

# **Erie Steelhead Fishing**

## **By Ken Bowyer**

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The I-90 corridor in the Erie, PA area provides for easy access to several steelhead fishing opportunities on Lake Erie tributaries from October through April (November tends to be the peak month). Erie is about a 6 to 7 hour drive from the Washington, DC area thus making this destination about a 4-day trip to make it worthwhile. Various motels are available at many of the exits along I-90 and I-79. The Erie airport is also located near these streams if one chooses to fly to Erie. The beauty of this area is that all streams are within a 15 - 30 minute drive assuming you stay at a motel near I-90 and I-79. If the first stream you try is not fishable, you can usually find one that is. The best fishing tends to occur after heavy rains and/or snow melt while the streams are still receding and are slightly stained. In each of the past years, PA has stocked about 1 million yearling steelhead in about 14 streams. Only a few of the streams are briefly discussed in this article. Most of the streams have shale bottoms and are easily wadeable under normal fishing conditions.

Elk Creek is the largest and most popular of the streams. Numerous access points are available from where it crosses I-79 all the way to mouth of Lake Erie. On recent trips, my most productive fishing on Elk has been in the upper section across from the KOA campground on West Road or at Rick Road (see Map 5). The lower section at the Elk Park Road access area is also a very good access point (see Map 4). In past years, Elk Creek has been stocked with about 250,000 steelhead. The creek starts to clear in 1-2 days after high and muddy conditions. If this is the case when you arrive it should be fishable before you leave.

Walnut Creek is the 2nd largest and 2nd most popular creek. While there are several access points on the upper and lower sections of the stream, my most productive fishing has been in or just upstream from the "project waters" which are located between Manchester Road and where Walnut Creek enters Lake Erie. It should be noted that the "project waters" tend to be crowded most of the time and could be considered a "combat fishing zone". I have not fished Walnut Creek in several years now. In past years, Walnut Creek has been stocked with about 200,000 steelhead. The creek starts to clear in about one day after high and muddy conditions.

If these two streams are unfishable, the "mile" streams to the east provide the next best chance for success as all of these streams except for 20-Mile Creek clear in less than a day after heavy rains. On one outing several years ago, both Elk and 20-Mile were high and muddy and we found success on 16-Mile Creek. Our preferred stream on recent trips has been 20 Mile Creek primarily at the Middle/Hirtzell Roads access and the Hirtzell Road access near Hirtzell Pond (see Map 12).

I use a 10' 7 wt. mid-flex Orvis silver label rod (Orvis recommendation) and an Orvis Large Arbor Reel with a floating line. I recommend at least a 9' 6 wt. rod for steelhead fishing. When I first started fishing for steelhead in 2000, I used an 8.5' rod with a 5 wt. line. I mention it only because I did catch my first 2 steelhead with the smaller rod. You can use the standard 7.5' 0x tapered leader that Jay has recommended in his "[A Simple Trout Leader System](#)" along with 2x tippet for steelhead. I use a 5' Airflo Poly-leader (either floating or sinking) with 3-4' of 3x fluorocarbon tippet most of the time. I use the same loop-to-loop setup with this leader that Jay recommends. For low and gin-clear water conditions, I have gone down to 5x tippet. I recommend Seaguar's GMAX Fluorocarbon tippet. Standard nymphing and streamer fishing techniques work well for steelhead.

The most popular and effective flies are sucker spawns, crystal meth, and egg patterns in various colors and ranging in sizes from 10 to 16 depending on the water conditions. Effective nymphs (with or without bead heads) include pheasant tails, prince nymphs, black stoneflies, and brassies in sizes 8 to 16. Effective streamers include sizes 6 to 10 woolly buggers in black, olive, and chartreuse. Don't forget the Steelhead Hammer. Several members had success with this fly several years ago. You can purchase it at any Orvis fly shop.

PA steelhead streams are managed as put and take fisheries. PA has a 3 per day limit with a minimum size of 15" during the period from early September until mid April (check the regulations for specific dates) in case you want to keep a fish or two.

For trips between November and February, you need to be prepared for cold weather and dress appropriately. There was a discussion several years ago on the list server about dressing for cold weather fishing plus Captain Duber Winters briefly talked about this at our October meeting so I won't discuss it any further here.

To fish these streams, a PA fishing license is required with a Lake Erie Stamp or a combination Lake Erie/Trout and Salmon Stamp. Many PPTU members may already have a PA license with a Trout and Salmon Stamp. If this is the case, you will need to purchase a Lake Erie Stamp for \$9.90. If you don't have a PA license, a non-resident license with the combination Lake Erie/Trout and Salmon Stamp will cost \$68.80 for the year (3 and 7 day options plus the Lake Erie Permit are also available) and can be purchased on-line at [PA Online Fishing License](#). I recommend buying your license on-line so you don't have to find a licensing agent when you arrive in Erie. In addition, by purchasing it on-line, you can print an extra copy to carry with your fishing gear in case you lose one or it gets wet.

There are numerous restaurants along the I-90 corridor at various exits around Erie. No attempt has been made to identify any here.

The [Fisherie](#) site provides fishing information for the streams in the area of Erie, PA. This site has current fishing reports and conditions for the Erie area. It also has stream descriptions and access maps as well as guides, bait & tackle shops, and weather conditions. **I recommend that you print access maps for at least Elk Creek, Walnut Creek, and the "mile" creeks and bring them with you.** It should be noted that some of the stream maps reference the "old" exit numbers for I-90. [Uncle John's Elk Creek Campground](#) provides a webcam of Elk Creek below the Conrail tubes. [Folly's End Campground](#) has a Fly & Tackle shop you can contact for information on Elk Creek. [East End Angler](#) sometimes provides current fishing reports for the "mile" creeks east of Erie. [Walnut Creek](#) has a USGS stream gage as does [Brandy Run](#) (a trib of Elk Creek).

Much of the information provided above was obtained from the book "Steelhead Guide, Fly Fishing Techniques and Strategies for Lake Erie Steelhead" third edition (revised), Copyrights 1998, 2000, 2003 by John Nagy. The fourth edition is now available. Go to [John Nagy's Steelhead Guide](#) for information on ordering a copy. I highly recommend this book if you're seriously interested in Lake Erie steelhead fishing.

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