

## Doug Rose Flyfishing

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### Bill McMillan's New Report

Bill McMillan occupies a singular position in Pacific Northwest fly fishing. There are plenty of celebrated fly fishers in our region—not a few who seemingly view being a “celebrated fly fisherman” as their life’s work. But Bill is the only angler I know who is a great and innovative steelhead fly fisherman, who has created flies that have become part of the fabric of Northwest steelheading, who has written a classic fly fishing book, and who is also one of the sport’s most passionate and articulate advocates for wild fish. A legendary steelhead fly fisher, who honed his skills on the lower Columbia River tributaries, Bill nearly single-handedly revived dry line steelhead techniques for summer fish during the 1970s and early 1980s. His 1985 volume, *Dry Line Steelhead*, introduced a new generation of fly fishers to techniques such as wading, skating, the greased line, and the riffled-hitch. It also provided descriptions of his signature fly patterns, the Winter’s Hope, Paintbrush and Steelhead Caddis. When I camped out on the Sol Duc for four months in the 1980s, I had two books in my tent—a thrift store copy of Anna Karenina and *Dry Line Steelhead*. However, from the very beginning, Bill’s written work has also been informed with a strong and clear-eyed concern for the fate of wild steelhead, and a deep concern, occasionally bordering on anguish, about the seemingly willful indifference of management agencies to their plight. In recent years, Bill’s work has been focused on ensuring the survival of wild steelhead and other native Pacific Northwest fish. He has been the president of Washington Trout, now the Wild Fish Conservancy, and also works as a field biologist. Bill hasn’t written for the angling magazines in a long time, but he has continued to turn out important reports and essays that support his conservation work. “Male as Vectors to Hatchery/Wild Spawning Interactions and the Reshaping of Wild Steelhead/Rainbow Populations Through Fisheries Management” was done for Washington Trout. He has also written for the Washington Trout annual report, the Wild Steelhead Coalition, and he contributed a wonderful introduction to Dec Hogan’s superb, *A Passion for Steelhead*. Now, those of us who are just as interested in the status and natural history of steelhead as we are how to cast or tie flies, have a book length piece of writing by Bill McMillan to savor. It is called *Historic Steelhead Abundance: Washington NW Coast and Puget Sound (with particular emphasis on the Hoh River)*. It was commissioned by the Wild Salmon Center, which has been involved with preserving the Hoh River for a number of years and which was instrumental in the creation of the Hoh River Trust. Bill’s new book—I call it a book rather than a report because it is more than 200 pages and stands by itself as a fully realized work—is elegantly conceived, exhaustively documented, and persuasively-argued. It is also a ringing indictment of what passes for fish management in the state of Washington. Bill describes the reason for the book in its introduction: “The purpose of this paper is to provide a more complete historic perspective from which to manage for perpetuation of Hoh River steelhead as but one indicator of a larger ecosystem that will eventually determine the future of all species contained within it.” All of us who care about wild fish can tick off the factors that brought about the decline of native steelhead—overfishing and various forms of habitat degradation such as logging, development, dams, irrigation and pollution. But Bill goes beyond that in this book and explains the primary reason that fish managers continue to be unable to halt the decline of wild fish, let alone restore them. It is a phenomenon that Daniel Pauly described in a 1995 essay as the “Shifting Baseline Syndrome.” “Essentially,” Pauly wrote, “this syndrome has arisen because each generation of fisheries scientists accepts as a baseline the stock size and species composition that occurred at the beginning of their careers, and uses this to evaluate changes. When the next generation starts its career, the stocks have further declined, but it is the stocks at that time that serve as a new baseline. The result obviously is a gradual shift of the baseline, a gradual accommodation of the creeping disappearance of resource species, and inappropriate reference points for evaluating economic losses resulting from overfishing or for identifying targets for rehabilitation measures.” The central task Bill set for himself in the book was to show that wild steelhead on the Olympic Peninsula and Puget Sound were originally dramatically more abundant than

