

## Steel the Show with Boat Control

By Kyle Buck for Woods -n- Waters News

Boat control...gotta be talkin' about walleye fishin' right? Not so darn fast.

While the guys who pursue those marble eyed, eatin' type fish think they've got a monopoly on the whole boat control issue, there's a technique that's catching on with the steelhead fraternity that's bound to make the likes of Mark Martin and Al Lindner proud.

It's similar to a presentation they call Boondoggin' out west. Around here most guys call it back bouncing. And at the risk of sounding like a snake oil salesman, it's just about the hottest thing going for fall and early winter river run steelhead.

I was introduced to back bouncing last November by Rob Gardenour a Muskegon River guide who has mastered the technique. And I was introduced to Rob by Tom Irwin a well known and somewhat crotchety retired charter captain and outdoor writer. "You just gotta fish with this guy...He's unreal." he said, "I've fished with Rob a half dozen times in the past month (this was around Christmas '06), and only once, when the river was high and dirty, did we land fewer than 10 steelies."

Now I've known Irwin since I was a kid, and seriously... when it comes to fishing he's not easily impressed. So I set up a trip with Gardenour and invited Irwin to join us. Irwin said he'd go, but only if I'd make a wager with him on who caught the most fish. "Five bucks a fish," he said and I reluctantly agreed saying, "no biggie I've beat you before." "Me," he said with a wry smile, "I'm bettin' on Rob!"

A couple days later we met Rob at the Salmon Run launch on the Muskegon River down stream from the city of Newaygo. The weatherman said it would warm quickly after sunrise. I hoped he was right because my dashboard temp read 16 degrees. Irwin hopped out of the truck and shook hands with Rob and said, "Steelhead... does that name refer to the fish or the fisherman." "Both," Rob said laughing, "You gotta be a little hard headed to enjoy fishin' in this weather."

Rob's boat is pretty typical of most river steelhead fisherman. A 17 foot wide, very deep flat bottom. I was somewhat surprised to see a prop outboard. A testament I would later learn of his knowledge of the river. An anchor stanchion on the bow and a big 80# transom mount Minn Kota trolling motor on the stern completed the rig.

Gardenour explained that we'd work our way up river concentrating on large deep holes and long runs. "Back bouncing works best on medium to large rivers where you can cover a lot of water," he said. "Don't get me wrong," he added, "it'll work on small rivers too, but this stretch of the Muskegon with its long deep runs is perfect for bouncing."

Rob's rods of choice are nine foot medium Fenwick spinning rods with Abu Garica spinning reels spooled with 10 pound monofilament. I asked him about super-lines like Power Pro or Fire Line and he said he'd tried them but always ended up going back to mono. "No question you can feel everything with the 'super-lines'," he said, "but everything you feel, the fish feels too. Also, if you snag up your sinker you can bust up a rod pretty easily with those lines. Bottom line, it's a personnel preference thing and I think I do just as well with fewer headaches using mono."

On the way to the river that morning Irwin explained Rob's technique. "Really, it's very similar to vertical jigging for walleyes," he'd said; "except instead of going the same speed as the current and fishing vertical, Rob works the boat down stream slightly slower than the current allowing the anglers to fish down stream at about a 45 degree angle."

He went on to explain that because most of the water was 10 feet or less and very clear that it seemed to be more productive to keep the baits down stream at enough angle to keep the fish from being spooked by the boat. He said, "I've caught fish right under the boat with Rob, but it seems to work best keeping your bait down stream 10 to 15 yards from the boat."

Irwin commented that the thing that surprised him the most was that back bouncing isn't a match the current presentation. "You know in all my previous experience fishing spawn for river steelies, we always tried to match the current with our presentation," he said. "You know, make it more natural I guess." He continued, "The way Rob fishes, that bait is moving quite a bit slower than the current. Heck I've even been with him in a strong wind when we were actually getting blown up stream and still caught fish. It really amazes me, but you know what they say; you can't argue with success."

