

# The Half-Pounder, A Steelhead Trout

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**M**OST ANGLERS are aware that steelhead are rainbow trout that migrate from the fresh-water environment to the Pacific Ocean, spend up to two years there, and then return to fresh water to spawn. However, many are unaware of the unique life history exhibited by half-pounder steelhead. Unlike most steelhead, half-pounders spend only a few months in the ocean before returning to fresh water in the late summer or early fall. They do not spawn during their first return to fresh water, except for a few precocious males. They migrate to upstream holding areas, remain in fresh water through the winter months, and migrate back to the ocean in the spring. Half-pounders range in length from about 10 to 16 inches, while adult steelhead in the same run typically range from 18 to 24 inches. The returning adult fish will eventually spawn in the late winter and spring.

There are no records of when or why the name “half-pounder” was first used, but it apparently referred to the fish’s weight, about one-half pound. The earliest record of the name in print is from an August 1907 *Ferndale Enterprise* newspaper story published in Humboldt County. It reported that “fly fishermen have been known to catch in a day’s sport from eight to ten steelhead and twenty to sixty half-pounders.” The name appears to be a colloquialism used by local anglers and applied to the small steelhead that enter the Eel River (and possibly the Klamath River) in the late summer and early fall.

## Half-Pounder Runs

Scientific literature reports that half-pounders historically occurred in the Rogue River in Southern Oregon and in the Klamath, Mad, and Eel Rivers in Northern California. However, there is evidence that half-pounders in North America may not be restricted to

these rivers. In *Fisherman’s Spring* (1951), Roderick Haig-Brown described a run of steelhead that entered the Campbell River, on Vancouver Island, during August and September. He noted that the fish “vary in size from three-quarters of a pound to four pounds or more. Two and a half pounds is a big fish and usually mature; the smaller fish are usually immature.”

The fish Haig-Brown describes in this Campbell River steelhead run are similar to those found in Southern Oregon and Northern California half-pound-



**HALF-POUNDERS RETURNING TO FRESH WATER ARE USUALLY 12 TO 16 INCHES LONG. THESE FISH CAN BE AGGRESSIVE, AND WILL READILY STRIKE AN ARTIFICIAL FLY.**

er runs. However, the scientific literature describing half-pounder distribution in North America does not include the Campbell River or any other rivers except those in Southern Oregon and Northern California. In addition, there are no fishing reports of significant runs of half-pounders in other West Coast rivers.

Steelhead are often separated into summer and winter runs. Half-pounders and the adult fish in the same run are more accurately a late summer–fall run, with the returning adult fish migrating to upstream areas to spawn in the late winter and spring. Some of the progeny of these

adult fish, but not necessarily all, return to fresh water as half-pounders. In the Rogue and Klamath Rivers, most of the fish in the late summer–fall run have the life history of half-pounders, while in the Trinity River, a tributary to the Klamath, only 15 percent of the adult fish exhibit a half-pounder life history.

Many anglers believe that the Sacramento River and its tributaries support half-pounder runs. Actually, the steelhead run in the Sacramento River does not include fish that exhibit a half-pound-

instances, with the exception of hatchery-produced fish, the steelhead run has been replaced by a resident trout fishery.

The Rogue and Klamath Rivers offer anglers good fly-fishing opportunities for half-pounders, but even though the Mad and Eel Rivers still support small runs of half-pounders, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife’s low-flow-closure angling regulations negate any fishing opportunities. In the Rogue and Klamath Rivers, half-pounder runs typically peak during the last weeks of August and the first week of September. Half-pounder numbers decline quickly after September in the lower river as fish migrate upstream, although late summer–fall adult steelhead will continue to enter fresh water through October.

## Angling History

Half-pounders have been a popular fly-rod fish for many decades. Early fishing authors such as Claude M. Kreider, *Steelhead* (1948); John Atherton, *The Fly and the Fish* (1951), and Clark C. Van Fleet, *Steelhead to a Fly* (1951) included chapters describing their fishing for Rogue or Klamath River half-pounders and adult steelhead. Kreider described camping on the lower river at Blake’s Rifle in early August in the 1940s, and in a chapter on the Klamath River, he wrote: “It pays to have faith in the Klamath.” It was Kreider’s expectation that the “scrappy little half-pounders” would be soon followed by the “big ’uns.”

