Steelhead are anadromous rainbow trout native to the rivers flowing into the North Pacific Ocean. Like their cousins the Pacific Salmon, steelhead are a cultural and ecological keystone species, yet across their native range, wild steelhead are in dramatic decline.

Recovering wild steelhead populations will require large-scale efforts to address the many threats they face, but one thing we as anglers can control immediately and directly is the unintentional mortality and impacts caused by catch-and-release practices. Even a small improvement in catch-and-release survival can have a big influence overall on a population’s ability to sustain, or even grow, their numbers.

“\text{THE FATE OF FISH AFTER RELEASE IS PRIMARILY DETERMINED BY ANGLER BEHAVIOR}” — Brownscombe et al 2017

With numbers so low, and populations so precarious, it is crucial that every wild steelhead is able to reach their spawning gravel and spawn successfully. As anglers, we have the responsibility and opportunity to reduce our impact on these iconic fish, helping to ensure their survival now and into the future.

If we’re going to continue fishing, we must reduce our harm, go above and beyond regulations, and use science-based best practices to create better outcomes for each wild steelhead we catch-and-release.

**SEEK COOL WATER**

Angling becomes increasingly stressful for steelhead as temperatures warm. Mortality can increase exponentially beyond 16°C/61°F. If you can’t find water below 16°C/61°F, it’s probably time to stop fishing or change to pursuing warm water fish.

**AVOID FISHING IN SPawning HABITAT**

Spawning is the most critical period of the steelhead life cycle. If you see steelhead actively spawning, find a new spot to fish so you don’t accidentally wade on redds or disturb spawning fish.

**USE SINGLE, BARBLESS HOOKS**

Single, barbless hooks have demonstrated lower rates of deep-hooking and mortality for steelhead across several studies.

**HOLD FEMALE STEELHEAD BY THE BASE OF THE TAIL AND CLOSE TO THEIR PECTORAL FINS**

Do not hold by the belly. Female steelhead carry eggs in their body cavity, and as they near the spawning period, these eggs become loose and can be pushed out with pressure. Never touch the gills of steelhead.

**USE ARTIFICIALS**

Studies have consistently shown that organic baits (e.g., shrimp, roe) result in considerably higher rates of deep-hooking in steelhead than artificial tackle.

**MINIMIZE AIR EXPOSURE**

Ideally, don’t remove steelhead from the water at all. Steelhead lifted out of water for 10 sec or more can experience stress and behavioral impairment. Taking a picture is one of the main reasons steelhead are lifted out of the water, so be ready to use your camera quickly, or opt to take a photo of the fish with its gills fully submerged.

**USE A RUBBERIZED, KNOTLESS NET TO LAND FISH**

Rubberized, knotless landing nets can shorten fight times, and reduce stress and mortality compared to landing steelhead by hand. Remember to never drag steelhead onto rocks or shore.

**OTHER WAYS TO HELP:**

- Harvest hatchery fish produced with the intention that they will be harvested. When wild fish spawn with hatchery fish, their offspring are less likely to survive, and compromise the biology and ecology of wild populations.
- Consider limiting the number of fish you catch
- Avoid fishing runs where spawning goals are not being met.
- Speak out and show up
- Keep fish wet
- Use cool water
- Harvest hatchery fish

Catching a wild steelhead in their home waters is an amazing experience and a privilege. Using these guidelines will help anglers ensure these fish have the best chance of survival and help sustain, and even grow, their numbers. Today, this is more important than ever.

Learn more about the factors contributing to steelhead declines and what anglers can do to help recover these populations:

- keepfishwet.org
- wildsteelheadcoalition.org