Streamer fishing for trout
The attraction for me

• I spend most of my time streamer fishing
• I love big fish
• I like to catch lots of them
• I like to cast
• I like to stay active when fishing
• The tug is the drug

The elusive 10lb+ wild, native trout. Taken on a streamer.
My path to streamers

• Dry fly fishing
• Dry / dropper
• Indicator fishing
• Bobber fishing
• Chironomid lake fishing
• Czech / euro / contact nymphing
• Obsessive steelhead fishing
• Applying steelhead techniques to trout

These are bobbers, not strike indicators.
What’s a streamer?

• According to Orvis...

“Streamers are bigger flies that you fish on an active retrieve, and these flies imitate baitfish, crayfish, leeches, and large aquatic insects. Streamers are the fly-fishing equivalent of conventional lures. Because the fly is usually moving, strikes can be explosive.”
OK, but...

• There are plenty of small streamers
  • Standard nymphs can be fished as streamers
• The strikes can be both explosive and quite subtle
• We all know that big trout can be caught with small flies
  • But they would prefer big meals
• As far as I am concerned, almost anything can be a streamer, it’s all about the retrieve

I have caught 26” trout very slowly stripping back size 20 mayfly nymphs in crystal clear, 47-degree water, that was only 4 feet deep. Those takes were extremely subtle and required careful strip-sets.
Flies

- I have boxes and boxes full of streamers
- Leeches, minnows, saltwater patterns, buggers, damsel and dragon fly nymphs, etc.
- Sizes range from very small to very big
- My go to patterns for rainbows are size 8 and 10 buggers developed by Denny Rickards
  - flyfishingstillwaters.com
- But...I believe that successful streamer fishing is about equipment, not fly, selection
Streamers on lakes (and slow rivers)

• I fish streamers on lakes until I see a reason to change
• Perhaps I’ll move to indicator or bobber fishing with nymphs if it appears a hatch is starting
  • Or a balanced leech under a bobber
• I’m always ready with a dry fly rod
  • Midge, mayfly, caddis droppers are all great to add to the mix
• But I can easily spend all day streamer fishing

Jeff Perin, owner of The Fly Fisher’s Place, on a cold day at Paulina Lake on 5.20.22. The water temperature was only 39 degrees. He tried everything, but only streamers worked that day. I never stopped streamer fishing and landed 13.
Rods & reels

• To maximize your catch rate on a lake you need multiple rods in the boat
  • Multiple line types and weights

• Lake rods are typically longer than river rods to make distance casting easier
  • 10’ is common
  • You don’t have to worry about your back cast or overhanging trees

Don’t spend too much. This 10’ 5wt Stillwater rod from ECHO is only $479 and is as good as you need
Rods & reels

- You will also need multiple reels / spools
  - To hold the various lines
- Again, don’t spend too much
- This Lamson Liquid 3-pack is only $210
Rods & reels

• I take 4 rods in the boat
• Two ECHO 10’ 5wt rods
  • Paired with 2 Lamson reels and 6 spools
• You could use a single rod, but you need the extra spools and will spend a lot of time re-stringing
• I don’t use these as often, but I also take
  • A 9’ 8wt rod for really big streamers
  • An 8.5’ 4wt rod with a dry line

“I hope my wife does not sell all my fly equipment for what I said I paid for it.”
• Fly lines are complicated
  • There is an overwhelming variety
    • RIO has 52 freshwater line types on their website
  • I’m going to group them into 3 primary classes: floating, full sink, & sink tip

• Floating
  • General purpose, indicator, aggressive head, precision taper
  • I carry general purpose and indicator lines

RIO Gold general purpose floating line. Note: I am not recommending RIO lines. In fact, recently I have mostly bought Scientific Angler lines, leaders, and tippets. RIO just has the most variety.
Lake lines

• Sink tip
  • 4.7ips sink rate on a 24’ head and a floating running line
  • Useful if you are trying to imitate something swimming to the surface
  • But you can make one by adding a tip to a floating or intermediate line (more on this later)

• Odd ball
  • RIO Fathom CleanSweep
  • Ever hear of booby flies?

5wt configuration: 2ips running line, 4ips head, 1.5ips front taper.
Lake lines

- On lakes, I like full sinking lines
  - The entire line sinks at the same rate
  - Ex: RIO Fathom and RIO Outbound Short
- Outbound Short
  - This is what most shops carry
  - Easier to cast with an aggressive 30’ head
  - Limited sink rates: only have floating & intermediate sink rates for 5wt rods
- RIO Fathom
  - Takes a little more effort to cast
  - Much wider range of sink rates for a 5wt rod
- There are many, many more line types for streamers if you want to become obsessed with it
Here’s what I take

- 6 spools for my 5 weight rods
  - Hover: 1ips, intermediate: 1.5ips to 2ips
  - Type 3 and Type 5 full sink (3ips & 5 ips)
  - Floating, indicator (floating line with an orange front taper)

- Take the short amount of time required to change spools / lines
  - All my lines already have the leader / tippet on them
  - Only need to tie on a fly

