

*the Sheboygan*

# Grand Slam

Gordon Martin

*And we're not  
talking bratwurst,  
beer, and cheese!*

**S**almon, steelhead, and brown trout are not the first things that come to mind for those who don't live here in Wisconsin. Usually the first three are—cheese, beer, and bratwurst! However, Wisconsin provides anglers an opportunity to catch the Sheboygan Grand Slam: Steelhead, salmon, and brown trout.

Wisconsin rivers that have fish are no secret. During fall migration, the Wisconsin DNR updates their web site weekly on how many fish have passed through their egg-collecting stations. Which leads me directly to stocking; none of these fish are wild, all are stocked. Rivers in Wisconsin are simply too warm during the summer months for smolt and juvenile fish to survive. The only option for Wisconsin is a very aggressive stocking program.



## Steelhead Stocking

The Wisconsin DNR stocks the major rivers and harbors from Kenosha to Green Bay, along with many others throughout the state. The DNR stocks the following steelhead strains: Chambers Creek which originated in Washington State at the South Tacoma hatchery. The Ganaraska strain, also originated on the West Coast, both are winter-run species. The Skamania strain makes up part of the spring/summer run. And in 2003 Wisconsin DNR introduced two new strains of steelhead, the Arlee and Kamloops. That brings a total of five different strains of steelhead in Wisconsin's waters!

Wisconsin steelhead range from 5 to 15 pounds, depending on the species. The winter-run fish, Chambers Creek and Ganaraska strains, are generally much bigger than Skamania. The average fish is around the 7- to 10-pound range. Males can be enormous, weighing up to 15-plus pounds. The average four-year-old fish is 29 inches and 10 pounds. This past year several fish were landed in the 36-inch range and 15-plus pounds. The steelhead fishing can be fantastic.

Last October I got a call from a woman who said she was new to the sport of fly-fishing. I immediately thought, how cool is this? Thankfully she hired me for her first shot at the Sheboy-



gan Grand Slam, even though she was focused exclusively on steelhead. Originally from Oregon, she has heard all the mystical stories of the elusive steelhead. After a quick run through tactics she was fishing. Being a quick learner I knew it was just a matter of time, she was doing everything right.

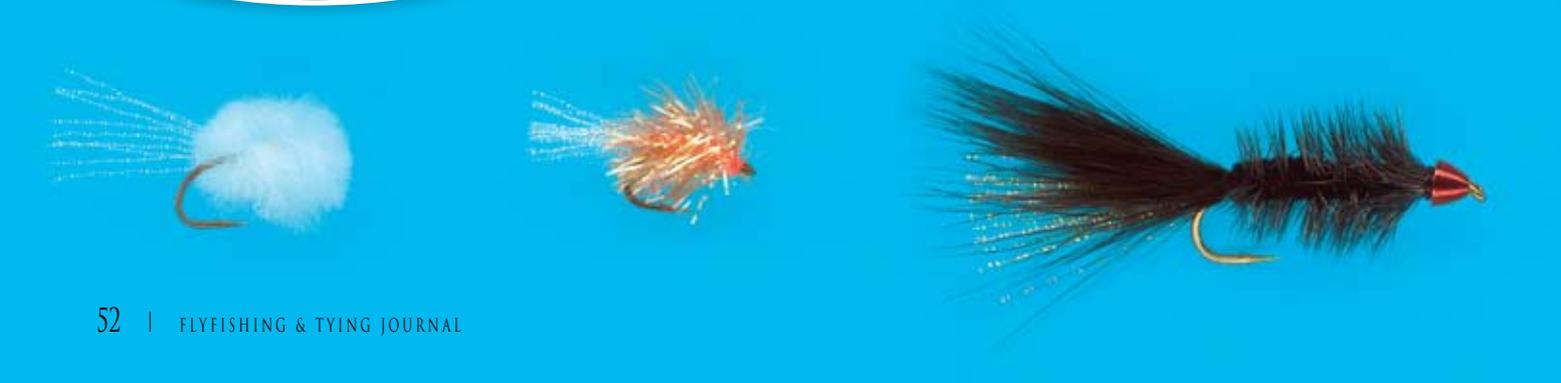
Then on one particularly great drift it happened...the rod bent over, she set the hook and very quietly said, "There he is." Her first steelhead, a beautiful bright male. You never forget your first steelhead.

## Salmon and Brown Trout

The Wisconsin DNR also stocks the following species: Chinook, coho and brown trout are all part of the fall runs. You can catch the [The] Sheboygan Grand Slam if your timing is right—Steelhead, brown trout, coho and, last but not least, the almighty chinook (king) salmon.

