

Spey Fishing the Salmon River

A New Approach to a Beautiful River

By Rick Kustich

One only had to attend the 2011 installment of Spey Nation this past June to see how the art of Spey casting and fishing with a two-hander has surged in popularity in recent years. Spey Nation is an annual gathering on New York's Salmon River where anglers can learn about Spey fishing, sample various equipment, exchange ideas, and receive hands-on casting instruction.



Spey fishing is not simply a fad, but rather an entire approach to fishing a swung fly on a tight line. Using the wet fly swing technique requires that the fly swims or swings across the river to a point where the fly hangs in the current in the casting position. In order to begin the next presentation of the fly, a ninety degree angle cast is required. Proper Spey casting allows for an efficient change of direction. Change of direction can be both problematic and fatiguing using standard overhead casting with a single-hand rod. But with the leverage of a two-handed rod and precise movements to set up the cast, change of direction casting becomes routine. Long casts can be made even in tight situations where little or

no back-casting room exists since the rod is loaded with little or no line passing beyond the casting position. This means effective casts can be made when backed up to a gorge wall or trees. This can be very helpful when fishing the Salmon River.

Historically, a wide range of angling techniques has been used to fish the Salmon. Over the years the most common practice when it came to fly fishing the Salmon River was using techniques that drift the fly naturally with the current. In recent times the concept of using techniques more commonly associated with traditional angling for steelhead and salmon have gained greatly in popularity. This is the result of advancements in equipment which has made covering various types of water more possible and because more anglers are gaining confidence that Salmon River steelhead will readily take a swimming fly. The take of a steelhead when using this approach can be explosive and exciting. But the true joy in the Spey approach may simply be the act of fishing itself. It is a rhythmic style of fishing that requires focus to make the proper cast given the conditions or situation. The line and angler are almost always in contact with the water which provides a deeper connection with the flow and character of the river than other styles of fishing.

The Salmon is a perfect Spey fishing river since it is big, broad, and powerful. I have found Salmon River fish to possibly not react quite as well to a swung fly than on some other rivers on the Great Lakes, but with persistence some very impressive fishing is possible.

The key may be in finding the right water. Pools, runs and even softer riffles that are at least knee to thigh deep can potentially hold steelhead and with the right flow will be perfect for Spey fishing. The right flow is sometimes difficult to judge but a good rule of thumb is to fish water that has a current that approximates the speed of a brisk walk. This type of water can be found throughout the river from the upper fly fishing stretch down through the Douglaston Salmon run. Fishing lower on the river can have its advantages in targeting fresh, aggressive fish that have not seen much fishing pressure. Fishing higher in the system can take advantage of concentrations of steelhead condensing in various pools and runs.

The Salmon can easily be covered with a lighter two handed rod or even a switch rod. Standard two-handers of twelve to thirteen feet are perfect for meeting the various casting and fishing situations that the Salmon can present. A switch rod is one that will generally be about eleven feet long and can be used to Spey cast with two hands but is light enough to also use with one hand. The versatility that the switch rod provides allows an angler to use a variety of techniques with one rod. The switch rod is good on the Salmon during lower water conditions.

The flow of the Salmon can vary widely and dramatically changes the character of the river as it fluctuates. Spey fishing is at its best from 300 cfs up to 1,200 cfs. At levels exceeding 1,200cfs it is still very possible to use Spey fishing

techniques but the flow quickens and finding the right water becomes more of a challenge. Changes to the presentation and rigging are required at the various levels. I use sinking leaders or sink-tips to take the fly to the lower part of the water column. Longer belly lines with type III or type VI tips can be used to cover flows at the lower end of the range. Shorter belly Skagit lines with tips constructed from level pieces of sinking line from ten to fourteen will work best in higher flows. Material such as T-14 is commonly used for the tips. Trial or error will often be required to find the proper combination for a run or pool at a certain flow level. I keep detailed notes of my experiences to help in rigging for future outings. I use a monofilament leader at the end of the tip of about three feet in length with ten to twelve pound test of breaking strength. A heavier tippet is required to withstand the force of the down river take.



The key to Spey fishing the Salmon is getting the fly down to gain efficient coverage of the water. A big upstream mend after the across river cast will take some tension off the line allowing the fly to sink. In heavier flows stack mending and releasing some loose line into the presentation may also be required. Throughout the presentation I may make adjustments by mending to eliminate the downstream belly in the fly line and reduce the speed of the fly. The mends should be subtle to not interrupt the swimming action of the fly.

Spey fishing generally involves complete coverage of the water. This means entering a pool or run at the head and making a step or two down river after each cast and presentation is complete. At the peak of the season in October and

November it may be difficult finding water with light enough angling pressure to work a pool through from top to bottom. Strategy will be required to find water. Hiking into less accessible water, fishing afternoons and evenings, and fishing secondary runs and pools that are often overlooked are a few possibilities. My preference is to fish after the peak season. Angling pressure dissipates in late November and December. The fish will not be as aggressive at this time because of lower water temperatures but will still take a fly well. I fish slower flows when the temperature is below 40 degrees. I also fish the fly slower by changing the angle of the presentation to hold back the fly and slow down its swing speed. Fishing can remain good throughout the winter and be extremely good in the spring as the water warms.

Spey fishing is an interactive method that simply melts away the hours when out on a river. There are volumes of books and hours of DVDS dedicated to Spey casting and fishing. Also Spey gatherings like Spey Nation are a great place to get started.