

# Great Lakes Winter Steelhead - Chasing Chrome in the Cold

## With Rick Kustich

**D. Roger Maves:** [00:00:00] Welcome to Ask About Fly Fishing Internet Radio, your source for learning more about fly fishing in cold water, warm water, and salt water. Hello, I'm Roger Maves, your host for tonight's show. On this broadcast, we'll be featuring Rick Kustich and he'll be answering your questions on Great Lakes Winter Steelhead and this show will be 90 minutes a length, and we're broadcasting live over the internet.

If you'd like to ask Rick a question, just go to our homepage at [askaboutflyfishing.com](http://askaboutflyfishing.com) and use the Q and A text box to send us your question. We'll receive your question immediately, and we'll try to answer as many of them as possible on the show tonight. And while you're there, make sure you sign up to receive our announcements so you don't miss out on any of our future broadcasts.

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In fact, if you have a moment, do it right now and let others know about the great shows we have going on here. The content of this podcast is copyrighted and is the property of The Knowledge Group Inc. doing businesses Ask About Fly Fishing. When we return, we'll be talking with Rick Kustich about Great Lakes Winter Steelhead - Chasing Chrome in the Cold.

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Before we introduce Rick, we'd like to let you know about the great prizes we have to give away tonight for our drawing tonight, we'll be giving away a one year membership to Fly Fishers International and a one year membership to Trout Unlimited.

Now, if you haven't registered yet for the drawing, you can do so now, just go to our homepage at [askaboutflyfishing.com](http://askaboutflyfishing.com) and look for the link under tonight section that says, register for a free

drawing. Click on that link and fill out the form, and we'll announce the winners at the end of the show.

We'll also be giving away a copy of Rick's book, *Advanced Fly Fishing for Great Lake Steelhead* courtesy of Stackpole Books. To learn more about the book, Stackpole has to offer you go to [stackpolebooks.com](http://stackpolebooks.com), and here's how you can win. You must be the first person to answer the question I ask at the end of the show, and the question [00:03:00] will be about something that Rick and I talk about during the show, and you must submit your answer along with your name and location in the text box on our homepage.

And that's the same text box you can ask questions in during the show. So listen closely, take notes, pay attention, type fast, and maybe be the proud winner of Rick's Kustich book, *Advanced Fly Fishing for Great Lake Steelhead*.

Tonight our guest is Rick Kustich. Rick is a fly fishing writer, instructor, and guide who began fly fishing 50 years ago on the lakes and streams of upstate New York.

His work has appeared in numerous national and regional publications. Rick is also the author of *Modern Spey Fishing*, *Hunting Muskie with a Fly* and *Advanced Fly Fishing for Great Lake Steelhead*, as well as four other titles including the bestselling *Fly Fishing for Great Lake Steelhead* co-authored with his brother Jerry.

He is featured in the film *Spey Daze* and is Great Lakes editor for [00:04:00] *Swing the Fly Magazine*. Rick has also spent time as a fly-shop owner, travel host, and fly-fishing book publisher. He lives in western New York.

Rick, welcome back to Ask About Fly Fishing Internet Radio.

**Rick Kustich:** Hey Roger, and thanks for having me.

How are you doing?

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah, I'm doing great.

I'm doing great.

**Rick Kustich:** Good.

**D. Roger Maves:** And you're just fresh off the water, right?

**Rick Kustich:** Pretty much, yeah. It's been, uh, you know, kind of busy last few days, so

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah,

**Rick Kustich:** I, I am fresh with Steelheading experiences, so I'm ready to go.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah. Has that been good or marginal or bad?

**Rick Kustich:** It's been, it has kind of been marginal, you know, really this year the weather patterns have kind of been up and down. I'm not sure our runs are, are real strong so far. So yeah, it's been trying, I would say, you know, we're scratching out a few fish each day and it's been a lot of work, but that's also part of the challenge and part of the fun.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah. Yeah. Well it's even on a good day, it's work, right? That

**Rick Kustich:** That's right.

**D. Roger Maves:** Never, [00:05:00] never easy steelhead fishing, right?

**Rick Kustich:** Yeah. Every now then, you know, just like all fish, every now and then, you get those days, you know,

**D. Roger Maves:** The banner days. Right.

**Rick Kustich:** All come together. Yeah, yeah, yeah,

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah. And then you can talk about those for years to come. Right.

**Rick Kustich:** Exactly.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah. Well, what makes Winter Steelheaders such a unique and dedicated breed of anglers considering all the work and the weather and all those kinds of things?

**Rick Kustich:** Yeah, I think there's a few things that draw people to the winter fishery. Certainly the one that kind of comes to mind first for me is just getting away from the crowds that you may see in the fall and the spring. Certainly as a time for solitude on the water. I think the winter too just provides a real different perspective of the river.

You know, I just like that. Stark contrast between the snow along the banks and the darker water. And I just feel as though there's a certain [00:06:00] challenge to fishing in the winter. There's difference from the fall and the spring fish maybe aren't quite as aggressive. And you know, just making those adjustments that you need to make for the wintertime, you know, that's what attracts me to it. And really, like I said though, I think the overriding factor would probably be the solitude though, that you find, you know, in the wintertime, good opportunity to cure some cabin fever and get outside.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah.

**Rick Kustich:** And you know, just enjoy what nature has to offer.

**D. Roger Maves:** Is the winter run, is that different than the fall run? Or is it just an extension of the fall run?

**Rick Kustich:** Yeah, all rivers are a little different in terms of the geographic regions are a little different. For the most part though, in the Great Lakes, you know, what we have are, fish that spawn in the late winter, early spring.

So those fish do begin to move into the tributaries, the rivers, the proceeding fall and there is a, just a bit of a continuation into the late fall and spring.

There are some regions, [00:07:00] some areas I would think of like in Michigan, the Manistee strain steelhead that are a little bit more later winter spring runners, and yet on here in New York state. Yet there are some river that I fished the most in the Cattaraugus. I mean, we see some pretty good numbers of fish starting to push through as early as September, and I think those fish do tend to, to spawn a little bit earlier, late winter.

There are some variations throughout the Great Lakes and a lot of it just has to do with, you know, some of the unique characteristics of that fishery.

**D. Roger Maves:** How, uh, how the Great Lakes,

**Rick Kustich:** Yeah. But

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah, go ahead.

**Rick Kustich:** No, no, but just generally there's just that continuation. I wouldn't say that there's a necessarily a winter run.

**D. Roger Maves:** Right. Yeah.

**Rick Kustich:** But it's usually more, you know, some of them start a little earlier, some start a little, you know, run, start a little bit later and maybe it will be a little more concentrated in the wintertime.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah. Yeah. How do the Great Lakes [00:08:00] winter steelhead different biologically and behaviorally from their Pacific Coast ancestors?

**Rick Kustich:** Well, you know, it's a, a bit of a loaded question. You know, certainly the steelhead in the Great Lakes are descendants of West Coast fish. Genetically, obviously, they run out of freshwater lakes versus the West Coast where they're making that transition from salt water to fresh water. I think though, that there's a lot of similarities though, in how they react, and I think the biggest thing is just how they react to stimuli in that.

Water temperature just becomes, I know we'll probably talk about water temperature here some more, but water temperature just becomes a real key factor with respect to behavioral, you know, traits when they're in the river. And I guess what, you know, even out west, I mean, there's some winter runs where the water temperatures remain, [00:09:00] you know, maybe in the high thirties, forties, whatnot, especially on some of the, uh, lower states in the US. And versus, you know, for the most part throughout the Great Lakes, there's going to be very few rivers that aren't going to be running 32, 33, 34 degrees during the wintertime or in a normal winter.

**D. Roger Maves:** Mm-hmm.

**Rick Kustich:** So I think that a lot of times that temperature is one of the things that I would point to as one of the major differences, major defining characteristics of the behavior. And that's one of the things that, you know, we'll talk about. And that's one of the things that they have to consider when, uh.

Yeah, we're fishing for steelhead here in the Great Lakes in the wintertime.

**D. Roger Maves:** But the steelhead yeah. As you said, are related to the Pacific coast, right. They brought over fry or eggs or something right? At some point.

**Rick Kustich:** Exactly. Yep. It was, yeah, that was, they were transplanted in about, uh, 1875 from the first eggs, actually came to a hatchery here in New York State from [00:10:00] only about an hour from where I live.

