish downstream

of someone who has already devoted time and patience is considered disrespectful and is frowned on, as it's frustrating to have someone cut in below you and hook into that fish you'd been working so hard to connect with.

When I reflect on my journey as a steelheader, I

immediately recognize that my most fulfilling moments didn't come merely as a result of the fish themselves, but through the truly incredible people I have met along the way. To this day, some of my closest friends were first encountered as unknown fly fishers on steelhead rivers across the province. It seems that the quest for wild steel is more than an angling challenge. It is a mentality, a life-style, and a personal characteristic which I claim proudly. ✧

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