a letter from Ed Ward

Congrats, Dana! It is good to see that International Speycasting lives on through the Flyfishing Forum. Your site has been most interesting, informative, and best of all, full of lively discussion. For the most part, I have been an intermittent, casual observer (steelhead bums don't own computers, they just occasionally use a friend's), however, today I would like to post a few thoughts on some recently discussed subjects, as seen by someone that lives by the shootinghead style of flyfishing for steelhead. My purpose is not to sway any traditional Spey practitioners from their methodology, but rather to establish a criterion of equal representation and to demonstrate that there is a completely effective and viable alternative to the long line techniques of traditional Speycasting. My opinions have been derived from many years of angling in this way (with shootingheads), and for me they have been solidly validated by the test of time. Please bear in mind that these are presented in a general context, and that there are probably some isolated, particular exceptions to some of what I have to say.

Shootingheads ... another form of Spinning?

I have no quarrel with traditional Speycasting - the method - which I view as just one of several different ways for catching steelhead on a fly. However, I do get irked by the fact that some sports from the traditional Speycasting camp seem to find it necessary to denounce and disrespect the validity of the shootinghead style of casting a doublehanded flyrod. I believe that most such indictments originate from individuals that are so stuck in the trappings of the inherited traditions of their own approaches to flyfishing, that they cannot allow for or accept the establishment of newer, alternative forms of flyfishing that differ in any way from their own personally sanctioned methods. I have no doubt that much of the bickering over the legitimacy of the shootinghead/doublehanded rod styles of flyfishing would end quickly if more of it's detractors would set aside their bias and open up their eyes and minds for a season or two out on the river. Shootingheads as spinning? Fishing for a day with someone that is just moderately versed in the use of shootingheads on a doublehanded rod would probably be an educational and perhaps enlightening experience for most advocates of traditional Speycasting. The fact is, both traditional Spey and the shootinghead styles of casting and fishing a doublehanded flyrod, have their advantages and disadvantages, and whichever method one chooses to use should be based upon a matter of personal preference and needs, and not some misguided assumption of moral superiority deduced from a supposed birthright in tradition.

It is wise to remember that, even though flyfishing is a sport of many traditions, all traditions were at one time new and novel, and probably the cause of some controversy. Without the continual exploration and evolution of fresh ideas and innovations, flyfishing would most likely be so unproductive, time and labor intensive, or stale, that very few of us would have the desire or resources to participate. Imagine trying to flyfish for winter steelhead using bamboo flyrods, silk flylines, and catgut leaders, under the modern day circumstances of decreased steelhead returns and increased fishing pressure, especially from the other sectors of sportfishing.
Whether one prefers to use a doublehanded flyrod with time-honored, traditional long line tactics, or the more recent untraditional shootinghead approaches, all have been or have benefited from, new and nontraditional innovations to the sport at one time or another. I believe that the more important point to bear in mind when considering new techniques or ideas for acceptance as flyfishing, is how do they fit in with the basic definition of our sport?

What defines flyfishing? Is it the fly? In part, yes. But, one could argue that in reality a "fly" was, for the greater part of its history, intended to imitate an insect. Does this mean that an an4let that is flycasting a crab fly for bonefish, or a prawn pattern for Atlantic salmon, with a flyrod, flyreel, and flyline, is not flyfishing? Of course not. The modern concept of a fly has necessarily evolved to reflect the expanding horizons of our sport. In actuality, the most defining aspect of flyfishing is the flyline, and the truly unique method of casting that is required to use it. They are the elements that undeniably and distinctly distinguish flyfishing from all other forms of sportfishing with a rod and reel. Considering this, as long as one is fishing a fly, on a flyrod, flyreel, and flyline, WHILE USING THE WEIGHT OF THE LINE AS THE MEANS FOR MAKING THE CAST, one is in fact flyfishing.

