

Before a few days ago, everything I knew about fly fishing and steelhead fishing could have been contained in maybe two paragraphs.

Well, even with fishing sometimes it's not what you know, but who you know. In this case, the "who" is John Graba the manager of the fishing department at Gander Mountain in Kenosha. John had contacted me and said that he wanted to take me out to do some fly fishing for steelhead trout on the Pike River.

I agreed figuring it was something different and I am always looking to learn new ways to catch fish.

So he and I met up last Wednesday morning to see if the steelhead would be biting. On the way to the river, Graba talked about his love for fishing, the importance of conservation, and preservation of habitat. It was immediately apparent that his love of the outdoors extended beyond just wetting a line.

Graba's introduction to fly fishing occurred about 24 years ago. Since then he has spent a lot of time fishing waters across the nation. In Wisconsin, Graba has fished for steelhead in rivers such as the Pike here in Kenosha, the Root up in Racine, and numerous rivers and creeks all the way up to Door County.

Graba gave me a quick education about steelhead which are basically a larger version of rainbow trout. He called them "the rockets of the trout and salmon species" due the fish jumping and making strong runs when they get hooked. "Realistically you may hook up with three fish and only land one"; said Graba.

He described the spots we would be targeting and said we would be looking for locations that contained gravel about the diameter of a nickel.

Our first stop brought us to Petrifying Springs Park which the Pike River meanders through on its way towards Lake Michigan. We parked in a location just off of highway JR.

Graba assembled his fly rod and proceeded to rig up two flies that he attached to the leader which is called a tippet. The use of the flyrod allows the casting of light flies and the longer length of the rod allows for better control of the line to get the flies to properly drift through an area.

Just like when using other lures, fly size, weight and color are all important considerations. A proper weight is needed to make sure the fly gets down into the water and even occasionally bumps along the bottom. For color choice, one rule of thumb is that on bright days, use brighter colors. On darker days, use darker and more natural colors. Of course those are just a starting point and you may have to go through various colors before you find one that works.

For the size of the fly, you want to stick with sizes that match what the steelhead are likely to be feeding on. “Fly size is very crucial and often overlooked”; said Graba. In our case, flies of about ½ inch to 1 inch in length were used.

We scouted the water from above on the riverbank which Graba explained was important instead of just plunging into the river and starting to fish. We stayed low keeping our shadows blended in with the trees on the bank and looked for fish, and spots where they were likely to be holding.

We then proceeded to wade into the cold river and Graba began casting. He would repeatedly cast above the spot he was targeting and allow the current to wash the flies through the intended area. “It’s important that anglers slow down and thoroughly work an area”; said Graba.

About 30 minutes into our fishing trip shortly after Graba uttered the words “You never know what you’re going to experience on the water”, the tip of his fly rod snapped off. My first thought was that I was glad it broke while he was using it instead of me. My second thought was this was going to be a short outing. However, Graba said that he noticed I had a spinning rod in the truck and that he could use that to cast the flies.

“I am not a snob purist that only uses fly rods”; said Graba. “A fisherman must be adaptable”.

Within a few minutes, we were back in business working the likely fish holding areas; one of the most important of which are called redds. Redds are locations where the fish have used their tails to fan out a depression in the gravel and sand. The depression gives the eggs some protection from the river’s current.

There was definitely a strong current that day. The heavy rains from Saturday and Sunday had meant the river was higher and cloudier than normal. We were able to see that the fish were not actually holding on the redds which was confirmed by other fly fisherman on the river.

Graba patiently worked the various areas including deeper holes and we moved around to other locations in the park. Unfortunately, the only fish willing to take the bait, was a sizeable sucker.

We then packed up and headed downstream to where the river crossed through the Kenosha Country Club. We did no better in this spot than the last one, but we did come across an angler who did manage to catch a steelhead. He allowed us to look at the fish and take some photos.

We finally called it a day, without hooking up with any steelhead. However, I learned a lot, was introduced to a new fishing method and most important found a new friend to fish with.

Note: A few days after our outing Graba did a quick trip back to the river and caught a huge steelhead that he estimated weighed close to 16 pounds.

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