And then within probably, I don't know, maybe a five years or so, those eggs were distributed all through all of the five or eggs and descendants of the, of that original transplant were stocked in all five of the Great Lakes. And by the turn of the century, there was naturalized populations in all five of the Great Lakes going forward. And you know, that's really was the, you know, the forerunner of the fishery that we have right now.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah. That, that's kind of just thinking about it. I happen to be. Reading, listening to a book by Wallace Stegner, and he's a mining engineer. This is in the, about the same period of late 1800's, you know, and it's talking about him going through, well, right by my house here in Colorado when they were using Buckboards, going up to Leadville over mosquito pass and stuff.

It just, I try to think back, you know, I mean, it wasn't easy. It [00:11:00] can't have been easy to transport these fish or eggs or whatever, you know, across the whole country in your case, to get 'em there.

**Rick Kustich:** I know.

**D. Roger Maves:** Alive, you know,

**Rick Kustich:** I've thought about that.

**D. Roger Maves:** And that had to be a big experiment, right? To go to freshwater too.

**Rick Kustich:** Yeah.

**D. Roger Maves:** I mean, I don't know who first thought of that.

**Rick Kustich:** It really was. I mean, and my understanding is they were brought over on, you know, through on railroad cars. So the

**D. Roger Maves:** Uhhuh,

**Rick Kustich:** What kind of opened the west to the east in terms of being, even being able to do something like this was to have cross country railroad service.

So they were brought in these large steel bins of some nature. I'm not sure how they were exactly, were kept so that they were active, but they were brought to, again, this fishery and they, or to this hatchery in New York. And the person that was kind of behind this was individual named Seth Green. And he was kind of known as the father of fish culture in the [00:12:00] United States.

So he had the plan and he somehow, he, uh, had this idea in his mind. He had heard about the, the mountain they called the mountain shroud or mountain rainbows and had heard about, you know, how exciting they were to hook and how aggressive they were to taking a, a fly, a bait known for their legendary jumping and leaping. And somehow, you know, that motivated him to try to bring those to New York state, create a new fishery.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah. Yeah. Why do you think that the steelhead adapted so well in the Great Lakes, considering it was a major change from salt to fresh water?

**Rick Kustich:** Yeah. Uh, you know,

**D. Roger Maves:** Of course,

**Rick Kustich:** You know, I think even in where native steelhead exists, there are fish that the actual steelhead is a fish that decides basically to migrate out to the ocean in [00:13:00] their native environment.

But some of those fish would never migrate, some fish and this is still the case. Some fish that are even offspring of steelhead will just stay as resident in the stream. So those fish, you know, basically are going to be freshwater fish for the rest of their lives, presumably, unless they do decide at some point to, to go out to the ocean.

So even in almost every river out west where there is both migratory steelhead and resonant rainbow trout. There is this kind of interplay between those fish. They're not a specific species.

**D. Roger Maves:** Mm-hmm.

**Rick Kustich:** They're the same species that just one has a migratory urge. So I think,

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah.

**Rick Kustich:** You know, probably biologically that fish was already in a position to adapt to just being in fresh water all the time.

**D. Roger Maves:** And probably good source of food, right?

**Rick Kustich:** Yeah. Yep, yep.

**D. Roger Maves:** In Great Lakes.

**Rick Kustich:** And, you know, they would, that's right. I mean, that, that was the thing that there are a number [00:14:00] of tributaries, like Great Lakes that are good cold water rivers that can support trout for a whole year for natural reproduction and 'cause they need to younger of the year then need to live, you know, a full year cycle, at least one full year cycle in, in one of the tributaries. So you need, you know, high water quality. So there was that in the number of the Great Lakes regions where there was. Tributary streams, rivers that could support natural reproduction. Yeah. And then you had the lakes that, you know, were rich with bait fish and other, other parts of their diet. You know, they're very adaptable, so that just flourished after that.

**D. Roger Maves:** Right. Right. And the fish that don't migrate, they're just basically rainbow trout right? I, I assume they don't grow as big as, as the stick to migratory fish.

**Rick Kustich:** Yep.

**D. Roger Maves:** Because they don't have access to the food and so forth. Yeah. Yeah.

**Rick Kustich:** That's exactly right. So the ones that migrate just have an urge to find more protein and get bigger.[00:15:00]

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah. Bulk up, huh?

**Rick Kustich:** Yep. Yeah. Yeah, exactly.

**D. Roger Maves:** Can you explain how the water temperature and metabolism affect winter steelheads movement and their feeding behavior?

**Rick Kustich:** Yes. For me that's, and I mentioned that earlier, that's probably the biggest characteristic that you have to be aware of during the wintertime.

Yeah. I love to swing flies. You know, we've talked about that in some of the previous shows. I'm really looking for aggressive fish in the fall and the spring, and you know, really that's pretty much the main way that I fish. But in the wintertime you definitely recognize that those same fish that might move long distance for a swung fly in the fall or the spring, they're definitely not moving as far. So, I mean, their metabolism is slowed.

They just don't have that same aggressiveness, the same movement. I mean, you can feel that even when, you know, a lot of times when you fight a fish in the wintertime, it just doesn't have that same zip that it would have in the fall and the spring. So I think that's the thing from a angling standpoint, just have to be cognizant [00:16:00] of that.

I like, again, when I'm swinging flies, you know, I'm going to look for water that is generally slower, deeper, you know, deep pools, slow tail outs, things of that nature, because that's usually where

you're gonna find more fish in the softer currents during the wintertime so that they don't have to use as much energy. But that's also the type of water where I can present a fly.

More slowly too, where there isn't a lot of current really work. Even if I'm swinging a fly, can really work it slowly and you know, kind of keep it within the reach of the fish. I just don't feel like they're gonna move as far for it. So keeping it accessible is going to help you be more successful. Now for those, you know, we can talk a little bit more about that later, but for those that aren't swinging flies, you know, certainly techniques that, again, slow the fly down, more dead drift techniques, you know, can be quite effective in the winter for that reason.

You know, just that they're, the vicious metabolism isn't as jacked up as it is in the fall.

**D. Roger Maves:** Mm-hmm.

**Rick Kustich:** Spring.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah. Yeah. [00:17:00] I guess steelhead tend to move in smaller pods or even in singles. How do you change, how does that influence your strategy?

**Rick Kustich:** You know, if there's one thing, and I agree with that, and particularly in the fall, we'll see that where you're actually, see where fish are kind of moving through a pool, maybe you'll see 'em, you know, rolling or.

You know, you can actually see some fish or you're gonna get some grabs and all of a sudden the kind of, the activity just slows down and you can almost kind of feel that where there's been a small wave or a small pot of fish moved through, you probably don't get as much movement in the fall. You know, I think a lot of these fish have, you know, in the fall time, kind of get to the pool where they're gonna spend some time.

A lot of times it's, they are spawning in a tributary a lot of times that, those pools will be, you know, in close proximity to some of the spawning tributaries. So I just don't feel there's quite as much movement in that cold [00:18:00] water, you know, and that's, I'm making some generalizations and there's no always and no numbers in steelhead.

**D. Roger Maves:** Right.

**Rick Kustich:** But, um, you know, just some generalizations. I'm gonna try to focus more on pools where I know there are they'll slower characteristics and where, you know. Fish are gonna generally congregate, during the wintertime, but there's still gonna be some movement. But I think in general it's gonna slow down a bit in the wintertime.

But water, that's where, um, you know, water flow is gonna have a pretty big impact on that. You know, there are some rivers that I fished that have wide fluctuations in the flow. They depend, they're more spate rivers, so they're more dependent on, you know, runoff rain runoff or snow runoff for the, for its flow.



So a lot of times in the wintertime, even though the water's cold, when the water flow or the water level is at an agreeable level, that they can easily move, you know, they'll take advantage of that during the [00:19:00] winter time. But on bigger rivers where there's kind of a more of a consistent flow or the flows aren't as fluctuating as greatly, I think in a lot of cases there, the fish will kind of just move more slowly and congregate in the pools.

If that makes sense.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yep. Need to take a quick break here Rick, and then when we come back we'll talk more about Winter Steelhead.

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Rick, I always ask my guests what's going on in your fly fishing world? And yeah, so you've been out guiding. So tell us about your guiding service and where people can find out more about you and if you're doing any speaking at clubs or anything this winter. Yeah, just kind of tell us what's happening.