At least that is the way that I see it, and when I am out on a river, jacking a 42' shootinghead sinktip line and lead-eyed fly 85' out into the smoky-green currents with a 13' 8 weight doublehanded flyrod for winter steelhead, I have no doubts about the fact that I am, indeed flyfishing. My fly was tied specifically for steelhead from mostly natural materials, and specifically designed to be cast on a flyrod. My cast is being performed with the weight of the flyline, and not the weight of a "lure" or "fishing weight", and the line was built expressly as a delivery and presentation platform for my flies. I, for one, truly revel in the tight, precise movements, and the blazing speed and power, of a finely tuned and well cast shootinghead system - as opposed to the grandiose and waltz-like productions of traditional Speycasting. Spinning? I think NOT. Some people are exhilarated by the speed and handling of high performance sport cars, while others are drawn to the elegance and comfort of meticulously built luxury sedans - the purpose of both is getting from here to there.

Shootingheads and Mending
I seem to catch my fair share of steelhead Fall, Winter, and Spring - on many different rivers, including some of the largest that are conducive to flyfishing. During the Summer, in Alaska, after daily guiding duties, I swing flies for King salmon. All of it is done with shootingheads, and none of it would be productive for me if I could not mend my line. Mending is critical for flyfishing steelhead - particularly winter steelhead - and especially for the taking of King salmon on the fly. This should be validation enough on whether or not shootingheads can be mended effectively.

Shootingheads and the Stripping of Line
When flyfishing for steelhead with doublehanded flyrods and shootingheads, the need to strip in running line prior to each cast is a procedure that does result in some "down" time when compared to angling with long line tactics. However, in my observation, anglers that have become proficient at casting shootingheads seem to be far more consistent at achieving effectively fishable casts than traditional Speycasters -
particularly when casting conditions are less than perfect - and therefore have a lower incidence of having to remake casts because of a failure to perform the initial effort properly. In my experience, when it comes to upping the odds for catching steelhead on the fly, the benefits of casting consistency far outweigh the importance of the small amount of time saved because of not having to strip in line.

**Shootingheads and Frigid Weather**

In conditions of extremely cold water and frigid air temperatures, icing of the guides is definitely more of a problem with the shootinghead style of doublehanding than with traditional Spey. But, consider that a 14’ 1” doublehanded rod with a 42’ shootinghead can be fished out to about 70’ while keeping the running line completely suspended off of the water. Also, one can dress the shootinghead, running line, rod, and guides, with flyline dressing prior to fishing under such conditions, and shake off the water before each cast to extend effective fishing ranges. In any case, during most such circumstances I would gladly leave the deep guts and 100’ casts to the traditional Spey advocates. I know just where MY fly catchable steelhead are going to be - and it's not in 8’ of water, at the end of a 100’ cast.

**Traditional Speycasting and Graphite Rods**

I believe that traditional Speycasting with modern day graphite rods may be beyond the capabilities of being COMFORTABLY mastered by most anglers of average abilities and physical stature. I include myself in this group. Part of this is due, as someone else alluded to elsewhere on this website, to the fact that graphite flyrods recover very quickly from being loaded to unloaded, and therefore the timing of the casting process has become very particular. Also, graphite rods are extremely light in their tips - in actual weight - and thus do not reproduce the steady, deliberate inertial energy buildup or "pendulum casting effect" of the old greenheart flyrods. This loss of the sustained energy storing and releasing characteristics of greenheart has to be compensated for with additional power supplied by the caster during rod torqueing movements - stipulating very strong wrist and forearm strength to perform properly, or maintain for any length of time. On the other hand, casting shootingheads proficiently on a doublehanded rod depends mostly on technique - no special provisions in physical strength are called for - and I prefer that my casting be as pleasurable as possible, and not reminiscent of a weight training program.

**Casting Distances ... Waiter, Could I have the Check.  A Reality Check, Please!**

As a group, fishermen have a universally notorious reputation for exaggeration, and it is very well deserved. 100’+ fishing casts are like 20 pound plus steelhead... ... there are far, Far, FAR fewer in actual existence than one tends to hear about. Here are some of the reasons why-- - -

- Distances on the water are deceiving, especially the deeper that one is wading. Standing submerged waist high in the river makes an 85’ cast look like 100’.
- On casts exceeding 90’, line curvature, squiggles, and slack, can constitute 10 to 20 percent of the actual length of line that is thrown. In addition, if the belly of the flyline touches down on the water BEFORE the fly, then even more line can be subtracted from the true distance of the cast.
- Some people crave recognition, and in their quest to achieve it, will justify as right actions with less-than-honest credibility. Raising the rod and pulling back on it at the end of a cast to "slip" leftover line out onto the water, does not add to the distance of the cast.

