

Featured Travel Domestic

## Skeena Spring

Dana Sturn

December 14, 2020

### Coffee

Yeah, that's what I need. Exactly what I need. There's a Thermos half full of it—aromatic and hot and laced with Bailey's—tucked into my daypack at the top of the run. I can feel a slight chill on my neck and shoulders and the tops of my arms. My feet are a little cold, and I'm regretting not pulling on that extra pair of socks this morning. Coffee will fix this. Either that or a few pulls from the flask in my pocket. I opt for the flask and tuck my Spey rod into my armpit for a moment.

I'm standing knee deep in the drink, halfway down a big run on the main-stem Skeena River west of Terrace, British Columbia. As I tilt my head back and enjoy the bourbon's momentary burn, light slips beneath my sunglasses and I realize just how bright it is. All around me are mountains, impossibly white and sparkling in the midday sun, like something a Hollywood CGI team would produce, only better because it's real. Up there, winter lingers, and beckons to the happy hell-skiers who buzz by above me every few hours, moving between lodges and power runs on these high peaks. But down here the tree-lined banks are showing signs of spring. And crashing through some thick brush to get around a logjam releases the scents of renewal. The day warms, and all around things seem to be getting ever better, moment-to-moment, filling with promise.

This may all sound idyllic, until I tell you that my bladder is filling. It's not quite at pee-pee dance volume yet, but we're close. And that bourbon? Well, there are few moments in life when good bourbon is ever a mistake, but this might be one of them. I'm shifting my weight back and forth now, just a little, and clenching my jaw every few moments, distraction from my whining bladder. I could reel up. Relief is only 40 steps away. I could even drop my rod on the bank, and leave my line out and swinging. I've risked this before. But I'm in the sweet spot now. I know this because yesterday a fellow stepping down the run ahead of me hooked a good one right here. I begin to shift my weight a little more rhythmically.

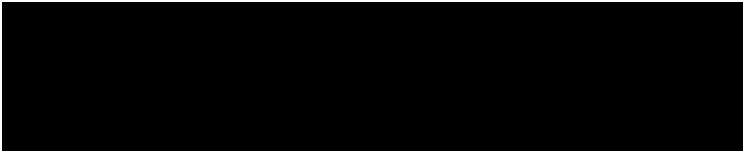
I look at the beach; I look down my spey rod and follow the line to where it disappears into the Skeena's deep green. Then something far out in the run tightens the line I have pinched between the bottom of the rod handle and my index finger. For a split second it releases, then tightens again, and all sensations and thoughts are silenced save one...

[Continue \(Steelhead\)](#) ➤



When fishing Skeena steel, make sure you've got at least 200 yards of backing on your reels. This is big water and the fish make long runs, often beginning in the shallows and ending somewhere far downstream. Getting spooled, any guide or fellow angler might tell you, isn't cool.





The Skeena offers up big steelhead in spring and fall. This spring fish is an excellent example of what the river might produce. Make sure your gear is up to the task, and that your loops are sound and your knots wound tight.

Steelhead

There it is. Again. Again. The take of a Skeena spring steelhead, each tug like the pluck of virtuoso fingertips on my heartstrings, each building on the other until that final Pete Townshend “windmill” moment when the rod is truly bent and the reel growls and there’s no doubt about who’s on the other end.

Continue (Mornings) >

Mornings

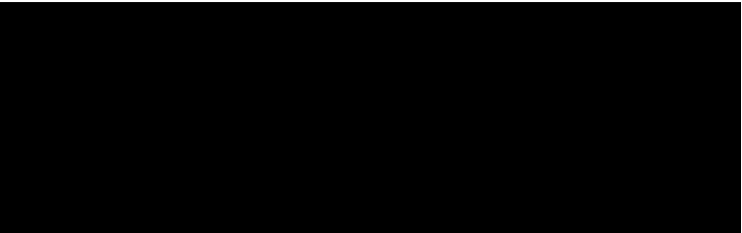
Waking up at a spring steelhead lodge in northern British Columbia is like having a whole week of Christmas mornings. My alarm goes off earlier than I wake for work, but here there’s no problem swinging out of bed. Someone’s already put the coffee on and I shuffle down the hall to grab a cup.