**Rick Kustich:** Well, I think the best place to get information on myself is either on Instagram, you know, @rickkustich or on my website, which is [rickkustich.com](http://rickkustich.com).

You know, especially the Instagram account. I try to to make, you know, frequent posts on there, kind of give you a good opportunity to see what I'm up to, see what I do, [00:21:00] and. That's also a good place to get ahold of me through direct messages, especially if anybody has any questions after this that, um, you know, they don't think about during the broadcast, you certainly feel free to, to reach out to me and ask me.

You know, as far as the guiding, you know, most of what I do is, you know, steelhead here in western New York. So my two main places that I, well, I would say three, but my main river is the Cattaraugus Creek, which is, the creek is more of a misnomer. It's, it's more of a river, but it's a temperamental place. Certainly a special place has some wild steelhead.

It tends to get dirty easy after a rain or a runoff on, you know, can take a little bit of time to clear up. But when it's on, it's really a special place, particularly for swinging flies. So it's my favorite place to be, you know, I love it there. My happy place for sure when it comes to steelhead and I do some guiding for other things too.

So some muskie [00:22:00] guiding. I spend a lot of time muskie fishing myself and something that I really enjoy as well. Probably getting to the point where I think I like muskie fishing as much as anything else, so,

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah.

**Rick Kustich:** But yeah, you know,

**D. Roger Maves:** Another challenging fish.

**Rick Kustich:** Yeah. Another more challenge. Yeah, I need more challenge.

**D. Roger Maves:** Right?

**Rick Kustich:** Yeah. So Instagram and, in my website. Best places to get ahold of me.

**D. Roger Maves:** Okay. All right. All right, great. All right, well let's, uh, dive back in here.

How do you know when the fish, you know, what are the signs of fresh fish that are moving up into the system during the winter? What are the indicators?

**Rick Kustich:** You know, I always think out just. Being observant a lot of times. Never a rule of the thumb, but you know, when there's fish moving and there's fish in a pool, a lot of times you'll see one or two roll here and there, maybe you'll see a handful roll. So, you know, and why they roll on top, that's pretty much anybody's guess. I mean, I think it's some type of an aggressive [00:23:00] behavior.

It's definitely a good indicator they're, there usually seems to be associated with fish that are moving, but not always the case. So, you know, I just think sometimes, you know, the fish get a little aggressive. Maybe they're pushing each other around a little bit. So that's definitely one sign I'm always kind of keeping just an eye on if there's other anglers. I mean, are anybody else catching fish? Are you getting grabs or tugs and maybe not hooking up?

You know, that's always a really good indicator. You know, unfortunately, I mean there's, we live in almost a real time world where people are posting on social media right from the river, right from in their, uh, stories and things like that.

But usually you can actually use some of that information to kind of get an idea of, uh, you know, how the fishing is on a particular river, almost on a daily or hourly basis. Certainly a lot different from when I was first getting in the steelhead and in terms of being able to get it up to date information, but those are the things I look for.

Those are the [00:24:00] signs, just kind of being observant and keeping your eyes open.

**D. Roger Maves:** What's your season for, I mean, are you out guiding for steelhead from September through what the spring or are what, when are you actually guiding

**Rick Kustich:** My, my fishing here, it's kind of in its prime in mid-October through, I'd say maybe mid to end of December. It gets a little dicey in January, February, and, a lot of it really depends on the type of winter we're having and I, in the western Europe, buffalo area, so you know, the type of snow and cold we can get, it's pretty well documented.

But you know, some years it, the winters are, you know, fairly, uh, mild and the rivers will stay open through January and February.

So, you know, what I try to do and is just to stay somewhat flexible and I don't really book much in January or February, but you know

**D. Roger Maves:** Mm-hmm.

**Rick Kustich:** If the opportunities come up and I have some local [00:25:00] clients and they wanna go out, you know, we'll try to take advantage of that. But then things usually start opening up again in March, April and go as late as early May in some years.

**D. Roger Maves:** Okay. Okay. Yeah. Okay. Okay. Now, how do weather patterns affect the bite, like snow or rain or barometric changes? Do you notice an effect on the steelhead?

**Rick Kustich:** Absolutely. I would say the biggest thing is. Two things, water temperature. Again, I'll go back to that even in the winter time. A couple things with water temperature that I think are really important.

One is dramatic decreases in water temperature. Really slow fishing down. And we already had this, and it's not winter time and we already had a situation last week, or it might have been two weeks ago, where the water temperature on the Cattaraugus was 46 degrees, one day we had a cold snap and by 36 hours later it was 33 degrees.[00:26:00]

So that kind of dramatic, yeah, that kind of dramatic water temperature drop is really, yeah, I wouldn't say the kiss of death, but it's close. When you kind of get that, that really, it shocks a steelhead system. Um, you know, and takes some time to recover.

So, you know, that's something to be cognizant of, you know, even, and then. As you get some recovery, even on a day where it drops like that, if you get some recovery in the afternoon, even if it's a couple degrees, it can make a difference where, you know, it'll start to to bring the fish back, you know, to some level of activity. So water temperature's really big, but versus like in the middle of the winter, once that water temperature's kind of dropped and it's kind of consistently 35, 34, 33 degrees, the fish is acclimated to that and they seem to be more active even in that cold water, as long as there hasn't been that dramatic decrease.

And then during the winter time, if you just do [00:27:00] get a, a degree or two, it's really remarkable. You get a degree or two, a change. In the water temperature and you know, really can make all the difference in the world in terms of activity.

You know, the other thing I have kind of noticed with the, well, not even noticed, I mean it's pretty dramatic with the barometer, dramatic decreases in the barometric pressure really seemed to put steelhead off.

You know, there's like, if you have an approaching front, it's usually a time where they'll be very active. Like that front's just a little bit out. But man, once that comes through, especially if it's a cold front associated with that, a big drop in the barometric pressure that a lot of times that seems to shut things down.

If you get rain, especially along with that, sometimes you get some rain that'll charge up the river for a little bit, but you get too much rain after it's been, you know, after the water's been pretty clear and it starts to cloud up, that seems to shut things down [00:28:00] too. So, you know, for winter time, my best.

Fishing consistently occurs when you have a, a fairly stable barometer and a couple a degree increase in water temperatures. And when you get those fact, you know, get those two factors in place, that's a good time to be out in water in the winter.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah. I was gonna, I was gonna ask you and then I kind of thought about this question is, or just kind of observing that with fish, it's the same way all over the world, you know, I mean, it doesn't seem to matter what kind of fish you're fishing for when you have those temperature decreases or a front coming in or a barometric pressure drop, the fish turn off and I go, I wonder why it is that fish do that. And then I thought.

Well, we as humans do the same thing, you know?

**Rick Kustich:** Yeah.

**D. Roger Maves:** It's kind of like, oh, a front's coming in. Hmm. [00:29:00] Maybe I better get back in the tent, you know, or go in the house, or, yeah. Front's coming in, or, Ooh, I feel a chill. I think I'll, uh, put more clothes on you. I mean, all those things, you know, we, as humans, it's a biological signal, I guess, that we're all going, oh, take cover, you know, get ready. Something's changing. So

**Rick Kustich:** It is.

**D. Roger Maves:** Maybe the fish are on any difference.

**Rick Kustich:** Yeah. No, I always kind of think of it as, you know, they kind of sense that there's going to be a major change and that they better do whatever they're gonna do. Kinda like we would, you know, there's a big storm coming in. You're gonna, I don't know, pull in the patio furniture or whatever. You know what I mean?

**D. Roger Maves:** Right, right, right.

**Rick Kustich:** It's kind of the same thing. Whatever they gotta do, they wanna feed, they wanna get to different water. They're just gonna be, it just creates a sense of inactivity or of activity. Before a period of just kind of going down for a bit. So

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Rick Kustich:** You know, I just think,

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah,

**Rick Kustich:** That's kind of what it is.[00:30:00]

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah. Yeah. Well, let's talk about gear and setup now, and Jason Stacy in Kentucky had asked this. What size Rod do you recommend? What's your go-to setup? Both for rods and lines and, uh, both for swinging and, and then nymphing for winter steelhead, because you said you kind of change up your tactics, right?

For winter steelhead?

**Rick Kustich:** You know, I'm, I'm gonna pretty much swing fly. I, you know, I just, I guess I've got to the point, you know, in my career where I kind of want to just do it on my own terms. So now I'm gonna continue to swing and fly swing flies all through the winter time. And yeah. And that's kind of the clientele I've developed too at this point.