Optimum Length of Shootingheads

Years of experimentation with shootingheads have led me to conclusions on line length that parallel Per Stadigh’s findings. I too have determined that Windcutter lines are too long to realize to the fullest, the benefits of shootinghead styles of casting. At this time, at least in the U.S., optimal shootingheads for doublehanded flyrods are available only through personal efforts of cutting and splicing lines at home.

Hooks for Tube Flies

It has been over 15 years since I have had the opportunity to fish for Brown trout. If memory serves me correctly, Brown trout have a slightly fleshier mouth than do Rainbow trout (at least the big lake-run Browns of Lake Huron do). It may be true then that the Atlantic salmon has a similar comparison to the steelhead. I mention this because of questions concerning hooks for tube flies. I have no doubts about the effectiveness of small doubles or trebles on Atlantic salmon, but would have to question their usefulness on steelhead. I have employed a system similar to tube flies when fishing for steelhead, for the past 8 years, primarily to minimize the chance of injury to native steelhead when using flies that would normally be tied on single flyhooks larger than size 1/0. This system has also had the added benefit of an increased landing/hooked ratio. I have found single hooks to be the best at hooking and holding steelhead. In my experience, these are the characteristics that make for the most positive results: straight eye, short shank, point of the hook aimed more towards the eye of the hook instead of parallel with the shank, slightly offset, and built on the thinnest wire that one can get by with. My ratio for the 2001-2002 winter season was 25 steelhead landed out of 30 positively identified steelhead hooked, with a zero injury and mortality rate.

Bobbers and Flyfishing for Steelhead

The use of accessories such as bits of yarn, small Corkies, very buoyant dry flies, "hot" colored leader butts, or even alternating bands marked onto the tip of the flyline - as aids in the detection of subtle strikes when fishing submerged flies - is indicator fishing. When the purpose of such an accessory expands to include fly presentation, in other words, when it is also being used to suspend a fly in the water column at a predetermined depth, that object then becomes a BOBBER. But, such a change in purpose and definition does not automatically disqualify the method from flyfishing. Quite frankly, I believe that it is pointless for anyone to try to deny the qualification of the use of bobbers in flyfishing as just another alternative technique of flyfishing. So long as a fly is being used on fly tackle, and the cast is conducted by means of the weight of the flyline, and not by way of any additional weights that may or may not be attached to the leader, flyfishing with a bobber still fits in with the most basic physical description of flyfishing. In any discussion on this subject, it is prudent for those that do not utilize this method, to bear in mind that not everyone is blessed with the good
fortune of having ready access to rivers, races of steelhead, or situations of fishing, that are conducive to swungfly tactics. There are occasions and conditions where flyfishing with a bobber offers the only viable option for having a REASONABLE chance for catching a steelhead on a fly.

The truth is, the most aired objections towards bobber fishing have more to do with the anglers using the method than with the method itself. I believe that a great deal of the discord over bobber fishing would dissipate quickly if the individuals practicing the technique would follow along with the concept of working through a piece of fishing water at a steady pace, rather than "camping" or "hotspotting" at particular places, actions which tend to throw a huge monkey wrench into the works of established steelheading etiquette. The notion of working through a run - the original intent of which was to provide for a thorough coverage of a piece of water with the fly - is now, more than ever, needed to provide for a fair means of opportunity for increased numbers of anglers to fish over a limited amount of steelhead water and steelhead. To impede this process through ignorance is barely excusable, to do so knowingly is an act of incredible selfishness and disrespect towards other anglers, the spirit of our sport, and THE RESOURCE. As population densities increase, our rivers and their steelhead are more than ever in need of having as many friends and stewards as possible, and processes in sportfishing that are more democratic in scope, that encourage and afford for additional people to pleasurably partake of the resource in a civil manner - such as the rule of working through a run at a reasonable pace - become all the more important and critical to the preservation and continuation of our sport and the resources upon which it depends. Attitudes of fishing without regard to the impact that one's actions may have on other-anglers, or the future of the resource, can no longer be accepted or tolerated.