This week I’m “in camp” with an orthopedic surgeon, a judge, a heavy equipment marketing executive, and two successful entrepreneurs. At the end of several long flights we all had wardrobes to match our sense (or someone else’s) of how we should appear. But here in camp we’re all dressed like five-year-olds who’ve been asked to “go put something nice on”—mismatched socks, fleece pants, tee-shirts or fraying-collared fishing shirts, old worn hoodies or the fading colors of zippered mid-layers. Ball caps or wild, unkempt hair complete the ensemble. Over the week most of these comfortable camp clothes will be covered in bits of tying thread and dubbing, a sure sign of good fishing.

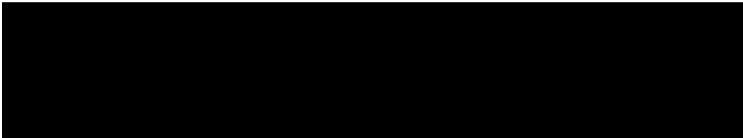
All of us have had fishless days this week; most of us have had multiple hookups. Within the hour we’ll have wolfed down a big Canadian power breakfast of pancakes, sausage, bacon and eggs. Then we will layer up and meet out front, breath condensing above our heads as we discuss our morning’s fly selection while the guides hook up the jetboats. Thirty minutes later we’ll be running wide open down the Skeena, faces rosy from the cold, holding the brims of our hats so we don’t lose them. Eventually one boat will pull ahead, round a bend, and be lost to our sight. We’ll see them again later at the launch. For now the river is ours alone, and by the time our guide eases back on the throttle, the still sleepy among us are wide eyed and ready to cast.

The Skeena is known for big runs, and this is one of them. An easily waded cobble bottom, and clear water deepening to green make it the kind of water I want to spend the entire day in. It helps that this spot regularly puts out fish. I’ve taken them here before. Our guide points out the sweet spots, and my partner for the day and I divide the water between us. We elect to fish relatively close together, in case one of us hooks up. We’ve been fishing together for years, and both know that on steelhead water it’s nearly as fun to watch a good friend wrestle with one as wrestle with one of your own. That one of us has a flask of bourbon and the other scotch makes fishing close by even more appealing.

Continue (The Season) >



It’s difficult to keep your eyes on the water and off the northern British Columbia scenery. Once a fish is hooked, however, we know where your attention will be.





On any given cast, the Skeena and other area waters could produce a fish reaching 20 pounds or more. This is a prime season, and a perfect place to make your personal best steelhead a reality.

Flies

Whenever I'm bound for a new steelhead destination I always ask ahead about the flies I should bring. It's a silly question. Because when you look around you'll notice that most steelhead boxes are full of lots of basically one thing. Now that one thing is as varied as the tiers who fish them, but it still comes down to the one fly that you really believe in. Because if steelheading is about anything, it's about faith.

I have faith in the Raging Prawn. It's a rather fiddly and time consuming variation of the General Practitioner tied by my friend Tyler Kushnir. In various sizes, tied on tubes from as long as the span between my thumb and pinky to half the length of my first knuckle, it's all I need on spring steelhead water. It might be all you'll need, too.

Still, it's always a good idea to listen to your guide, and fish what they recommend. If they don't like any of your flies, take the fly they offer, and fish it with confidence. Remember, their livelihoods depend on you catching steelhead. They won't steer you wrong.

Continue (Tackle and Tactics)

The Season

I've spent six spring seasons on the Skeena. Every one has been different, and as memorable as the last. Beginning in March, waters cold enough to form sheet ice begin to roll off their chill, and the slowly warming waters signal the beginning of the springtime run. Fresh, bright steelhead enter the system, and sleepy locals begin to prow the banks and test the waters, imagining that first hookup. Sometime in the middle of the month someone gets one and the season begins. It lasts through April, some years early May.

When you come to the Skeena in spring, don't expect the hoards of anglers and jetboats screaming up and down every run that often characterizes fall fishing there. While you won't be completely alone, don't be surprised if some days you don't see anyone else, and expect to have beautiful runs to yourself much of the time. There's so much water to fish that it can be fairly easy to find a place of your own, especially when weather and water conditions are favorable.

Ah . . . weather and water conditions. Always the worry when winter turns to spring. Steelheading any time of the year is a mature angler's game—that's part of the appeal. While it's impossible to hit it right all of the time, fishing with a knowledgeable local outfit, that knows the systems and what's likely to be fishing well and where, gives you the best chance at a great week. In six seasons I've only had a few days when we couldn't fish. No worries: There's nothing wrong with spending a warm and sleepy day in the lodge, flipping through old issues of *Gray's Sporting Journal* and maybe tying up tomorrow's brace of Secret Killers.