But there's certainly alternatives to that. And, you know, something that probably makes some sense when. At certain different times of the year, especially when there's certain factors in place. But I'm kind of divided it up into two in terms of, yeah, [00:31:00] let's look at the swing Rods, my spey Fish, spey cast.

Again, my favorite way to do it, there's wide range of rivers in the Great Lakes in terms of their size, um, depth. So to say there's one rod that kind of fits all, is kind of impossible to come up with. But I would say a rod that would probably match up with 70 to 80% of the opportunities that exist in the Great Lakes. It'd probably be like a seven weight something that handles four 50 to 480 grain Skagit head.

And something probably around 11 and a half, 12, 12 and a half feet. Something in that range is probably, you know, the one that would cover a good portion of the Great Lakes opportunities. So I would kind of call that a go-to two-hander.

**D. Roger Maves:** Mm-hmm.

**Rick Kustich:** In terms of one handed rods, I think length is still going to be important there. [00:32:00] So something that is 10 feet in length, and probably the same thing about a seven weight, 10 feet, maybe even something that's, you know, ten, ten three or ten six inch, as long as it stays light enough, you know, would make a good winter steel head rod.

In terms of the heads and lines I would use, I pretty much use a head system where I'm using a running line with a loop on it and then looping my head to that. So I'm gonna either use Skagit head, which I would mainly use in the wintertime. I'll use some scandi heads in the spring and fall, earlier in the fall.

But, for delivering the fly down deep handling heavier sink tips. I'm gonna run for sink tips, usually 10 feet, maybe to 12 feet. I'm gonna run anything from a three inch per second sinking or versileader to key 14, depending on how deep I have to get it, how quickly I need to sink and fly. So I'm gonna carry, [00:33:00] uh, sink tips on the wallet that's going to cover all those different situations.

With a single hand rod, I think probably the, you can swing obviously with a single hander, so, you know, just using, you know, similar type of an arrangement with a weight forward line and, um, versileader to, to sink the fly.

But, you know, using some type of a dead drift technique, whether it's an indicator or more of a tight line approach, you know, can be very effective in that cold water, particularly for fishing. Along slots and deeper edges and things of that nature. There are some rivers where, as much as I like to try to swing everything, there's some water that is a little more conducive to dead drifting a fly during the wintertime, and it's certainly going to have, its a bit of a higher level of effectiveness by being able to make that fly so accessible to the fish.

**D. Roger Maves:** How do you balance the need for depth and control when choosing sink [00:34:00] tips or leaders, and when do you know when to change?

**Rick Kustich:** That's a really good question, and I think that's one that, uh, experience will kind of help dictate that particular experience on a particular river. I mean, it's really going, that's something that's gonna vary by river, depending on depth and current speed and whatnot.

I think for the most part, my go-to starting point would be a tip or a versileader that's kind of in the five to six inch per second range. With that tip, I'm going to run usually about two and a half to three feet of leader or tippet off of that front of that. Usually that's gonna be about, I'm gonna have that down to about, uh, 12 pound. I usually use maximum ultra green. The water's super clear though. I, I may go to fluorocarbon. And then from there I like to fish the bottom fly near the bottom in the wintertime. I want it kind of fishing in that [00:35:00] bottom zone, but I also don't want it scraping the bottom too much. I don't wanna be hanging up. I don't wanna be losing a lot of flies.

So really what I kind of focus on there is just making sure I'm ticking the bottom every now and then. And if I feel like my leader isn't, you know, my tip. Isn't heavy enough to even get close to that bottom edge. I'll make a change. I'll maybe go to a piece of T eight or T 11 so that I can just keep adding some sink rate.

And if I'm dragging too much, I'll make a change that is back the other way. But I try to keep my tip changes to a minimum and I can make some more micromanagement of the sink rate by either, you know, adding or subtracting a weighted fly. Weighted fly is gonna help get your presentation down deeper, quicker.

So an unweighted fly can kind of, you know, keep that up a little bit. So if you're ticking a lot with a weighted fly, just going to an unweighted fly can make a big [00:36:00] difference. And then probably the biggest way to control it is just your angle of your cast. Casting straight across river is going to allow your fly to sink deeper, versus if you're angling down maybe 80 or 70 degree cast.

And then also adding a big men at the ray as you complete your cast. So if you cast across 90 degrees, make a big men take the tension off the fly, allow it to kind of sink right away. You're gonna get a lot more depth there. So you can control a lot through the sink tip. But I, especially in the winter when your hands are cold and you're out there, I like to try to minimize the amount of time that I'm gonna change a tip during the course of the day, and then try to do more of a micromanagement of the depth through casting angle, mending and through the fly.

**D. Roger Maves:** When you guide folks up there for the steelhead, do you take care of those kind of things, like using your [00:37:00] selection of tips and so forth? Are, are your guests expected to have all those come with those in hand?

**Rick Kustich:** I have everything to make, to outfit somebody to adjust during the course of the day. Yeah, I certainly prefer that people have their own stuff and my, I guess my approach too is I'm always, I try to be a teacher more than a guide even. I want somebody to spend a day with me and walk away with more than just hooking a, a fish or two. I want 'em to walk away feeling like they learned something.

And you know, I think part of that is for, you know, for the, that the client that kind of have their own equipment so that they can take that forward and work with it. Or maybe they'll find out that their equipment was inadequate and will make some adjustments or use some of my equipment so that they can see what different equipment can do for them. So I would prefer that [00:38:00] anglers come with their own so that they can get used to it and we can cast with it all day long and, you know, they can take something away.

But I certainly have everything always, 'cause I wanna be prepared. Because, you know, just making those type of adjustments can make all the difference in the world.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah. Yeah. What about staying warm on the rivers? Do you have any secrets, methods to staying warm? Because

**Rick Kustich:** Yeah, certainly a starting point is trying to be a little bit flexible during your winter fishing.

So that, I mean, to me, that's the place to start. Try to get, try to find days if you can. You got, you know, some flexibility or you know, some ability to kind of change days to get the days when the wind's down a little bit and get temperatures at least in the high twenties or thirties. But that can be your good base and starting point. I mean, those are tolerable days when you have that versus days where the wind's whipping and the wind chills and the team are [00:39:00] lower. I mean, it's hard to really enjoy a full day in that.

Without doing some walking around or going back to the car to warm up a bit. So, you know, pick your days wisely. It's the first thing I would say.

You know, secondly is with the clothing that's available today, it sounds cliché, but certainly layering is a key thing. You know, putting a layer next to your skin that's gonna wick away some of your moisture and kind of nice loose layers on top. When I'm fishing, I like to usually have a vest on under my main coat. I find that a vest kind of brings some warmth and at the same time, you know, leaves me kind of, you know, open for my casting, doesn't restrict my casting. 'Cause that's the one thing about particularly spey casting, but even with single hand casting.

If you're gonna get more fatigued, if you got too heavy of clothes on or too constricting of clothes on, so you kind of gotta try to find that balance. Some of the other things that I would recommend for winter fishing or [00:40:00] using boot foot waders, boot foot waders are certainly a lot more. Keep a lot more heat in your feet than stocking foot waders.

If you are going to use stocking foot waders and I do use them into the wintertime. Yeah. I use battery operated socks for my feet and there's all kinds of battery operated, everything now. And you can find battery, rechargeable, battery hand warmers.

There's even rechargeable battery vests that you can wear. Um, so a number of different options to be able to kind of keep warm and comfortable. And I can just say like those, the hand warmers, the foot warmers, they're just, there's something about, I mean, it keeps you warm and at the same time these

**D. Roger Maves:** Right.

**Rick Kustich:** Just mentally kind of keeps you in the right place knowing that you got something there extra. Trying to, you know, that's gonna help keep you warm.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah. You don't want to be thinking about how cold you are. 'cause that messes with your fishing.

**Rick Kustich:** Yeah. I mean, it's true. I mean, it's funny but it's true. There's no question about if you wanna, you can't be [00:41:00] like two day, two hours into the trip and. And I've been there two hours into a trip thinking, oh my God, how am I gonna spend eight hours out here? You know, it's certainly nice to kind of have that warmth feeling of saying, yeah, yeah, I can do this, you know, I'm gonna be able to fish all day in this.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah.