Atherton also fished the lower Klamath River and reported that the first runs of half-pounders appeared in July and that as the season progressed, the size and number of fish increased, with the largest fish arriving in October. Van Fleet apparently first fished the Klamath River in the 1920s and indicated that his friend Bill and he caught 17 fish in one evening, but the average was around 10 fish.

## Tactics for Half-Pounders

Unlike trout fishing, where success depends more on being able to present an imitation of an insect or other food item in a way that seems natural to the fish, half-pounder fly fishing depends more on presentations that induce a strike. These presentations fall into one of two categories — a subsurface presentation with a wet fly or nymph and a surface presentation using a fly that is either fished wading or dead drifted. Within these two categories, several different methods or styles can be used. Water conditions often dictate the choice of method. While in fresh water, half-pounders seek areas that provide habitat with suitable cover, flow, depth, and bottom substrate. Since half-pounders are usually found scattered throughout broad riffles or at the head or tailout of a large pool, methods that cover the greatest amount of water in the least amount of time will usually be the most effective.

Floating, sinking, and sink-tip lines can be used for half-pounder fly fishing. Each has its place, and all can be fished using the traditional wet-fly presentation. Today, many anglers and writers refer to this method as “swinging.” It is unclear when this term first came into use, since it is not mentioned in early Atlantic salmon or steelhead fly-fishing literature, although the method itself was often used. The term may have been coined to discriminate the traditional wet-fly presentation from the dead-drift nymphing method using an indicator that has become popular in recent times.

Haig-Brown described the wet fly presentation as a “chuck-and-chance-it” method, although fly anglers today often employ line mends and other tactics to

present the fly. Half-pounder fly anglers begin by making short casts at the top of a run to cover the near water, lengthening the line with each successive cast. The rod tip is held low to the water’s surface during the swing and is used to lead the line and fly. The fly is allowed to swing through the run or riffle under slight tension. Each cast is fished completely across and down, and the fly is allowed to dangle for a few moments at the end of the swing. Half-pounders have a notorious habit of following the fly and then striking when the fly is dangling downstream below the angler. For this reason, the line and fly should be allowed to hang downstream after each cast for several seconds before retrieving line, irrespective of the fishing method used. Some anglers will even impart a few twitches to the fly before retrieving the line for the next cast, just to entice a reluctant half-pounder to strike.

Occasionally, a surface wading or skating fished on a floating line can be effective. Surface flies are best during low-light periods and often evoke rises, but also result in many misses. Nonetheless, the angler can follow up with a wet fly that will often result in a strike.

## Tackle for Half-Pounders

Most half-pounder anglers use a 9-foot to 10-foot 7-weight or 8-weight single-handed fast-action graphite rod. Some anglers fish for half-pounders and adult steelhead with trout-sized fly rods and even with the smaller rods characterized as “midge rods.” However, line and fly control is difficult with the shorter and lighter rods due to the size of the rivers, the longer casts required, and the windy conditions often encountered.



**HALF-POUNDERS WILL HOLD IN RUNS AND RIFFLES THAT PROVIDE A MODERATE CURRENT AND SOME FORM OF COVER SUCH AS ROCKS AND BOULDERS, OR A ROCKY SUBSTRATE. THE WATER SHOWN ABOVE IS ON OREGON'S ROGUE RIVER.**

Two-handed rods and Spey casting have become popular with many steelhead anglers in recent years. Many early two-handed rods were long and heavy and required double-taper or long-belly lines. In recent years, rod manufacturers have introduced lighter two-handed rods. A typical two-handed rod for half-pounders today ranges from 12 to 14 feet in length and is rated for 4-weight to 6-weight lines on the two-handed line scale.

Recently, switch rods have become popular, meant to be fished using either single-handed overhead casts or two-handed Spey casts. Typically, they range from 10-1/2 to 11 feet in length. If used all day as a single-handed rod, a switch rod can be fatiguing for average fly anglers. The shorter length of the switch rod also loses some of the casting and line-control advantages of a longer two-handed rod. Switch rods thus offer the advantage of being able to use two casting styles with one rod, but some of the disadvantages of weight and line control found in both single-handed and a two-handed rods.

