

STEELHEAD

By *Samuel M. K. eider*

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

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through which these little rivers flow in their shallow canyons with willow-bordered, green sod banks. There are places where one is reminded of the famous chalk streams of England with wide-spreading oaks and all. They lack only the feudal castle on the hill, but even that is provided by a great country home with battlements and spires, which occupies a hilltop far back where it can command an immense estate stretching down to the blue ocean.

On down the coast where the mountains retreat still farther back is a wide farming and grazing country. And here—only one hundred and fifty miles from the great Los Angeles metropolitan area—flows the Santa Ynez, the most productive of all the little steelhead rivers of the south. A tiny brook in mid-summer, it heads far back in the higher reaches of the Coast Range to become, with this immense watershed, a real river after the first rains of winter. And then with a continued flow assured it receives not only one but several good runs of large steelhead through the winter. And the splendid fish taken in great numbers there each good season in this easily reached region so close to a great center of population are a constant reminder of nature's marvelous works.

I have celebrated Christmas by taking a limit of fine big steelhead from the Santa Ynez late in December, and again have wound up the season with a catch of splendid fish the last day of February, at which time legal fishing ends for the season. Thirty miles of the lower river are legally open to the winter angler, and these offer an interesting variety of fishing water. One time I started fishing at gray dawn, far up the river where it slipped swiftly between sod banks lined with a veritable jungle of willow and cottonwood. A good fish took my bait in the murky current, at once charged off downstream and tangled in a mass of drift. And a bit later an equally fine steelhead not long from salt water, as indicated by its silvery sheen when it leaped high, seized my bait and neatly encircled a clump of grass growing in the shallows.

A third fish, fully a ten-pounder, fought me mightily for a half hour then went free while I tried desperately to work my way down past the heavy growth along the shore. Such fishing is distinctly sporty, and I heartily recommend it to the angler who loves to overcome obstacles, but it is not productive of a nice fish to take home, perhaps to appease the family for this sudden desertion from the fireside. So, I wooed the Red Gods diligently that day, went far downstream and hooked and landed a fine steelhead in the rocky pools under the falls, where the water had all the speed and foaming dash of a real mountain stream.

Farther down, I found anglers trolling from boats in the mile-long lagoon and others surf-fishing for steelhead out in the pounding breakers. Thus did the river that day provide splendid big fish to be taken in any kind of water the angler desired to try—even the difficult jungle water where I failed so sadly.

Surf casting for steelhead is an interesting game, as practiced by many anglers off the little rivers before the tidal bars are open and while the great schools of fish are waiting out in the roaring breakers where they have assembled so faithfully. Fairly heavy gear is needed for this angling, as considerable lead must be used to cast the spinner or wobbling lure well out into the breaker line. A long rod for easy casting, much like that favored by the winter anglers in the North, but with more backbone for handling the surf sinker, will permit a hooked steelhead to fight a tremendous battle out in the wild water of a heavy surf.

Surf fishermen ply their art through the winter off the Ventura River still farther south and frequently enjoy splendid sport, even in seasons when the river cannot break through to the sea. And only a few miles farther down the beach is the Santa Clara, where often a trickle of water over the bar will attract the fish without giving them purchase even at high tide to reach the lagoon above. There is an undeniable charm in surf fishing for these silvery warriors. You wear hip boots