**Rick Kustich:** You know, and that just makes it more enjoyable and you're gonna fish better too.

**D. Roger Maves:** Any particular type of glove that you like to wear?

**Rick Kustich:** I usually, in the heart of the winter when it's really cold, I'll just use like a kind of one of those flip over type knits so that you know, they, they have the open fingers

**D. Roger Maves:** Uhhuh

**Rick Kustich:** When you're fishing, but then you know, in between, you know, if you really gets cold on your rod hand or on your other hand in between, maybe when you're going from pool to pool or something along that line, you kind of flip that mid over and kind of really warm up your hands again.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah.

**Rick Kustich:** So that's kind of one thing. Some anglers don't like the flip overs 'cause. Running line has a [00:42:00] tendency to kind of get caught in that, but I really don't have much problem with them. So in the really cold weather, that's kind of what I do. And then just, you know, really just either a pair of, uh, fleece or, uh, wool cut off fingers generally are pretty good for me.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah.



**Rick Kustich:** You know, even during the, the middle of the winter.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah. Okay. Um,

**Rick Kustich:** Something that, something that keeps your fingers free so that you can

**D. Roger Maves:** Right.

**Rick Kustich:** You know, fiddle with life,

**D. Roger Maves:** With some stuff, yeah.

**Rick Kustich:** That nature. Yep.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah. Yeah. Okay. Time to take a quick break and when we come back, we'll talk about reading the water and, and locating fish, so hang with us a bit longer here and we'll dig deeper into Winter Steelhead Fishing.

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You're listening to Ask About Fly Fishing Internet Radio. We're talking with Rick Kustich about Great Lakes Winter Steelhead - Chasing Chrome in the Cold.

If you'd like to ask Rick a question, just go to our homepage, ask about fly fishing and fill out that Q and A box and send us your question.

Okay. Let's see here. We did get one question in here. [00:44:00] Rick, Phil in Kentucky is asking about the fish that you've got in the picture we have on the website if it qualifies as a big one, and is that a Great Lakes steelhead?

**Rick Kustich:** I believe if it's the picture I saw and I think I saw it earlier, that was actually a British Columbia Steelhead and I had

**D. Roger Maves:** Okay.

**Rick Kustich:** Yeah, I have, I probably should have looked at that and could have sent you one that was, uh, a Great Lakes fish. But you know, I have spent

**D. Roger Maves:** Oh, that's all right.

**Rick Kustich:** A lot of time. Yeah. No, I've spent a lot of time in British Columbia fishing for steelhead as well. Yep. Made many trips out there over the years and certainly has helped my development of some of the techniques and presentations that I used here in the Great Lakes. So it's all been part of my kind of education and part of my progression.

But that fish was, I believe was like an 18, I think I calculated out to 18 and a half pounds. I think it was [00:45:00] 38 inches. It was from, uh, the Babine River in British Columbia from a few years ago. It was probably about 12 years ago or something like that.

**D. Roger Maves:** Oh.

**Rick Kustich:** But yeah, that's, that's a good fish for up there, even still. It's a good fish.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah.

**Rick Kustich:** Not a high end fish. Not the highest end fish. But that's a good fish for British Columbia.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah. Babine is, uh, definitely a world class fishery, at least a very well known fishery, right?

**Rick Kustich:** Yeah, absolutely.

**D. Roger Maves:** For steelhead.

**Rick Kustich:** One of my favorite places. Yeah, one of my favorite places for sure.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah. Good. Okay, so let's talk about a few things about reading the water and finding the fish and so forth. Now, you've talked about a little bit of this earlier, but let me throw this at you again, and you can go into more detail.

So, what types of holding water are the most productive for winter steelhead? Boulder pockets, gravel runs, tail out spools. What, where do you start from?

**Rick Kustich:** Yeah, I, I mean my, I'll expand upon that 'cause maybe I simplified it [00:46:00] when we talked about it earlier. But I certainly like those slower pools, deeper pools, particularly those that are kind of in proximity to, uh, spawning tributaries.

I just really feel like, you know, that's a scenario where fish can rest and, you know, not use a lot of, uh. A lot of, you know, their energy, you know, that they built up. So I think that's kind of an area that I, I really focus on. But as I talked about earlier as well, there are times when fish are gonna be moving and migrating during the winter time so they can be found in a wider range of water as well.

So what I look for then, particularly like I said, on more state rivers, we have a lot of lows along the south shore of Lake Erie. As those fish move up, they are gonna be looking for just any place where they can kind of rest softer areas, but any place where they can rest. So sometimes that [00:47:00] is a pocket just that's defined by a, a boulder or a log or something that, a drop off, something of that nature.

And they'll also kind of utilize slots and ledges and any place, particularly in the wintertime, if you got lower water, any place where there's kind of some depth. And where the current is being blocked and slowed down a little bit. I wouldn't pass by any of that stuff in the wintertime, particularly if, you know there's some fish on the move and I've even found fish on some more heavily pressured rivers that you'll find even fish in some heavier riffles too, even during the wintertime.

So yeah, I wouldn't bypass that type of stuff either, but you know, I'm always going to be looking for that deeper, softer water was my go-to.

**D. Roger Maves:** Do you think you catch more fish in the softer water than the other areas? I mean, if they're moving as opposed, holding rather than moving, are they more vulnerable then

**Rick Kustich:** In the wintertime?[00:48:00]

Well, I guess I would always be kind of looking for areas that have a certain element of softness to it, if that makes sense. Whether it's the inside of a seam, a nice pocket created by a big boulder, or even like in the middle of a run. Where there's a big boulder kind of blocking the current, even if it's a, a fairly soft run, the areas behind that boulder.

So I'm always just going to be thinking in terms of a certain element of softness in the winter where, you know, that can be a driving force in the fall and spring as well. But certainly not as much we looking, you know, a lot of times for faster or we'll be fishing just kind of faster runs and things of that nature in the fall.

**D. Roger Maves:** Mm-hmm.

**Rick Kustich:** And spring that I kind of might bypass during the winter time.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah, yeah. Someplace where they're resting, at least for the moment.

**Rick Kustich:** Exactly.

**D. Roger Maves:** So how does your approach different on rivers with smooth [00:49:00] slate bottoms, like, uh, many of the Lake Erie tributaries?

**Rick Kustich:** I think where it is different is there, you know, on those rivers, almost all those Lake Erie rivers have.

There's some gravel, but there's also a lot of pools that are gonna have sleet drop offs and edges and things of that nature. I think it's just really important to pay attention to those ledges. The fish really,

particularly in lower water, really relate to that structure. Kind of hanging right next to the ledges and the drop offs.

And then just think, I just kind of mentioned that, but just looking for any type of water that, you know, a lot of times there's just divots or cracks in the bedrock and anything like that is gonna provide some respite from the current and give the fish a little more security if it gets just a little bit deeper in some of those pools. Again, particularly in the lower water conditions.

So anywhere where the water's a little dark, it's [00:50:00] really an important couple things. I mean, one thing that's important to have. Polarized glasses and really analyze the water because it really can be just a, a small area that might be holding a fish.

And just the other thing is I just love and really enjoy as much as I like bigger water and making lawn cast and kind of covering a pool by that rotational approach. Or I'm casting stepping down, casting, stepping down. I also really appreciate the tactical approach of some of these smaller tributaries that hold steelhead because you are kind of picking apart smaller pieces of structure in a run. So you might be going down a run and you know, you might be casting and stepping, but when you get to a particular part, you might need to shorten your cast. You might need to make it at a little different angle just to cover the particular parts of that run or pool. That might be more likely to hold a fish [00:51:00] because of its depth or its structure. So I like, I really enjoy that tactical part of it as well.

**D. Roger Maves:** This kind of goes back to temperature, but do you actually have better luck fishing in the warmest part of the afternoon, say, because water might be warming up just a tad, or do you not notice a difference?

**Rick Kustich:** No, absolutely no, absolutely.

**D. Roger Maves:** Okay.

**Rick Kustich:** It's a great question and yes, there are times, again, when you have a dramatic, or maybe even not so dramatic drop in water temperature, it's pretty common to the water temperature's gonna drop even on a normal night, five or six degrees. So, I mean, you can go first thing in the morning and you might find a couple aggressive fish, particularly in the low light, but certainly you're also likely to find fish that aren't very active at that time because of that drop in water temperature. But boy, as things warm up, I usually see that.

