

Sound advice from a MAN OF STEEL

Uncovering the secrets of Chautauqua's tributaries

By Vic Attardo
Contributing Writer

During the fall, the jammy smell of Concord grapes wafts over Chautauqua County as a sweet, pervasive cloud.

That's on land.

On Chautauqua's streams, the smell of fresh steelhead would be equally pungent – if our noses could only detect it.

Like the grapes hanging thick from the fields' omnipresent vines, that's how many steelies seem to be in the Erie region's tribs.

Yet, just as not all grapes make good libations, not all steelhead presentations will produce great fishing. To know how to stomp on some steelhead, it pays to listen to a seasoned guide. Alberto Rey is just such a steelhead seducer.

Working Chautauqua's waters from its tiniest backyard rivulets that don't even carry a recognized name, through the widening waters of Silver and Walnut creeks all the way to the widest, the almost-mighty Cattaraugus Creek, Rey has been around these streams for years, taking steelhead on a fly rod in the most popular as well as the most unlikely flows.

On a very recent trip with Rey we were cursed, then blessed, with heavy rain as I arrived, followed by the resulting chocolate milk, then a brothy clam Choo-der as the waters nominally cleared, culminating 48 hours later into some perfect conditions that brought plenty of fresh and eager steelhead into the flows.

Naturally, the first thing we discussed was which Chautauqua streams cleared the fastest after a steelhead-luring rain and how they should be fished.

In order of their clearance, Rey said anglers should first go to Silver Creek then to Walnut Creek, followed by Chautauqua and Canadaway creeks on an equal footing, and last to the largest, Cattaraugus Creek.

All of the waters can be fished with common fly rod weights adorned with streamers and egg flies, but for the wide banks of "The Catt," Rey recommended switch and spey rods for their distance casting.

Just that advice requires seasons of learning and is worth

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— Alberto Rey

the price of admission.

The morning after the heavy rain, we hit Silver Creek first but it didn't seem to be holding fish and there had been too much precipitation for a quick clear-out. Rey (716-410-7003; www.albertorey.com) also said Silver Creek usually attracts a later run.

On the second morning we thoroughly investigated two miles of Walnut Creek and though it's bottomed with slate, conditions were still too close to the drenching rain and we didn't spot fish.

However, toward the end of the second day – 48 hours after the rain – we made it to Chautauqua Creek, and though it wasn't a picture of crystal clarity, I could at least see my feet in knee-high water. Also, it proved to be positively bubbling over with bright steelhead.

To lure our steelies we used both large streamers and tiny egg flies, and Rey had a lot of interesting advice about using those things. But first I heard from him tidbits I'd never heard before and are worth getting in somewhere. That somewhere is here.

Under any conditions, Rey said that when he sees fish jumping over waterfalls and the rapids preceding waterfalls it's been his experience that those places don't make the best fishing.

"It just seems that when they're interesting in moving along, they aren't interested in our flies. It's better to work back from those spots."

Despite the influx of fresh fish, and much to my surprise, we didn't see them jumping

over the falls and ledges. Instead, they were ensconced in the plunge pools below the whitewater, and at the end of the second day that's where we caught them.

Indeed, in a hot spot where a number of steelies were eventually caught and where I landed a beauty, the water was gushing over a low ledge and into a deep, dark hole. The water was still chowdery so I couldn't see into the hole at all, but the fish definitely told me they were there.

Rey is a proponent of what, for years, I've called "flat-sticking." That's where you hold your rod low and parallel to the water and allow your streamer to hang in a current, waiving back and forth to attract a strike.

Rey's advice is that the flies used for flat-sticking should not be lustily weighted.

"You don't want your fly so heavy that it lays on the bottom," he said. "It needs to move around with the current."

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Finding fish is just part of the steelhead game: offering up the right fly or bait pattern for the conditions at hand – especially the right drift at the right depth – often means the difference between an action-packed day on the water.

Photos by Andrew Steele Nisbet



Water levels and water clarity will often dictate which of the Chautauqua County tributaries to target.

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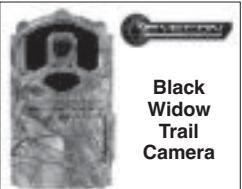
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Method: Archery _____ Slug _____ Rifle _____ Black Powder _____

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- No high fence hunts, entrants will be disqualified. Fair chase only.
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PHOTO TIPS:

- Entry must be received before Jan. 29, 2015.
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Steel

(From Page 27)

Weight and its placement plays an important role in Rey's other schemes. While using egg flies, the seasoned steelheader doesn't like to rely on a string of split shot above the fly, especially in clear water.

"What happens is that the split shot is the first thing the steelhead sees as it comes along. It even may hit the steelhead in the nose and that spooks the fish."

Instead, Rey weights his egg flies as he makes them. On this day the effective egg flies actually had coneheads behind the hookeyes. This one tidbit alone will send me back to my fly-tying vise to make fresh imitations. Also, the egg flies we used in this still-unclear water were larger and fluffier than the dainty little round pearls I commonly employ. I believe Rey's flies were made for the conditions we faced.

However, Rey is not adverse to using split shot when so required. Remember, this was certainly not clear water and if a steelhead was to get plunked in the nose by extraneous weight, it might blame the collision on a rolling stone. Not the Rolling Stones, but one moved by strong currents.

Indeed, though I had lobbed some two dozen casts and drifts into the dark hole it wasn't until I asked Rey if he had one more shot that I scored. On the very next cast - the very next cast mind you - the egg fly concoction sunk lower and a steelhead latched on.

When working streamers for steelhead, Rey recommends striping the fly very slowly. Remember, he says, the water is cold and a steelhead doesn't want to put a lot of effort into chasing a fly.

"In cold water he just gives up chasing it if the fly is moving away too fast," Rey said.

In dirty water, Rey likes white streamers, followed by large black ones. For leaders he uses between 12- and 16-pound test - mostly 16, always fluorocarbon.

"When they hit, they hit aggressively and you can land them quicker with heavier line," Rey said.

With eggs he uses 3-, 4- and 6-pound test fluoro tippets, preferring the lighter grades for himself but heavier lines for less experienced clients.

But something that really had me thinking was Rey's advice for setting the hook with egg patterns.

He had told me to set the hook lightly, just raising the rod against the pressure.

Of course, part of this is because the tippet is so much thinner with the eggs, but he also said that with an easy touch by the angler if the strike isn't a strike at all, then the drift can be continued because the fly hasn't been ripped out of the water.

And so it was: when my split shot-enhanced egg fly first circled through the dark hole on Chautauqua Creek I thought I had a strike that wasn't, made a light lift of the rod, but then let it continue on its way. The next sensation was indeed a head-shaking strike which resulted in a fighting steelhead. It proved to be a fish that didn't taste like Chautauqua's myriad grapes but went very well with a fine bottle of wine.