

## **A TALE OF TWO MONSTER STEELHEAD...and OTHERS**

**CLIFF AYNES, OF** Puyallup, went steelheading on the Cowlitz March 31, 1971. Not much is known about the fight he had with a giant steelhead that day, other than he successfully boated it. He continued fishing for the day, all the while the monster fish lay in the bottom of his boat, drying out.

When he came back to the launch site, at the Game Department Cowlitz Steelhead Hatchery later that day, it was then that others noticed the huge fish. Fortunately, certified scales were available. Game personnel weighed it. At 32 pounds, 10 ounces. It was then the new state (and perhaps world) record. It is a shame he did not keep it moistened while in the boat, or better yet return immediately to the hatchery and have it weighed. If he had done so, it would have logged in at least another couple ounces heavier.

Shortly thereafter, I and the whole Olympia headquarters office heard about it. As PIO I subsequently wrote a news release to announce the momentous event. This was the 1970-71 year of the enormous winter-run steelhead return on the Cowlitz. The record was submitted to FIELD & STREAM Magazine, then the national record-keeper of fish caught by sporting methods. The magazine published a story about it and the Cowlitz run in their October 1971 issue.

**EARILER THAT SAME** year, I was returning from a steelheading trip on the Olympic Peninsula. I stopped in Hoquiam for gas. There in the adjoining stall was a guy showing off his huge catch. I had never seen a 30-pound plus steelhead before, but I knew I was looking at one. It was well over 40 inches and mint-bright. The guy was busy displaying it and I took pictures (good thing) and got his name (and license plate of his vehicle). He said he caught it on the upper Quinault River. I knew the Quinault Indians had a net fishery there. Only problem with this guy's "sport caught" monster steelhead was that it had clearly visible net marks on its body. I didn't say a thing, but muttered to myself, "Sorry man, you ran into the wrong person."

Back at the office I relayed my encounter to the director, chiefs of fisheries management and enforcement, plus others. Our photo lab produced the pics I took of smiling fisherman and net-scarred steelhead. A subsequent phone call and

visit from our personnel to the guy's home insured his "big catch" would never get any publicity. Moral of the story: Don't try to pawn off a net-caught steelhead as landed with rod and reel.

**THE DEPARTMENT OF** Game and Department of Fisheries merged in 1994 to become the WA Department of Fish and Wildlife. Separate records for winter and summer-run steelhead are now kept. The latest Internet-published record for a Washington summer-run is from the Snake River, caught downstream from Clarkston, in Whitman County: 35 pounds, 6 ounces, taken by Gilbert Pierson 11/23/73. Coincidentally, on that same day, Keith Powell was fishing on Idaho's Clearwater River, 22 miles upstream from Lewiston, between there and Orofino. He boated a 44 inch long, 30 pound, 2 ounce summer-run. Had this 44-inch fish been caught earlier in its travels from the ocean, not having to fight its way over Columbia and Snake River dams, it probably would have weighed in excess of 35 pounds. Both were officially weighed at a Lewiston sporting goods store. After 46 years, both remain their state records.

There is however, a discrepancy in the Washington winter-run record. The Internet currently shows a late-run 32 pound, 7 ounce fish from the East Fork Lewis, in Clark County, caught by Greg Maygra, on 4/14/80. But, on March 31, 1971, Cliff Aynes caught his monster fish of 32 pounds, 10 ounces, as described above and recorded with FIELD & STREAM Magazine and IGFA in 1971.

During the merger of the two departments, it is a shame that data from those early 1970's years have obviously been misplaced or lost. Washington and British Columbia both have several famous rivers known for their runs of "four-year salt" steelhead. Better records should be taken when documenting exceptional fish.

**THERE IS A** formula for estimating weight for fish, in absence of physical, official scales for actual: It is... girth at widest portion (squared) X length from nose to tail ÷ 800. On the Internet is a photo of a steelhead with girth of 24.6", length 42.6" = 35.25 estimated pounds with the formula. It was caught on the upper Quinault in 2004 and released. Actual weight of fish can vary significantly with same girth and length measurements, both within species, and even more between species. Only fish weighed on officially-certified scales can be considered for IGFA records.

**A CLASSIC EXAMPLE** of a world record fish being misidentified fortunately has a happy ending. In the summer of 1970, young David Robert White (with family

one presumes) was on a boat trolling for salmon off Bell Island, Alaska. For an 8yo catching a big fish, that must have been the thrill of his young lifetime. The impressive trophy officially weighed 42 pounds, 2 ounces. Fortunately, his dad had the fish mounted, everyone then assuming it was a nice chinook salmon, big but no chinook record.

David's trophy made its way back home to Seattle. It was there THE SEATTLE TIMES, on October 21, 1970 published a picture of it. Suspicion was aroused on several fronts. Two noted fish biologists from the University of Washington identified it positively as a steelhead. Why the taxidermist and others didn't note the obvious identification is not known. This fish had a square tail as all trout do: salmon have a forked tail. You could use this fish's tail for a ruler! (See pic on Internet, search..."Record Steelhead.")

From its mounted appearance, it also might be a female. Catching a steelhead trolling for salmon in saltwater is virtually unknown. Who knows where this monster was hatched and might have eventually made it back to spawn? It's also a shame that scales were not taken off the back side of the fish. Under a microscope, scales can be read like growth rings on a tree. Also, they can tell one if the fish had previously spawned (once or twice)? Somewhere in Washington or British Columbia, maybe Idaho, lies the birthing waters of this magnificent fish. We all hope it was a returning spawner and had parented future generations. At almost 50 years old, it is unlikely this world record will ever be broken!!

**ALTHOUGH THE WORLD'S** record steelhead was caught trolling in saltwater, when rivers are out of shape in Western Washington, there is a unique saltwater alternative. Surf casting from a beach! Winter-run steelies migrate off the shores of Whidbey Island. Bush Point and Lagoon Point are often crowded to the point where shoulder-to-shoulder surf casting, known locally as "combat fishing," takes on a whole new meaning. A better location would be Washington's historic Fort Warden State Park. There you have two miles of beach, not to yourself, but a bit less crowded. Forget traditional river lures like salmon/steelhead eggs and spoons. Preferred lure is a "Hoochy," aka a Spin-N-Glow. Do a search for, "Saltwater Steelheading and Saltwater Steel-NWFR" for more information, or stop by local sporting goods stores for lures and tips.

**THE ABOVE STORY** does have a cautionary lesson that would apply to all fishermen, if you are interested in weights. It would behoove one to: 1) Memorize the simple weight-devising formula, plus carry a cloth or small retractable metal tape measure, especially if you are “catch and release.” 2) If you're going to keep the fish, make sure it stays moist, or better yet find someplace with an official scale quickly. 3) Plus, in this day of everyone, from 5 year olds on up, having a cell phone, don't forget to record vital measurements for photographic record.

And finally, don't bother to buy a net-caught steelhead or salmon and claim it as a rod and reel trophy. Sorry, can't hide net marks.

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