Water temperature starting to kind of turn [00:52:00] around around 10:00 AM 11:00 AM. My brother Jerry and I have noticed that over the years that there, and he used to always call it the 11 o'clock fish, that he would always want to be in his best spot at 11 o'clock because he would always catch a fish then.

But looking back at it and looking at the trends of water temperatures, that's about the time when the water temperature starts to turn around, starts to warm up. So absolutely.

**D. Roger Maves:** Mm-hmm.

**Rick Kustich:** I even say that if you're somewhere efficient in the wintertime and you have one of those really cold nights, cold snacks, yeah. You're probably best off just kind of getting an extra cup of coffee instead of getting on the water at seven. You know, get on the water at five or 10.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah, yeah.

**Rick Kustich:** You know, and really try to give it your best shot as that water temperature's warming up. But absolutely, the afternoons and the wintertime tend to be the best time to be on the water.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah. Okay. Well take another quick break here, Rick, and then we'll come back and talk about fly selection and presentation. A bit more. So hang tight. We'll be right back. [00:53:00]

Fly Fishers International needs your support. Its conservation projects at both the national and club level are addressing critical issues of importance to fly fishers.

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If you're listening, Ask About Fly Fishing Internet Radio, and we're talking with Rick Kustich about Great Lakes Winter Head Steelhead. If you'd like to ask Rick a question, just fill out that form on our homepage and send it on over.

All right, Rick, this is about strike attitude. Question is, is biotic stimulation, uh, key to winter head steelhead strikes? Can you explain what that means and, and how it differs from pure aggression?

**Rick Kustich:** Well, I think if I understand the question, you know, there. Steelhead in, uh, certainly in the Great Lakes region, you know, they do, and this could be, maybe the statement would be debated, but when they're in the rivers, there does seem to be an element of them continuing to feed a bit while they're out the rivers.

That's certainly not their main [00:55:00] purpose for being there. The main purpose is to spawn and propagate the species. And even with the hatchery fish, they're gonna go through the progression. But it does seem, and I've had enough observation evidence of this, that when there's opportunities to feed when they're in the rivers, they still tend to do that.

And again, not their main objective, but when the opportunity arises, it seems like they do opportunistically continue to feed. What I really think though, when I am, particularly when I am. Swinging flies and using a tight line like that, I'm trying to get the fly to swim and kind of look like

prey, but I think the idea is to present that fly to the fish so that it's kind of pulling away from the fish and it's maybe not necessarily a feeding mechanism that makes that fish [00:56:00] chase, but I do feel like it's just kind of that instinctive response that most predators will have that something's getting away from 'em, and I gotta chase it down. I gotta kill it. Whether I wanna really eat it or not is I think becomes inconsequential. It's just a matter of they want to get it, they want to kill it. It's something get in the way. So I think that's the main part of what I'm swinging the fly when I'm trying to play upon. Is that

**D. Roger Maves:** Mm-hmm.

**Rick Kustich:** Instinctive response, getting that fish to chase. Like you get a cat to chase a toy.

**D. Roger Maves:** Right, right.

**Rick Kustich:** But I do think there are times when, and I feel like I see it sometimes in fly selection, where, you know, I'll use flies that are a little bit more representative of common food in that tributary, or at least out in the lake and where they respond better to it. So I do feel like there is an aspect of that as well.

**D. Roger Maves:** What are the natural prey or food sources they have [00:57:00] available in the rivers? Primarily since that's where we're fishing, I guess.

**Rick Kustich:** Yeah, there's, I mean, in the rivers, well in the lakes, they're very opportunistic feeders. You know, in Lake Erie, they, they feed a lot of emerald shiners, but you know, they're known to feed on a wide range of bait in, you know, small suckers and things like that that exist in Lake Erie. And even insects, you know, Hexagenia, they've been known to fish on cray or eat on crayfish and everything, so very opportunistic in the lake and the rivers, there's a wide variety of dazed and shiners and sculpin, they've been known to eat.

And what I've also seen, and you know, anybody that's spent a fair amount of time on steelhead rivers that also have salmon is, you know, you'll commonly see steelhead behind salmon reds.

And, you know, they're clearly eating eggs that are drifting out, or they're eating some of the, the nymphs that are being kicked up, you know, by the, the salmon as [00:58:00] they create their reds. Yeah. So that those are some of the food sources that they eat, um, you know, in the rivers.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah. Uh, Mike, uh, Jouvidownie, um, in Ontario is asking about fly patterns. We'll give you these chance, intruders, sculpin eggs, something else.

What is your usually go-to kind of pattern there?

**Rick Kustich:** Well, for swinging flies, I like my marabou, the reverse tie, marabous, you know, tube fly. Usually use two different colors of marabou and tie it in reverse style so that the, it keeps the, the feathers propped up. Give it a nice silhouette. Also allows those, the fibers to really move and, uh, dance in the water. So any of my swing flies, I guess. I mentioned I like to have the fly. Kind of pulling away from the fish, enticing the fish to chase it. So I want something that swims and moves. So marabou is really a great material [00:59:00] for that.

I also like a fly, I call the bunny spey, just kind of a exaggerated ball, uh, zonker kind of zonker with spay hackle on the front. Really, really effective pattern. Swims real well. I also tie a couple tubes out of Arctic Fox. I have one that's called the, uh, scandi swinger, just an arctic fox wing. And, uh, again, very effective. Looks like a bait fish in the water and pretty simple to tie. So most of my flies are, you know, pretty easy to tie, meat and potatoes, but do work really well in, in terms of, of movement in the water. One other one that I do tie as a bit of an intruder, I call the cattitude. Nothing special about it, but it's a, you know, a little bit bigger fly. And I use that in really. Heavier water, you know, deeper water. I have actually have all four of those that I just mentioned. I don't have much on YouTube, but I do have a small YouTube channel with a handful of videos on there, and those, those four patterns are on there.

**D. Roger Maves:** Oh, good, good. Yeah.

**Rick Kustich:** In terms of, [01:00:00] yeah. Yeah. In terms of dead drifting though, you know, egg patterns are always very effective and just a variety of nymph patterns. Just some generic nymphs or stone flies or hex nymphs, things of that nature. If you're dead drifting or tight line fishing, those can be extremely effective.

**D. Roger Maves:** Do you usually go on the larger size of nymphs?

**Rick Kustich:** Yeah, it really depends on 14. Yeah, it really depends. Yeah, really depends on the water. You know, if you're fishing bigger water, I'd like to have a hook with a bigger gap, you know, eight, 10.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah.

**Rick Kustich:** But unreal, low clear water situations I know of, uh, anglers. You know, again, on some of the Lake Erie streams that, you know, might go down to twelves or even fourteens in real clear water situations, but

**D. Roger Maves:** Okay.

**Rick Kustich:** Yeah, I generally wouldn't fish anything that small,

**D. Roger Maves:** Smaller, yeah. Yeah. Do you modify the fly size or color as if the water clarity or light conditions change?

**Rick Kustich:** Yeah, you know, I absolutely, water clarity is the biggest thing [01:01:00] for me. When I have a higher dirtier water, I'm gonna fish darker flies, you know, black and purples, black and blue. I like purple and pink and really, in dirty water as well. Um, and then it's certainly gonna get more subtle as the water clears and drops more olives, olive and tan browns, things of that nature. More subtle natural colors.

My maybe dirty little secret when it comes to just really low, clear water and I'm swinging flies, is just an olive woolly bugger. Maybe a size six or size 8. Just a killer fly if the fish are just kind of pulling or tugging on the bigger flies. Boy, just a small woolly bugger a lot of times gets 'em to commit. And the nice thing about woolly buggers too, I mean if you're a single hand fishing and you wanna kind of dead drift and swing, you can really use that fly for kind of a wide range of techniques. I mean, you

can kind of dead drift it, [01:02:00] you can tightline it, you can, you know, kind of tightline, dead drift, swing it at the end, or you know, I just use it as a pure swing flies. Definitely having some olive woolly buggers in the boxes really staple for me.

**D. Roger Maves:** It's funny how over all the years, I mean that was one of the first flies. It wasn't the first one I tied, but one of the first flies I tied.