But two-handed rods have several advantages over single-handed rods. Many runs are more effectively fished from a particular side of the river, but that side may be overgrown with alders and willows that limit back casts. While Spey casts can be made with a

single-handed rod, the shorter length of a single-handed rod makes longer casts difficult, while the longer casts that a two-handed rod can open up new runs to fly anglers.

A second advantage is that two-handed rods provide greater line mending and fly control due to their longer length. This can be very important for effective fly presentation.

Finally, two-handed rods offer a physical advantage with the casting stroke. Instead of using the arm and shoulder in an overhead casting motion, the upper hand and arm are kept low, and the upper hand functions as a pivot point, while the lower hand provides power to the stroke. This style of casting helps relieve stress on the arms and shoulders, reduces injuries, and allows the angler to fish longer.

Fly reels for half-pounder fishing are usually just matched to the rod, because there’s no great need for a strong, fish-stopping drag. Reels with basic click drags are usually adequate. Reels for single-handed rods from 3-1/8 to 3-3/4 inches in diameter are adequate, as long as they hold at least 100 yards of backing. Reels for two-handed rods are typically larger in diameter and weigh more to help balance the longer rods. Most reels for 4-weight to 6-weight two-handed rods range from 3-1/2 to 4 inches in diameter and hold adequate backing for half-pounders.

## Flies for Half-Pounders

Fly fishing for half-pounders and adult steelhead was first reported on the lower Eel River as early as 1879, based on reports printed in local newspapers. Early



**HALF-POUNDER STEELHEAD CAN BE FOUND IN THE LOWER KLAMATH RIVER FROM KLAMATH GLEN UPSTREAM TO JOHNSONS FROM MID-AUGUST THROUGH SEPTEMBER. ADULT STEELHEAD BEGIN TO ENTER THE RIVER SLIGHTLY EARLIER AND WILL CONTINUE TO ENTER THE LOWER RIVER THROUGH OCTOBER.**



POPULAR KLAMATH RIVER HALF-POUNDER FLIES ARE OFTEN SIMPLE HACKLE OR SPADE PATTERNS. FROM TOP LEFT TO RIGHT ARE THE BRINDLE BUG, BURLAP, ORLEANS BARBER, AND SILVER HILTON. THE LATTER REMAINS POPULAR TODAY.

anglers used wet flies designed for trout fishing, such as the Royal Coachman, Parmachene Belle, and Scarlet Ibis, and occasionally Atlantic salmon flies such as the Kate and Jock Scott. Most of the flies were bright, attractor-type patterns and often included jungle cock eyes. A few early patterns, such as the Alder and Governor, were more natural looking and might have been more effective for half-pounders. A few early California fly anglers also tied their own flies and created new patterns specifically for the lower Eel River.

For many years, the basic half-pounder and steelhead fly was constructed with a hackle fiber tail, a chenille body with a tinsel ribbing, wound hackle, and a hair or bucktail wing, although the wing was occasionally omitted, giving the fly a more nymph-like appearance. The chenille body was often wound thick, and some tiers extended the hair wing past the tail and hook bend. Many half-pounder flies still are tied to have a buggy appearance and a lifelike quality and are constructed with only a few materials. Today, successful half-pounder patterns incorporate materials that impart transparency and natural movement, along with some fish-attracting reflective feature. Many tiers overdress their flies, and as noted Southern Oregon steelheader Al Perryman says, less is more when it comes to dressing effective half-pounder flies.

Half-pounder flies can be grouped into four basic categories: winged wet flies, tied with various types of wing materials, including hair and feathers; spade and soft-hackle flies, simple patterns with a tail, body, and hackle; Spey flies, patterns that follow the traditional and modern Spey-type patterns; and dry and waking flies, meant to be fished on the surface. Marabou patterns have not been

popular, most likely due to the length of the marabou barbules, which results in a large silhouette. A divided, forward-facing wing style was popular on the Rogue River, fished on a floating fly line from a drift boat. The guide would row the boat down and across good-looking runs and tailouts while the client allowed his fly line and fly to dangle in the current downstream from the boat. The forward-facing wings were intended to give the fly more action in the water, and the client would occasionally impart action to the fly with short twitches of the line or rod.