Continue (Flies)



Cold weather be damned. Weather and water conditions vary greatly during spring. One morning might dawn bright and sunny only to turn gray and snowy by afternoon. Bring a variety of layers and pack them with you during a long day on the water. That way, you can keep your fly in the water and your concentration keen, giving you the best chance to hook a beast like this.

Tackle and Tactics

Spring is colder water steelhead fishing, so I'm not fishing the same gear or looking for fish in the same places I might in September. My spring default has always been a 15-foot long 9 or 10 weight rod cast over deeper runs with some structure. Thoreau once told us "it is a great art to saunter" and that's the



You'll want a spray rod when fishing the Skeena. Long casts aren't always required, but it's nice to have that option when you want to reach a sweet spot in the middle of a run. Do just that and you might end up holding a chrome-bright Skeena steelhead like this one.

place of water I took out in spring.

But times change on steelhead waters. As anglers and guides learn more about Skeena spring steelhead, they are reconsidering their tools. Lighter 13-foot 7 and 8-weights are replacing the heavier rods, balanced by lightweight reels that hold 150 yards of backing and easy casting shooting heads and Skagit-style systems.

Spring steelheaders are rethinking their choice of water as well. Jeroen Wohe runs Skeena River Lodge in Terrace and has guided anglers to Skeena chrome for over a decade. It's rare to find his clients in deep water.

"Most of the time we will be fishing in two feet of water so there's no need to cast heavy tips," he said. "We use full floating lines or light tips—intermediate, T-3 and T-6."

This shallow water, light-line approach might come as a shock to steelheaders used to fishing deep and heavy for the big fish. If your heavy sink-tips—your T-14 and T-18—give you courage, by all means bring them. But don't be surprised to find them spending most of the trip in the front pocket of your waders.

There are two schools of thought when it comes to hooking springtime fish. The first is basically the same as trout fishing: feel the fish, then hit it. Hard. So any sort of tug or pluck on the line results in a Bassmaster-style hook-set. Make sure your feet are well planted.

The second is the simple. Wait. Wait for the line to tighten up and your rod to bend. After that you can basically do whatever the hell you want because you got 'em.

Wohe's approach combines the best of both. "In the spring the fish can be very aggressive, but they like to pluck the fly," he said. "When this happens don't move your fly—let them eat it. You won't get a second chance like you might in the summer or fall. You only get one chance, so you wait."

And then? Well, in Skeena country, the possibility that your line might be connected to the biggest steelhead of your life requires just a little bit more. "Big buck steelhead have money jaws," Wohe reminds me, "so lifting alone is not enough in most cases."

Continue (When the line gets tight, set the hook!) >

When the line gets tight, set the hook!

Back on the Skeena I set the hook hard. The steelhead is in 18 inches of water and reacts as shallow water steelhead always do, with a sudden eruption and a reel-screaming run towards the safety of mid-river. I've forgotten about the coffee and my sloshing bladder for the moment, because a just-hooked steelhead demands more attention than a screaming toddler. I take a few steps to find solid footing and hear a splash below me. I look down and notice my flask drifting slowly away as my reel quickly unwinds. I drop to one knee and grab it, and as I straighten, yep, there's the bladder again.

By this time my partner has jogged down from the top of the run and approaches, camera in hand. He hasn't hooked a fish in two days, and I've been doing well. The steelhead has settled now in the deeper water. I can tell it's a good one. There's a lot of line out. I consider my options.

"Remember that time on the Dean when you were borderline hypothermic and you asked me to take over for you?" I ask.

"I do. Lucky you were there. That was a big fish."

"Time to return the favor, brother," I say, and hand him the rod. For a moment he looks puzzled, and as I turn away and head towards the beach I just hope he understands.



TRAVEL



TIMING



THE RIVERS



TACKLE



GEAR





## Images by

Jeroen Wohe | Skeena River Lodge

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### Dana Sturn

Dana Sturn is a steelhead devotee and the founder of Spey Pages. He lives in Vancouver, British Columbia, and can be found each year (minus 2020 of course) swinging up chinook and steel on the Dean River, among other places. Follow him at @danawsturn

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