today. To that end, he assembled fisheries reports from various agencies from the late 19th century through the present era. According to his research, wild Puget Sound steelhead runs are now only 1.6%-4% of their abundance during 1895, and Stillaguamish River fish return at less than 1%. On the Olympic Peninsula, summer-run numbers rang from 3.9% of 1953 runs on the Quinault, 5%-8% on the Queets and 11.9%-19.7% on the Hoh. Winter run sizes on the Quinault are 25.7% of the 1952 size, 7.6%-12.6% of the 1923 Queets run, and 36%-56% of the Hoh's 1948-62 average. Why is this information important? After all, even the most ardent defenders of the state's current management policies concede there were more steelhead around 50 or 100 years ago. I'll let Bill answer that question: "Unless it is recognized that significant steelhead depletion has occurred, there is no reason from which to implement mechanisms whose goal is recovery rather than sustained depletion. Because of an inappropriate baseline, a management that accommodates continuing steelhead depletion is in affect on the Olympic Peninsula." The report is organized into five sections. Part One focuses on the geological, biological, and cultural history of the western Olympic Peninsula, culminating with a detailed analysis of Hoh River steelhead. The second part is a comparative investigation of the life histories of wild steelhead in Puget Sound, the Stillaguamish, Queets, Quillayute, Quinault and Situk rivers. The Third Part contains Bill's conclusions. The Wild Fish Conservancy's Nick Gayeski wrote Part Four, "Determining Escapement Goals to Rebuild Wild Steelhead Populations: What Role should Stock Recruit Analysis Have?" Part Five is an appendix that contains a stock-recruit analysis of the Hoh River wild winter steelhead between 1978 and 1999. Each section of the book is rich in information and anecdotes. \* "The historically dominant Hoh River catch of wild winter steelhead in both tribal and sport fisheries was in the months of December, January and February prior to when hatchery returns began in 1962. This sharply contrasts with most wild winter steelhead entering the Hoh fisheries in March and April as found in the 1980s." \* A report in 1898 explained why steelhead became such a prized commercial fish. "Steelheads are the most plentiful and the most valuable as market fish on account of their standing long transportation better than other species . . . prices received by the fishermen were (1895) for steelhead, 3 cents a pound; Chinook, 2 cents a pound; silvers, . . . an average of 1 cent a pound; humpies, . . . average 1/2 cent a pound." \* There was a cannery at the mouth of the Queets between 1905 and 1927, and it packed 1,500 cases of steelhead in 1923. \* Hatchery releases of summer steelhead began as early as 1922 on the upper Quinault River. \* The harvest of wild Hoh summer-run steelhead increased dramatically after hatchery steelhead, which stray widely, were introduced in the Bogachiel. Since then, the wild Hoh summer steelhead population has crashed. Ultimately, as we know all too well, the story Bill tells in this book doesn't have a happy ending. "The history of Northwest steelhead, as depicted by their population decline since the 1890s, is largely explained by this shift to an economy in which the takers are rewarded, not the givers." However, Bill's work and writing over the last decades demonstrate that he has yet to give up hope. Indeed, the intent of writing this book was to presumably influence the way fish are managed in Washington today. "Beginning in 1998/99, the Queets wild winter steelhead escapement goal was reduced to 2,500. The 1923 run size was an estimated 48,980-81,633 wild winter run steelhead. Today's escapement goal is 3%-5% of that historical run size. Is an escapement goal that is 3%-5% of the historical run size an effective target from which to manage for recovery or to provide for sustainable fisheries?" Many of us who live among these rivers and fish understand that there is still much of value left to protect. But there isn't much time. "Although Olympic Peninsula winter steelhead populations have not yet collapsed to the levels of some other populations in Washington, the life history strategies that were historically characteristic of these populations have been just as radically reshaped by fisheries management. These alterations may critically minimize the ability of the population to adjust to altered watershed and to an altered climate, and may deny the potential for recovery." This report isn't currently available in book form, although I hope the Wild Salmon Center eventually publishes it in print. Meanwhile, you can read it on their website, under "reports."

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