Although many half-pounder patterns have a general nymph-like look, most patterns were not intended to imitate specific insects. However, specific imitations of aquatic insects may occasionally be useful for half-pounder fly fishing. Both nymphs and adults of the Great Mahogany mayfly (*Isonychia bicolor*), *Pteronarcys* and Perlidae stoneflies, and a number of caddisflies are common in rivers with half-pounder runs.

Hook sizes for half-pounder flies range from as large as 4 to as small as 12, although sizes 6 and 8 are commonly used. Black, up-eye Atlantic salmon style hooks remain popular.

Natural materials make effective and great-looking half-pounder flies. Body materials for half-pounder flies can include various furs, wool, synthetic materials, and feathers such as peacock herl, marabou, and emu, which can be wound on thread, wire, or tinsel and then wrapped around the hook. Strands of reflective Flashabou or ultraviolet materials added to the wing show up well underwater. However, only a few strands of material are needed to provide a lifelike sparkle to the fly.

Traditional steelhead fly patterns often call for a feather hackle collar, an



POPULAR EARLY ROGUE RIVER HALF-POUNDER FLIES OFTEN HAD FORWARD FACING WINGS AND INCLUDED (TOP LEFT TO RIGHT) THE BLACK ANT, ILLAHEE SPECIAL, JUICY BUG, AND SILVER ANT. THE FORWARD FACING, DIVIDED WINGS WERE MEANT TO GIVE THE FLY MORE ACTION.

early wet-fly style intended to duplicate insect legs. A hackle collar is still used on most steelhead patterns, although most flies do not resemble actual insects. Stiff hackles stand out and look unnatural. Soft feathers from hen chickens, guinea fowl, various pheasants, partridges, and waterfowl are a better choice. These make great hackles for half-pounder flies. They come in a variety of colors, and many have a naturally mottled appearance.

Most half-pounder flies are finished with a black head built up with tying thread. As an alternative, substituting colored thread can enhance the fly's appearance. Irrespective of the color, the head should be small, but not so small that the wing or other materials will pull out, and it should taper toward the eye. It is also desirable to leave a small space between the final head wraps and the eye to allow for attachment of the leader. The head should be whip finished to ensure it will not unravel and several coats of head cement applied to produce a smooth finish.

In Southern Oregon and Northern California, many wingless fly patterns have been developed specifically for half-pounders. Wingless patterns such as Silvius's Brindle Bug, Arana's Burlap, the Orleans Barber, the Brown and Gray Hackle Peacocks, and the Pecwan Nymph all incorporated a simple wingless nymph-like design. Sylvester Nemes, in *The Soft-Hackled Fly* (1975), wrote: "A minor revolution has been taking place during the last few years in the style of fly fishing for steelhead as practiced in the west. The style has been turned topsy-turvy from big, heavy-weight flies, sinking shooting heads; to small, sparsely dressed, unweighted flies, and the floating or greased line."

Today, wingless soft-hackle patterns

remain some of the most effective flies for half-pounders. Patterns may duplicate the early, original soft-hackle patterns found in Nemes's book, while others are more innovative creations.

#### Half-Pounder Management

Throughout the Pacific Northwest, steelhead runs have been under assault for years. While returns of half-pounders to the lower Rogue River and adult summer steelhead to the Cole Rivers Hatchery on the upper Rogue have exceeded average counts in recent years, just the opposite is true for the Iron Gate Hatchery on the Klamath, where adult steelhead returns have been at record lows for the past 25 years. Returns of adult steelhead to the Trinity River Hatchery have been good, although fewer adult steelhead demonstrate a half-pounder life history today when compared with the mid-1980s. Unfortunately, no scientific rationale has been put forth to explain the change.

The issue of the influence of hatchery-origin steelhead on wild steelhead populations becomes especially vexing when habitat loss is mitigated with hatchery production and wild spawning and rearing habitats are not available. As steelhead numbers decline and fewer anglers fish for steelhead, less pressure will be placed on responsible agencies for better management. Attention needs to be focused on hatchery practices and management opportunities that reduce impacts on wild steelhead, on ways to reduce the effects of hatchery domestication and improve adult fish returns, and on finding acceptable methods for integrating wild stocks with hatchery fish. If we do that, half-pounders and other steelhead runs may survive to provide fishing opportunities for many years to come.