The kings can get huge; some runs might be smaller in size of fish, but never in numbers. The Sheboygan, Root, and Milwaukee rivers have so many kings it's unbelievable, and they're big. The king run of 2009 was a fantastic year and the fish were unusually large. I had many fish pushing the 40-inch mark and around 25-plus pounds. The Wisconsin record is 43 pounds 3 ounces, caught from Lake Michigan. The peak of the run is from mid September through October.

One afternoon of fishing turned into an "evening" of fishing. A client hooked a huge king, just enormous. I told him to do everything he could to get the fish at hand because we had 30 minutes till dark. I thought we might be in trouble with the sun setting faster than we could land this fish. A classic 45-minute



reel-screaming, rod-bending battle ensued until we landed “Jaws”, a monster 42-inch male...in the dark. A moment neither of us will forget.

The fall brown trout fishing is an opportunity to land the fish of a lifetime. The peak run is October through November. It is a common sight to see large browns gorging on eggs and nymphs that are kicked up from the spawning salmon as if they were attending an all-you-can-eat caviar buffet!

## Methods and Flies

In Wisconsin 7- to 9-weight single-handed rods are the norm. Switch rods are making some headway, Spey rods can be used on some of the bigger rivers. Weight-forward floating lines are standard for swinging streamers, sink-tip lines of various grains can be used during high water but I tend to shy away from using them because most rivers in Wisconsin are shallow; the deepest holes are sometimes only five or six feet deep.

## Indicator Fishing

Depending on water level, I have a 10-foot butt section tied to the fly line with a blood knot, then attach the indicator 3 or 4 feet from the connection to the fly line. The butt section is then tied to a 2-way swivel with an improved clinch knot, and I attach hollow lead core or split shot with two beads above the swivel. Attach a 2- to 3-foot, 6-pound leader (tippet) to the swivel, attach one fly at the end of that leader (tippet) then attach another 18-



to 24-inch leader (tippet) to the eye of the first hook, and that's my two-fly indicator rig.

If the water is off color, I will always switch to a heavier leader (tippet) to increase chances of landing fish. Generally, I use 6- or 8-pound Maxima. Split shot is used to vary the depth of the flies.

## Chuck and Duck Fishing

My favorite and most effective method is the chuck-and-duck (C&D) rig. The standard C&D rig consists of 30-pound running line (on reel with backing) connected to a 9-foot (20-pound) leader with an Albright knot. On the end of the 20-pound leader I use a #7 snap swivel with varying weights that are wrapped in parachute cord and burned at both ends to create a seal; also known as a slinky.

To secure it to the snap swivel I burn a hole into the parachute cord with a heated pin and snap it onto the swivel. I use a tandem-fly rig which starts at the swivel with 24 inches of leader (tippet) connected to the first fly. I attach another 16 inches of leader (tippet) to the eye (or hook bend) of the first fly, and attach another fly at the tag end of the second tippet. That is my tandem C&D rig.

Improved clinch knots are fine, make sure they are very secure. I adjust the weight by making several sizes of slinkies. The key to this method of fishing is being able to detect a strike, and oftentimes it is very subtle.

## Streamer Fishing

I use a 7- to 9-weight rod with weight-forward floating line for swinging streamers. A stout 9-foot leader tapered down to 2X



(approx. 8 pounds) at the connection to the fly...depending on the weight of the streamer. I apply two or three small split shot to get the fly down to the fish, it's trial and error on how much weight to use. I've seen steelhead holding close to the bank in two feet of water, other times I've had to get the fly down deep and fast in six feet of water.

It's important to adjust your tactics for the conditions. I use 6- or 8-pound tippet for steelhead, in dirty water you can get away with heavier 10- or 12-pound. My favorite tactics are swinging big streamers through "soft water" holding lies which can trigger tremendous strikes. Begin by casting to the far bank, let the fly sink, gradually swing the fly through the prime holding areas and be sure to let the fly get a full swing. The fly will sink to the strike zone, keep the rod tip down and hold on! Many times steelhead will hammer a fly on its way back up the water column.

## Flies

Woolly Buggers, Egg Sucking Leeches and black streamers with a little Krystal Flash are all good choices depending on the conditions. In clear-water conditions I use yarn eggs, nymphs, and various colored streamers. Steelhead and brown trout will sit behind salmon and gorge themselves on salmon eggs. Vary the size and color under low and clear water conditions. Eggs in various sizes in the #10-#12 range are not out of the question. When the salmon are in the rivers I use egg flies in the #6-#10 range.