Rigging for back bouncing is as simple as it is effective. Rob likes a simple dropper rig. But instead of a fixed dropper like you'd get using a three way swivel, he uses a double barrel swivel rig. He slides one # 7 barrel swivel onto the main line and follows it with a clear plastic bead to protect the knot. Then he secures another barrel swivel to the main line with a Palomar knot. From the sliding barrel on the main line he

ties a 4 to 8 inch dropper to a pencil sinker. For the leader to the hook (tied to the other end of the barrel swivel stopper), he uses about 30 inches of 6 or 8 pound fluorocarbon line. Hook wise, Rob likes a #4 or #6 saber hook by Red Wing Tackle.

Using the pencil weights on the droppers makes this rig remarkably snag free.

I asked Rob if he ever tried Slinky weights? He said he had and that they did work but you lose too much bottom feel. "A big part of this technique," he said, "is feeling the weight bang into the bottom. Slinkys are just too soft."

Spawn sacs tied with foam float balls are Robs #1 choice for back bouncing, though he admits that fresh skein is at times unbelievably hot. Early in the season, November and December, he likes dime sized bags. Later in the season, when the water is cold and the fish are not as active he switches to larger nickel and even quarter sized bags. "I know that seems backwards," he said, "but it seems those non-active fish will go out of their way to smack a big bag while just ignoring smaller ones."

When he has some, steelhead roe is Robs #1 choice though he says salmon eggs work almost as well. While fishing with Rob I learned just how important color is concerning spawn sac mesh. Before we started fishing Rob handed both Irwin and I baby food jars of prepared spawn sacs. Each jar had four different colors patterns: chartreuse, hot pink, orange and red.

I asked Rob which color usually worked best. He said, "Really, they all work but on any given day one color will usually out produce another." He explained that early in the day before the sun gets high or on overcast days that chartreuse is usually his first choice. He said that when the sun is high hot pink usually gets the most attention and that red and orange seem to turn on later in the day.

One thing that surprised me about this tactic is that it is really not a run and gun approach. I was amazed at the attention Rob paid to each hole or run. If the initial pass didn't produce fish (and honestly on this day most first runs did), he'd make another pass or two usually moving shallower to the sides of the run. He said, "These fish, especially if they are active, usually don't hold in the deepest part of the run. They like the edges where the current brings food to them." He added, "This is especially true during November and early December."

Another thing that surprised me is that running up and over the fish and floating back down on top of them doesn't seem to bother them in the least. On this particular day, in one 75 yard run, we hooked nine fish and landed seven of them. I lost track, but I bet we made that run 10 times before it burned out and we had to move on.

I stuck the first fish that morning. Noting that Rob baited up with a chartreuse sac, I followed suit while Irwin gave hot pink a try. At the head of a long run, Gardenour threw his line back about fifteen yards and with his trolling motor in forward started following his presentation down stream. He explained that the biggest mistake most of his clients make is letting out too much line which causes them to drag their sinkers. He said, "You always have to maintain the feel of that sinker bouncing bottom."

I remember thinking that Irwin was right. That this is a lot like jigging for walleyes, when I dropped my rod tip and didn't feel that familiar tap of the sinker hitting bottom. I lifted hard and the fish, a brightly colored male, cleared the water twenty yards below the boat.

After a spirited battle which included three more jumps, I lead the 10 pound class fish to the net. When Rob lifted the fish from the water I turned to Irwin and said, that's

one sawbuck my way. He said, "I ain't worried just wait 'til ol' Robbie gets on a roll." He was right. We ended up landing a dozen steelies that morning (all released). I got three, and Irwin got three. Do the math.

Since that day "back bouncing" has become a big part of my steelhead fishing arsenal. It's becoming more popular on the Muskegon, but the technique has proven just as productive to date on the Big Manistee, Kalamazoo and the St. Joe.

Anyone interested in learning the art of back bouncing first hand can contact Capt. Kyle Buck at Great Lakes Guide Service, (231) 638-5752.

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Back bouncing is really not new; a similar style of fishing from an anchored position has been used for years for chinook salmon and steelhead. The one wrinkle that is somewhat novel is the no anchor, mobile approach of using a transom mount trolling motor to control the down stream descent of the boat. Close to the same thing can be accomplished by dragging an anchor and using oars, but the guy stuck rowing can forget about fishing.

Well, Irwin won the bet even though he didn't hold me to it. Even if he had it would have been worth it because we learned how to Steel the Show with Boat control.

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