



Pete Percival of Abingdon works the famous Archers' Hole during the spring steelhead run.



Pete Percival tries to stop the run of a steelie peeling out line as it heads downstream toward Lake Ontario.



Oak and Steel

A Hard Combination to Beat

Story and photos
by
Dan Genest

The Oak Orchard River near Albion, New York, gained its fame and its infamy from the fall runs of salmon and browns. From mid-October to mid-November, king salmon that get to over 30 pounds and browns that can reach 25 pounds lure thousands of anglers. Back when New York allowed legal snagging, the fishery was butchery.

Goons with surf rods cast 6-ounce chunks of lead studded with ought-6 treble hooks and ripped the lethal weapons through pods of fish and other anglers' gear. It didn't matter if the fish were hooked in the tail, the side or the mouth—it was going home for dinner.

Today, the snaggers are illegal, but the fall season is still a zoo.

Having heard such horror stories, I was a little hesitant to accept my first offer to fish the Oak for steelhead in the spring. But the lure of a 10-pound steelhead on a fly rod was too much for a Virginia brook trout fisherman to ignore. Now it is an annual pilgrimage. The fishing is fantastic, and the crowds are gone. While there may be 400 or more anglers a day during the height of the fall salmon run, a crowd in the spring is a dozen anglers.

Purist, West Coast steelhead fly fishers sneer at the thought of catching the

Great Lakes' version of the ocean-run rainbow. They argue that the fish are all stocked, they live in the polluted waters of Lake Ontario and that you fish for them with egg patterns dragged to the bottom by several 3/0 split shot. That is all true, but then the West Coast guys consider it a good day if they have a single hookup. An average day on Oak Orchard, when the steelies are at the height of their run (usually the first two weeks of April), is two fish a day. A good day would be six fish, and 10- and 12-fish days are fairly common. My first full day on the Oak, I had 25 hookups and landed six steelhead to 15 pounds.



John Aiken landed his first steelhead, a beautiful 16-pound male, despite taking a spill in the river.



When they are fresh from Lake Ontario, steelhead are almost silver. After they have been in the river for a few days, they get darker and more colorful.

A nice looking steelie (below)



Those western fish may have a better pedigree, but I am betting the joy and the thrill of hooking into a tributary leviathan is just as great for an eastern angler as it is for a western one. Just ask my friend John Aiken. John hails from Virginia Beach via England. Middle-aged, he has two bad knees from an on-the-job accident, and his fly fishing is limited to places where the access and the wading

are easy. Oak Orchard fits that description. On a frigid spring day, John was working what is known as the Archers' Hole. Our other companion, Pete Percival, already had landed three fish and lost at least that many more. All John had to his credit were a couple of large suckers.

Still, he continued flipping an egg pattern upstream every 30 seconds and then high-sticking it through the drift. Pete

and I had run downstream to chase a 12-pounder that had taken Pete to his backing; we had just netted the fish when we heard John calling out. Looking up, we saw him staggering downstream on his gimpy knees. His 9-foot fly rod was flailing the air. Sometimes it was straight up; other times it was at his side, and more than once it was under the water. Pete and I assumed he was hurt and using it for balance as he hurried to meet us.

And then that distinctive British voice rose above the river noise: "I've got one, Dan! I've got one!" Together Pete and I started yelling instructions: "Get your rod up in the air! Keep tension on it! Lead him away from that blow down. And don't trip!"

That last warning came about a second too late. For two minutes, John sat in eight-inch-deep water fighting the fish from a sitting position. By this point, the gods must have been laughing as hard as the three of us and decided to pay for the show with a slight miracle. John regained his feet and despite having done everything wrong landed a 16-pound buck, its gill plates as red as a strawberry and its kipe the size of a thumb.

As we snapped photos, John said, "I don't care if I don't land another fish. This has made my trip. I will be back next year."

A few Oak Orchard steelheads will winter in the river. But the real run starts when high waters in March lure fresh chromers from Lake Ontario upstream. Spawning usually hits its peak when the water temperature reaches 43 to 48 degrees Fahrenheit. That brings the hens up into the shallow gravel where they make their redds. The males are close behind, jousting for rights to the fair maidens. Waters colder than 40 degrees will send the fish to the bottom of deep pools, and waters in the 50-degree range will burn out the run as fish lay their eggs and exit the river in a matter of days.

When the fish are on the redds, it

is sight fishing. Guide Jay Peck, who works out of Coleman's Fly Shop in Spencerport, locates the males and picks them off using big, ugly streamers such as egg-sucking leeches, teeny rainbows and muddler minnows. "As long as the female is there, other males will often move in to fill the spot vacated by the fish you just took."

The trick is to swing the fly down and across so that it passes right in front of the bucks. The males are extremely aggressive at this point in the spawning process and will often hit the streamer viciously.

Only after he has caught and released all the males will Peck target the females.

I can almost hear the screams of anger from thousands of fly fishermen: "Why the hell would anybody fish for steelhead on the redds? You will ruin the fishery. Any guide who advocates that should be banned for life."