Red, orange, yellow, chartreuse, and even blue should all be in your fly box. I tie a fool-proof pattern on a size 8 or 10 heavy-gauge scud hook with a little Krystal Flash off the back, then wrap the front quarter of the hook with yarn, whip finish, no glue and that's it. It's fast and simple.

Hare's Ears, Bead Head Black Stones, and *Hexagenia* nymphs are some of my go-to flies. The key is to get the flies down deep in the strike zone, then adjust your fly selection if your choices are not producing strikes. Egg Sucking Leeches, Woolly Buggers, Bunny Leeches, and Clouser Minnows can all produce mind-numbing strikes. Streamers are size 2-6 3x long hooks are standard. I tie a black Egg Sucking Leech with a fire orange head that works very well under most conditions.

## Water Water Water!

Far and away the biggest factor for good fishing conditions is water. With no rain during fall or spring runoff, rivers can have a very low flow rate, which can impede any sort of run. However when it does rain, the fishing can be amazing. Rivers that were devoid of fish and seemingly lifeless one day, can be spectacular within a few days of a decent rain.

Last fall Sheboygan River had a low-water spell. One morning it started raining and it didn't stop for three days straight. Water levels rose five inches, and I knew the fishing was going to get hot. The key to timing it right is to fish the rivers on the downturn of a major rain event. Five inches of rain will blow-out any river, but once the water recedes and begins to fall back to normal levels the fishing can be tremendous.

My timing on one such day was perfect. Several holes which previously had no fish were loaded three days later. It was a banner day, 8 steelhead landed—all dime-bright beautiful fish. I used a chuck-and-duck rig with an orange egg and a black stonefly nymph. It was an epic day, the kind we usually only dream about.

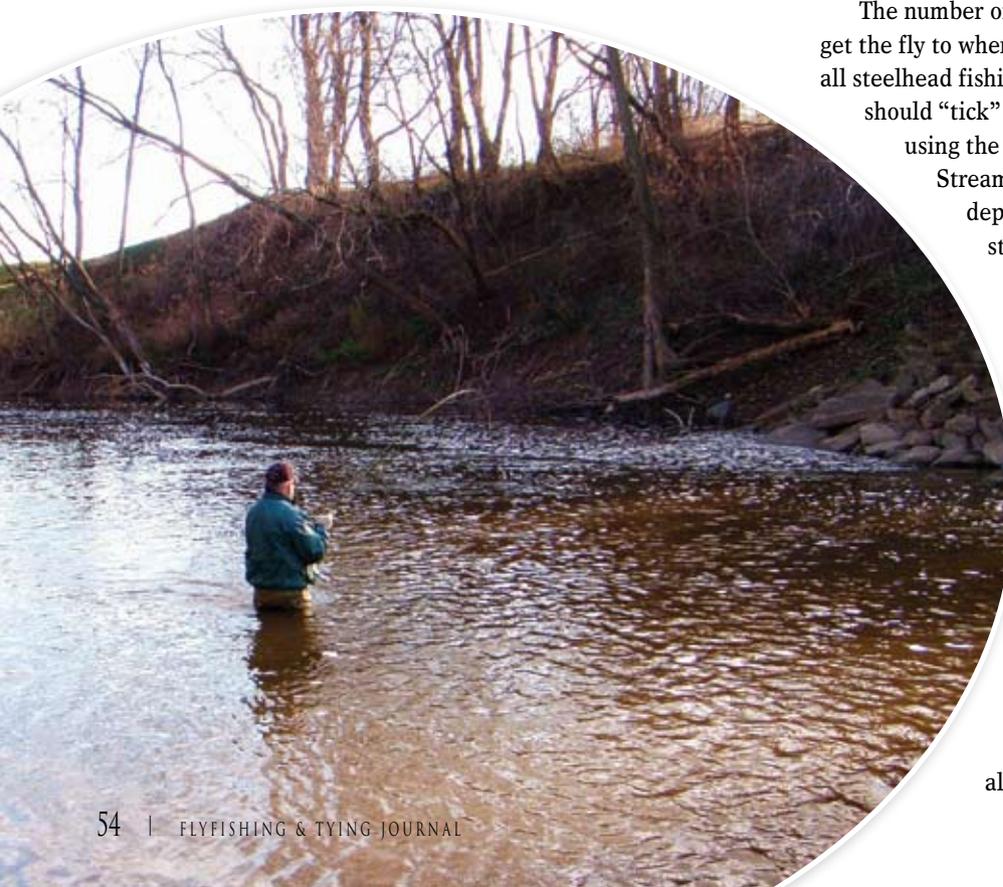
The slightest trigger will make fish move, and when they do it's usually pretty fast. Wisconsin steelhead are active in the traditional water-temperature range, between 40-50 degrees depending on the species. Ideal temperatures are in the 40's. Low barometric pressure and cloudy days will increase your chances greatly.