The only valid argument that can be made against the ACTUAL METHODOLOGY of flyfishing with a bobber has to do with the fact that out of all of the different aspects of flyfishing for steelhead, it is the one technique that is VERY effective at taking steelhead that are no longer or never were willing to move to a swung fly. While this characteristic is of no detrimental consequence in a put and take fishery for hatchery steelhead, it is a very dangerous capability to allow for in situations involving native steelhead. The ultimate value of native steelhead is their function in the continued propagation of their species, and when native steelhead are found to be holding in specific, or contained areas for extended periods of time, any method of sportfishing that harbors a potential for re-catching individual steelhead, time after time, and thus subjecting them to recurring episodes of stress - even long after they have lost any predisposition to "play the game" should be prohibited, and flyfishing with bobbers unequivocally falls into this category. Under such circumstances, sportfishing needs to be regulated in such a way as to allow enough fishing opportunity to maintain the interest of the angling community, and thus it's contact and concern with the resource, while at the same time managing it's impacts on the steelhead populations at a reasonable level of acceptance. By removing the use of bobbers from the available options for flyfishing, only a small percentage of the total population of steelhead - those fish that are aggressive enough to move to a fly - will be subject to angling pressure, and those individual fish that have been caught once or twice, and are no longer willing to chase a fly, will be far less likely
to be caught again and again, and repeatedly exposed to stress from catch and release. The only other objectionable attribute that I have associated with bobber fishing is it's penchant for arresting the growth of those anglers that have entered into steelheading by learning to flyfish for them in this manner. Many flyfishers in this group have become so dependent on the method's combined traits of simplicity and effectiveness that they don't seem able to muster up the spirit of adventure to break away from it's blanket of security to genuinely explore or experiment with other approaches of flyfishing for steelhead. That is a real shame, because those anglers that are incapable of making the sacrifice in time and effort to wean themselves from bobber fishing to learn how to take steelhead on a swung fly, will never succumb to the thrill of the steelhead's most exemplary quality, that part of it's character that separates the steelhead from other species of fish, and which makes it the Holy Grail of most ardent flyfishers ... the steelhead's predisposition for MOVING TO A FLY!

A Personal Note

I have it seems, gained a small bit of notoriety when it comes to casting shootingheads on doublehanded flyrods. While I feel that sometimes some of my casting may be worthy of it, it should be known that this can only be said for casts that are performed from my right side, under optimum conditions. Casts from my left literally suck. This is no fault of my casting style, or a lack of understanding in technique, but rather because I am one of those people that cannot do jack-momo from my left, not even pick my nose. I state this because I took up steelheading with a doublehanded flyrod because I love to fish, not to try and gain a name for myself in casting. I go to the river to chase steelhead and have fun, not to impress any@ one with my casting abilities (or lack of them), or to fulfill anyone's expectations of being a "good caster". It is in fact, rare for me to throw casts in excess of 85', yet I manage to catch a respectable number of steelhead, because I have been fortunate enough to have realized one of the most overlooked truths in steelhead flyfishing - and it is not a special fly, line, technique, or the ability to cast amazing distances. It is instead, the aptitude and discipline to recognize and thoroughly fish, only that steelhead water that can be MOST EFFECTIVELY covered by my particular line setup and fly. Combined with judicious wading, experience has shown me that there are far more steelhead to be taken on the fly within 85' of one's bellybutton, than are to be found out at the end of 100' plus casts. Just a thought for any flyfishers out there that are weary of trying to attain some of the implied standards of casting that seem to be continually circulating in the Spey casting community nowadays. Tight loops and big pulls!

Ed Ward