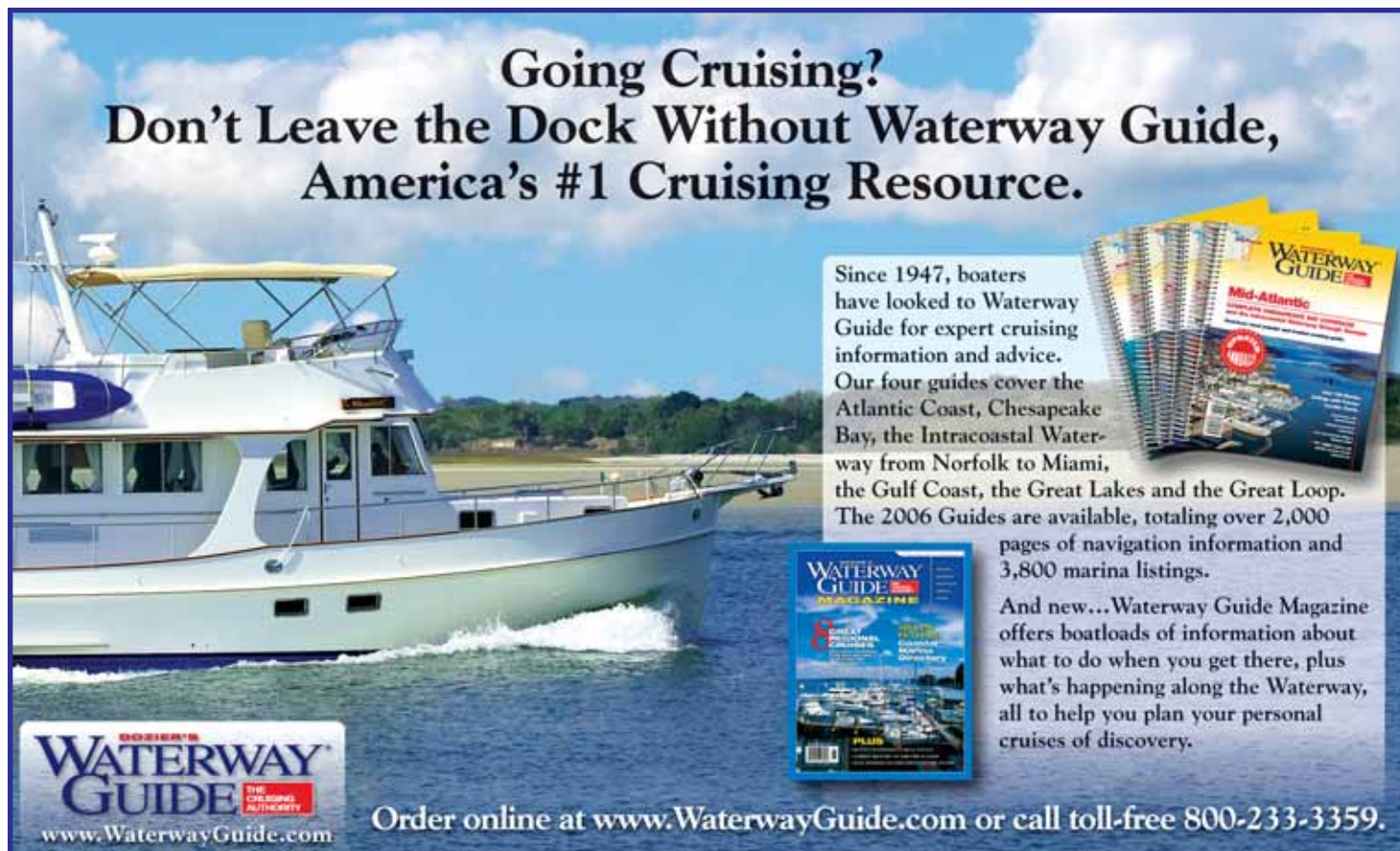
Peck is as ethical a fly fisherman as you will ever see. He fishes the redds because the sad truth is that while the steelhead will successfully spawn, the fry will never live to reach Lake Ontario. Steelhead fry must spend their first year in the protection of the river. Unfortunately, Oak Orchard waters warm to lethal temperatures for the fry during their first summer. "On some of the other Lake Ontario tribs, like the Salmon River, we are seeing some natural reproduction, but it has not occurred here on Oak Orchard. This fishery depends on the stocking of fingerling steelhead to exist," Peck said.

Because there is no reproduction, the fishery would improve if more people would practice catch and release. Unlike salmon, which die after they spawn, steelhead can live to make several runs. According to Peck, a 16-pound steelhead is probably on its fifth spawning trek. "We keep trying to educate anglers," he said. "But year after year, I am guessing that 80

percent of the fish that are caught here are taken home for mounting or supper."

The Oak Orchard River is located midway between Buffalo and Rochester near the small town of Albion. It is about a 10-hour drive from Richmond. Air service to Rochester from Richmond is about a three- to four-hour flight. For more information on fishing for steelhead, contact Jay Peck or Carl Coleman of Coleman's Fly Shop at 585-352-4775.

Dan Genest is an award-winning outdoor writer from Midlothian, Virginia. His articles have appeared in *Fly Fish America*, *Virginia Wildlife*, *Southern Anglers Journal* and the *Richmond Times Dispatch*. A former newspaper reporter and editor, he currently works in public relations in Richmond.



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