The number one key to steelhead fishing in Wisconsin is to get the fly to where the fish are, down deep. It is crucial, as with all steelhead fishing, to put the flies in the strike zone. The flies should "tick" the bottom a few times on every cast while using the chuck-and-duck method. **No tickie, no fishie.**

Streamer tactics are straight forward, adjust the depth of the flies, once again they must be in the strike zone. Depending on the myriad of conditions on any given day it is paramount that you adjust to the conditions.

## Seasons

Autumn is a beautiful time in Wisconsin. During early October the foliage color change provides a beautiful backdrop for fishing. Rivers vary in size from what are essentially small creeks to large free-flowing rivers. The Sheboygan River (my home water) is 40-50 feet across with deep holes and a rocky bottom. Classic pools with large tailouts will hold fish. Wading is easy but caution is needed during high-water flows. Bald eagles and osprey can be seen, always an added bonus.



The fall run for Wisconsin steelhead depends totally on the water level, temp, and flow. Conditions will vary, one week may be awful, the next may be tremendous. We follow the weather and water flows like a hawk. Generally speaking the fall steelhead run begins in late September and goes all the way until the rivers freeze over. It's difficult to pinpoint an exact time or date when the run is in full swing, it's all dependent on the water levels. October and November are generally very reliable.

The spring steelhead run begins once the ice melts and you can wet a line. Once the rivers are free of ice and all other debris, the spring run kicks into high gear very quickly. Again depending on water levels and temps, the spring run can begin in February and end in May. Generally speaking, late March until mid May steelhead are in the rivers, April is usually a prime time.



### **Accommodations & Area Attractions**

The rivers from Racine to Green Bay are surrounded by small towns with lodging, B&B's and other standard accommodations. My favorite is Kohler, not only do they have access to great water, but the accommodations are superb. River Wildlife is a private membership club which allows you access to the entire Kohler property on the Sheboygan River.

Wisconsin is known for many things—mostly cheese, beer, and bratwurst—and all are must-haves when you visit here, but have I mentioned the golf? Wisconsin is an outstanding golf destination and is home to the 2010 PGA Championship at Kohler's Whistling Straits. Besides the great fishing, we have great golf too! I've had several clients who are part of the "putt & cast" club. If you are a golfer, Sheboygan County has several top-rated public courses. Hit the links in the morning and go fly-fishing in the afternoon.

Other attractions include the beer barons of Milwaukee: Pabst, Leinenkugels, and several micro breweries can be found in Milwaukee and throughout the entire state. If beer is your thing after a long day on the river, Wisconsin is your place to be!

And let's not forget about cheese! Ahhh, Wisconsin cheese. Wisconsin has literally hundreds of cheese makers. Cheese curds are a Wisconsin tradition and an absolute must when you are visiting. There are several cheese festivals throughout the state, the Monroe Cheese festival is famous. Many of the small towns, like Elkhart Lake where I currently reside, have great Farmer's Markets featuring artisans and goods from all over the state.

Art shows, county fairs and a wide array of other attractions will also keep you coming back for a shot at the Sheboygan Grand Slam! Wisconsin's cheese, beer, bratwurst, and golf may bring you here, but the Sheboygan Grand Slam will keep you coming back!

### **Resources**

**Gordon Martin's web site:** [HYPERLINK "http://www.tie1onguideservice.com"](http://www.tie1onguideservice.com) [www.tie1onguideservice.com](http://www.tie1onguideservice.com). My local waters are the Milwaukee, Pike, Root, Sheboygan, and Pigeon rivers.

**Wisconsin Dept. of Natural Resources:** [HYPERLINK "http://www.dnr.state.wi.us"](http://www.dnr.state.wi.us) [www.dnr.state.wi.us](http://www.dnr.state.wi.us) **Great Lakes fishing web site:** [HYPERLINK "http://www.steelheadsites.com"](http://www.steelheadsites.com) [www.steelheadsites.com](http://www.steelheadsites.com) **Destination Kohler:** [HYPERLINK "http://www.destinationkohler.com"](http://www.destinationkohler.com) [www.destinationkohler.com](http://www.destinationkohler.com) **Discover Wisconsin:** [www.discoverwisconsin.com](http://www.discoverwisconsin.com) **Wisconsin Travel info:** [HYPERLINK "http://www.wisconline.com"](http://www.wisconline.com) [www.wisconline.com](http://www.wisconline.com)