- If I had to pick only one line it would be a type 3
  - Most guides would say intermediate
Leader / tippet

• There’s not much reason to use a tapered leader
  • You’re not trying to delicately present a small dry fly
  • Just need to get the streamer out there so you can strip it back

• My typical set up is 4’ 2x or 3x to a micro swivel then 3’ 4x or 5x to the fly
  • Depends on the size of the fly, depth, and water clarity

• Micro swivels are key
  • Stops the leader/tippet from twisting when making repeated long casts with bigger flies
Technique

• There is nothing fancy about fishing streamers in lakes
  • Cast as far as you can, let it sink to the desired depth, and strip it back
  • Keep your rod tip in the water and control your line

• Cast to the shore and over shallow areas and weed beds with slower sink lines

• Cast along drop offs and in deep areas with faster sink lines
  • If you only have a slow sink line just wait longer to start your retrieve

Lake Billy Chinook bull trout taken with a saltwater streamer on a 6wt rod and Type 6 full sink line. We landed a few like this that morning.
Technique

• Rocky areas, points, and weed beds can attract fish, but fish can be out deep as well

• If you don’t get a fish in a few minutes change something
  • Cast in a different direction, move a little, change your depth, change your fly, change your strip
  • Don’t get stuck in an unproductive rut

Williamson River desert redband taken on a seal bugger. You fish this part of the Williamson like a lake.
• There is no magic pattern for stripping, mix it up
• Short slow strips, short fast strips, long slow and fast strips
• One of the most interesting streamer videos I have seen showed big trout being cautious about the take
  • Throw in a pause into your strip
  • Especially true if you feel something odd, don’t immediately set the hook
  • Use a soft strip set
• Use a modified Leisenring Lift at the end of your strip
  • Best known as a river nymphing technique, it works well in lakes as well

18” brown on Paulina Lake, October 2022. Slow, very short strips, we watched the brown follow the fly, he grabbed it when a lift was used near the boat.
Rivers: where I think it gets really fun

• My default on rivers is to fish streamers until I see a reason to change

• Streamer fishing on rivers is both simpler and more complex
  • Simpler in terms of equipment needed
  • More complex in terms of technique

Grande Ronde river trout I caught on a black seal bugger September 2022
Rivers: where I think it gets really fun

• There are many ways to fish streamers on rivers
  • Floating lines with big streamers that you can’t really cast – chuck and duck
  • Using lake techniques

• The game changer for me was the introduction of Olympic Peninsula Skagit Tactics (OPST) lines
  • Founded by Ed Ward, one of the pioneers of Skagit style steelhead fishing
  • Ed applied the concept to single hand trout rods
  • Now copied by other line manufacturers, stick with the original
  • You must see it to understand
OPST System

• Super thin running line
  • Lazer line: equivalent to thick monofilament or backing
  • Very little drag, allows the head to really shoot out

• Floating or intermediate sink head
  • 12’ to 18’

• Tip
  • Many manufacturers
  • Floating to heavy sink
  • 5’ to 10’+
  • I carry a full assortment of these

• Leader / tippet
My typical set up

• I take a single 9.5’ 6wt rod when wading on a moderate to fast river with big fish
• You could go lighter, but I want to be able to land a 20”+ fish in strong current
• I’ve landed steelhead with this setup
• I might also take dry and nymph rods on rivers just in case

Trout fishing on the Lower Deschutes at the end of the season a few years ago I landed this steelhead swinging a seal bugger.
My typical set up

• Floating and intermediate heads can be swapped out during the day
  • Intermediate sink heads work great in places with lots of chop on top
• Tips can be swapped out as well
  • Floating, intermediate, all the way to T-11
  • An intermediate head with a medium sink tip is a great combination
• Don’t be in a hurry, create the line set up that is right for the situation
• No need to use heavy, hard to cast flies
  • The weight is in the head and tip

Grande Ronde river bull trout
Technique: it’s complicated but fun

• Streamer fishing on rivers requires that you read the water just like dry or nymph fishing
  • Where are fish holding?
  • Seams? Rocks? Current? Downed trees and other cover? Sunlight on the water?
  • All need to be considered
• Casts can be made in tight situations, like standing under trees or with your back right up against brush
  • Opens up new targets on the river
• You must think constantly about the speed and depth of the presentation
  • Requires a different style of line management
Technique: it’s complicated but fun

• Time to swing, strip, or dead drift? Time to dangle?
• Speed of the fly in the water? Up or downstream mend? Speed of the strip?
• Side or rear presentation?
• Think about presenting around rocks and other structure
• Learn an upstream presentation
  • Leisenring Lift rediscovered
• I don’t think OPST lines are a good match in many lake fishing scenarios
  • The casts really disturb the water
Resources

  - They don’t use good river lines
- Olympic Peninsula Skagit Tactics (OPST)
  - https://pureskagit.com/
  - Many videos of single hand casting
- Skagit Master Volume 2 DVD
  - The techniques for getting deep with streamers for steelhead can be applied to trout