**Rick Kustich:** Yeah.

**D. Roger Maves:** But you know, some of these old standbys just hang around. Woolly buggers, you know, are one of those just like, hare's ears or pheasant tails or the things you just never leave your box. Right. I mean, because,

**Rick Kustich:** Well, it's funny because, yeah, we were just talking about this the other night. So I had, uh, I just finished a spey camp we had here, you know, in Western New York and we had some anglers. Oh, well, you know, it was a really, really nice gathering. And, but we were talking about that the one night, how, you know, we were doing some fly tying and then really there's, there's so few really original patterns.

You can kind of boil it down. I mean, there's,

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah,

**Rick Kustich:** [01:03:00] Over the course of the year there's been so many, just only a handful of just really innovative ideas and, you know, the woolly bugger is, is one of those, is the way I see it. And it just seems like so many. You look at so many of the patterns that are on Instagram right now, you know, big different streamer patterns and it seems like all, you know, a lot of them, I shouldn't say all of them, but a lot of them incorporate the steps that you just find in a woolly bugger. So, you know, it's really seems to be the basis for a lot of patterns that are even out there now.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. Variations there. Yeah. Even like, you know, in Alaska, I remember we were fishing this, uh, egg sucking leeches, which is basically a woolly bugger with an egg on the front end.

**Rick Kustich:** Exactly. Yeah. No, great, great, great example. Yep. Mm-hmm.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah. Yeah. And that might work for steelhead too, right?

**Rick Kustich:** Oh, absolutely does. Absolutely

**D. Roger Maves:** Combo.

**Rick Kustich:** No question. No, it's a really good fly for that.

**D. Roger Maves:** So let's kind of wind up with a few techniques [01:04:00] here. Some of this stuff we may have already covered. First of all, have you seen this, has there been a spey revolution, so to speak, in the Great Lakes where, you know, two handed start really coming on since, 'cause you've



been fishing there a long time. I'm wondering if it was something that happened during your journey or people started swinging with two handed rods more than they have in the past.

**Rick Kustich:** Oh, absolutely. I mean, yeah, absolutely. When I first started back in the eighties, I mean, there was hardly anybody fly fishing, let alone, uh, you know, and we were some of the first ones here in West New York, anyways, me and a few friends. The idea there was, the word that we heard is you couldn't catch 'em on a fly. And, you know, we started at least dead drifting and catching them pretty regularly. And then, you know, eventually started getting into, you know, more tight lining, a little bit more traditional steelhead patterns, and then eventually really got into swinging flies somewhere in the nineties.

But there was very [01:05:00] few people back then that were swinging flies, either one handed or two handed. But I don't know if I would go as far as saying it's a revolution, but it is certainly much more well accepted now. And you see just a lot more anglers that throughout the entire Great Lakes that are fishing, either single hand or two hand spey casting, swinging flies and you know, it's really become the norm.

And people, you know, I think just in general that are accepting of the fact that maybe you could catch more fish, dead drifting, but they're out for the, the full experience, the grab and the challenge of the cast and everything. I certainly think that one of the driving factors too is the fact that there are a lot more rods and lines built for.

The type of fishing we do in the Great Lakes where it's, you know, more, you know, smaller, moderate [01:06:00] size rivers, a little more tactical fishing. So the fact that there are more shorter, lighter rods and shorter heads for to, to line up the rods with, I think have made a big difference in that as well. So yeah, there's definitely, I don't know if I would go as far as a revolution, but there's certainly a lot more people that are enjoying the swing game than there ever has been.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah. Now, you kind of alluded to this, that you might catch more fish with a nymph rig than you would with a, a spey rig, a singlehead. Is that, so if I'm hearing that correctly, that spey casting is more about the art and the enjoyment of the casting, but it doesn't really catch you any more fish, in fact, maybe less fish?

**Rick Kustich:** Um, yeah, I'd say that's probably true, and I guess I look at it as this, you know, every, if you got a pool full of steelhead, there's probably only a percentage, whatever that [01:07:00] percentage is, that are aggressive enough that they're, you know, in the mood or aggressive enough that they're gonna chase a fly.

But the dead drift techniques can kind of put that fly right in their face, easily grab it. So it's the type of thing, you know, I hate to put it in human terms, but I've heard it talked about like this, like, if you're sitting on the couch and you're watching a game and, or a movie or something like that, maybe you're a little hungry or maybe you want a munch on something, but you gotta get up to go get it. To go over and get a bag of potato chips. Maybe you won't do it.

But if somebody brings a potato chip and puts it right in front of your face. You're probably going to eat it. And I think that's, you know, that kind of, you know, equates to, to what the swing versus

**D. Roger Maves:** Mm-hmm.

**Rick Kustich:** Dead drift is, is that you're looking for those fish that are, you know, motivated to kind of chase something versus, you know, the dead drifts going to be making it, you know, that fly much more available to the fish and [01:08:00] you know, much more likely you're gonna find more fish that are going to

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah.

**Rick Kustich:** Grab a dead drifted fly.

**D. Roger Maves:** You find that all the way, the being kind of all the way through fishing, right? I mean, people

**Rick Kustich:** Mm-hmm.

**D. Roger Maves:** Ask me.

**Rick Kustich:** Yep.

**D. Roger Maves:** Why do you fly fish? Isn't that harder? Wouldn't you catch more fish, you know, with a worm or something?

**Rick Kustich:** Exactly.

**D. Roger Maves:** Probably. But I enjoy fly fishing.

**Rick Kustich:** Exactly. But, you know, and to get back to it, it's, you know, it is, it's part of the spey fishing thing is more, it is part of our culture challenge.

Learning a skill. The casting skill is something that, you know, you can learn it quickly, but take a, a lifetime to master all the different aspects of it. So I think that's, that attracts a lot of people. And if they can get that experience and still get a few fish here and there, you know, it seems to make people happy.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah. Yeah. Uh, is anybody doing any euro nymphing for steelhead? Is that,

**Rick Kustich:** Um, yeah. You know, they're [01:09:00] definitely, and you know, I'd say euro or, you know, maybe even like, I would probably. Just call it more tight lining. I know that my friend Joe Goodspeed, who now runs, uh, Diamondback Rods, he's incredibly proficient at, you know, catching steelhead with, uh, with a tight line rig, you know, using various flies and, long leaders and, you know, probably done properly is even more effective than dead drifting with an indicator.

**D. Roger Maves:** Mm-hmm.

**Rick Kustich:** You know, just because you can,

**D. Roger Maves:** Long, long rod I expect

**Rick Kustich:** Yeah. Long rod, long leaders, you know, the sensitivity that you can develop, you know, you can really just make precise presentations. You has some really, you know, phenomenal catches doing that. And so yes, that opportunity exists and I quite honestly, I'm kind of moved past long ago liking the idea of indicators. So, I mean, in terms of a,

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah,

**Rick Kustich:** A technique, you know, that kind of [01:10:00] combines more of a dead drift. You know, approach. I really think that tight line technique like that is

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah.

**Rick Kustich:** Is challenging and I think it provides a nice alternative for someone that's looking to dead drift apply.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah. Uh, Jeff Prit in Ohio asked, do you have any method to deter ice on your fly rod guides when fishing and cold weather?

**Rick Kustich:** It is a tough one. I mean, it's, that is one of the downsides with winter fishing is you get to a point where, you know, the water temp or the air temperature's consistently below about 26, 27 degrees, they're gonna get icing.

You know, one of the things that, and I've tried 'em all, I mean, they do work to some degree, you know, I think loon, whether they still do, but I have some of it still, um, you know, kind of have a ice off paste that used to work decent.

I've tried. WD 40. I mean, you know, if you don't mind getting that on your, you know, your fly line in your head, that seems to help [01:11:00] a bit. Vaseline, you know, lightly Vaseline, the guides, but you know, all, it kind of just wears off in time. So I'm not sure that the reality of it is, is if it's worth the effort, but those are all different things that can help deter it.

You know, a lot of times what I do is just, it's just a constant, but you just dipping the rod in the water and just kind of breaking the ice out really depends on how cold it is. You know, that'll work pretty good when it's 26, 27 degrees. You get much colder than that though, and it's, you know, it does become a problem, there's no doubt.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Rick Kustich:** Especially when you're, especially with spey fishing and where you're stripping line in all the time, so,

**D. Roger Maves:** Right.

**Rick Kustich:** That's the other, yeah. The other, the other thing would be that, you know, when you're. In that situation, you know, shortening up your cast so you're not stripping line in every time, you know, maybe fishing a little longer head, you know, going to a 32 foot head versus a 22 foot head so you're not stripping as much line in, um, those things will help.

**D. Roger Maves:** Mm-hmm. [01:12:00] Okay. Couple final questions. Winter head steelheading often means long hours with few bites. How do you keep your mental focus and motivation high?

**Rick Kustich:** Well, certainly, you know, we talked about earlier, staying warm during the wintertime is key to, you know, kind of that mental aspect for me. As long as I can stay comfortable, I don't know.

Yeah. Maybe my mentality is somewhat warp, but I, you know, I just enjoy the act of fishing as long as I think I have a decent chance of fishing or of hooking a fish, you know, I'm gonna continue to grind on, you know, and I actually, there's a part of me that just loves the grind. I mean, that's also why I like muskie fishing.

Um, but staying comfortable is kind of the key to that. I mean, there's just, uh, you're gonna have your issues, you know it. Yeah. Just that, uh, you know, kind of staying comfortable is really [01:13:00] gonna be the key to

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah, the key. Yeah.

**Rick Kustich:** Being able to guide.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah. I guess, we all, as fly fishers. We all are, have that just one more cast.

It could be the next cast you tell yourself. Right. And it's like, come on, come on Rick, let's go. Let's go. It's time to go.

**Rick Kustich:** Exactly.

**D. Roger Maves:** Just one more cast. Just one more cast. How many times have you heard that?

**Rick Kustich:** Well, and sometimes it is, you know, and sometimes it is that,

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah.

**Rick Kustich:** Extra cast that gets them. And then sometimes you get one on your last cast and you wonder whether it really was your last cast or not. Might have kept casting after that, so

Yeah,

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah, yeah. That's funny. But, uh, anyway, why don't we leave it at that call it a night here. Gotta wrap it up anyway, so stick with me here for a few more minutes, Rick. We're gonna give away a one year membership to Fly Fishers International and a one year membership to Trout Unlimited.

And then we'll also be giving away a copy of your book, Advanced Fly Fishing For Great Lakes Steelhead courtesy of Stackpole Books. So hang tight and we'll [01:14:00] be right back and give, to those giveaways.

The Bonefish and Tarpon Trust works very hard to safeguard the future of our beloved flats fisheries from protecting spawning sites threatened by unsustainable fishing pressure to securing historic funding to restore Florida's everglades and estuaries thanks to their members. They've expanded their conservation to The Bahamas, Belize, and Mexico. There's still much more work to be done, and they need your help with your support. They can ensure that the Flats fishery is healthy and sustainable now and for generations to come.

Visit [btt.org](http://btt.org) and become a member of the Bonefish and Tarpon Trusts today. Again, that's [btt.org](http://btt.org).

Just a quick reminder to everyone before you leave the website tonight, please take a minute, give us your feedback about the show. You can find a link on our homepage in the section under tonight's show that says, what did you think of the show?

Just click on the link and leave your comments. We'd really appreciate it, but now it's time to give away some of our prizes. The winners for our [01:15:00] drawings are randomly selected from our shows registration database. If you didn't register for tonight's show, it's too late now. But make sure you do so for our next show so you don't miss out on a chance to win some of these great prizes.

If you are one of the lucky winners, we'll contact you after the show and collect your information so that we can deliver your prize to you. So first, we'll be giving a way of one year membership to Fly Fishers International. And to learn more about FFI, go to [flyfishersinternational.org](http://flyfishersinternational.org).

Great organization to support and if you don't win, join anyway and give your contributions to them. And our winner for that is Joel Wood in North Dakota? Joel Wood in North Dakota? So congratulations, Joe Joel.

And now give away a one year membership to Trout Unlimited. And to learn more about Trout Unlimited, go to [tu.org](http://tu.org).

Another great organization to support and our winner for that is we see here. Rob Konowitch, Rob Konowitch in [01:16:00] Pennsylvania. So congratulations, Rob, and I know you both enjoy your, your memberships.

And that will give away a copy of Rick's book, Advanced Fly Fishing for Great Lakes Steelhead Courtesy of Stackpole Books. And this is a new edition, right, Rick?

**Rick Kustich:** Yes, it's a third printing.

**D. Roger Maves:** Third printing. Okay. Third printing.

**Rick Kustich:** Yeah, so it's pretty much the same book, but the,

**D. Roger Maves:** Okay.

**Rick Kustich:** The information in the book remains very relevant for sure.

**D. Roger Maves:** Okay. Okay. Okay, so, so here's how you can win this book. First, you have to use that form on our homepage of our website on askaboutflyfishing.com.

Put in your answer along with your name and location and we will, whoever answers the question correctly first, will win the book. And, what, there are a few of these things, but what was the first thing that Rick mentioned weather-wise that affects the bite? What was the first thing that he mentioned, which seemed to [01:17:00] be a, a primary thing that would change the bite off or on?

And I think that's good enough.

**Rick Kustich:** Yeah, I think so.

**D. Roger Maves:** Better enough. 'cause you did kind of bring that one thing up first. So it takes a minute, Rick, to be, there's a slight delay before they hear the question and then they have to type. So we'll, uh, we'll check here and see if we've got a winner. Yeah, yeah. I think we've got this.

Uh, Jeff Arthoburn in New Mexico said temperature and yeah. Wouldn't you agree Rick? Temperature?

**Rick Kustich:** Absolutely. Yep, absolutely. Temperature's gonna be a great consideration.

**D. Roger Maves:** Either up or down.

**Rick Kustich:** Yep.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah.

**Rick Kustich:** Consideration in the wintertime. Yep.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah. Yeah. So good. Well, Jeff, you're the first one in and you've got the, the answer correct. I've got your address there, which is wonderful, and I've got your email and everything I'm set to go. I'll send that information Jeff off to uh, Stackpole and they will send that book [01:18:00] directly to you. So enjoy and read up and then you call Rick up and book a date and go fishing.

So anyway, congrats to all, all three of the winners tonight and, uh, thanks for listening and, and joining us tonight. We always appreciate our listeners.

Rick, wanna appreciate you for being with us again. And by the way, there's another show we did on Great Lakes Steelhead Fishing, so if you wanna look up Rick by name or you know, just click on his, learn more about Rick on the homepage and you'll see a link to this, his other show that we did as well. You might wanna listen to that as well. But thanks so much for, you know, sharing your knowledge, staying up late on the east coast after a hard day of fishing.

I really appreciate it and thank you so much.

**Rick Kustich:** Thanks, Roger. Always great talking with you and thanks for having me on the show.

**D. Roger Maves:** Yeah, great. Well, hopefully all of you have found a podcast archive on our website. If you haven't, just look for the link on the top line menu. In that archive, you'll find all of our past shows over 420 some [01:19:00] 25 shows or something like that.

You can search by keyword, keyword, phrase like trout, tarpon, musky, steelhead, whatever. And I think what you'll find will enlighten you and educate you when you listen to 'em. Next broadcast will be on December 3rd, 7:00 PM Mountain 9:00 PM Eastern, and that show, I'll be interviewing Phil Shook and our show will be Surf, Sand and Silver - Fly Fishing the Padre Island National Seashore.

So we're gonna go a little warming in December. Uh, we've had two cold weather shows in a row here, so, uh, we're gonna switch it up a little bit. Go south. So, uh, step onto the longest undeveloped barrier island in the world as we explore the legendary fly fishing of the Padre Island National Seashore with acclaimed angler Phil Shook.

From Bull Reds prowling the surf to speckled trout Jack Snook migratory tarpon. This remote stretch of Texas coastline offers endless adventure and requires smart strategy to fish well. Phil breaks down how to read the [01:20:00] surf, locate product productive cuts and guts, and choose the right flies, handle wind and waves, and target each species through the seasons. If you love salt water fly fishing, this is a masterclass you don't wanna miss.

Be sure to add this upcoming show to your calendar just right under his picture. You see, add the calendar buttons. Just click on the your calendar of your choice and it will add it to your calendar.

We'd like to thank Fly Fishers International, Trout Unlimited, Bonefish and Tarpon Trust, Olympic Peninsula Skagit Tactics, The Ugly Bug Fly Shop and Water Master sponsoring our show tonight.

Don't forget to visit our website at [askaboutflyfishing.com](http://askaboutflyfishing.com) and make sure you sign up to receive our announcements so you don't miss out on any of our future live broadcasts.

Thanks for listening to Ask About Fly Fishing Internet Radio. We hope you enjoyed the show. That's it. Goodnight everyone and good fishing.