

## Epic Steelhead Battle

*Mark Kimmins*

It was a lovely sunny week in mid-August 2015 and I was staying at the wonderful Kalum River lodge in Terrace BC, hosted by Andrew Rushton and Deanna Taylor. I often think that there are great fishing days, and wonderful bright sunny days, but rarely do the two go together. This week had already been an exception, with fantastic fishing and good weather, but little did I know that an epic battle was still in store. On one of the last fishing days I was on the mighty Skeena with guide Pierrot Bernier and co-guest John. Fishing had been decent all morning, but no steelhead yet. I had fished both the top and bottom of this great run, but not the riffles in the middle. I decided to make a few casts in the slower middle section, and was having a little trouble keeping off the rocks during the swing. I was experimenting with my mends for better depth control, and mid-way through a drift the line just stopped hard and seemed like it stuck on a big boulder. I went to pull off the rock and the line purposely started to move steadily upstream. Pierrot immediately noticed the tell-tale signs of a decent fish and rose to grab the net. The fish turned and headed toward the “sticks” at the bottom of the run.

“Keep your rod high, keep him off the sticks!”. Too late. The fish charged through the sticks and the line became rigidly stuck. I was wrapped! Crap. I thought it was over. Pierrot was more optimistic and charged in and quickly unwrapped the line. Expecting slack line and disappointment I reached for the reel. My knuckles were smacked as line rapidly stripped off and the reel screamed. Oh what a glorious sound. The fish charged into the center of the river, well into the backing, and briefly came to the surface. “Good fish!” said Pierrot, who looked excited “Try to turn him when he’s ready”. The fish had other plans and disappeared below the surface and then became completely still. No more line stripped out. There was steady strong pressure on the line but no movement. “Just keep pressure on and wait” said Pierrot.

We waited, and waited and waited. “I think it must be wrapped on something again” I said, “but it makes no sense as it is in the middle of the river”. “I am applying pressure but there is no movement at all”. “I think the fish is just resting in a deep hole” said Pierrot, “Try a little bit more pressure”. I started to horse the fish a little, but became very worried I was about to pop off. “I think that is all I can apply without breaking off” I said.



**Steelie “stuck” in a deep hole**

“We can either wait it out or get the boat to see if we can change the angle and cause it to move” Pierrot replied. We waited for as long as we could stand and there was just no movement. The fish

felt like a log and I really thought it was gone and the line must be stuck on something immovable. "We have no choice" I said. "That fish is not moving".

"I'll get the boat" said Pierrot and off he ran. I kept steady pressure but still no movement. The boat arrived and I carefully got on board. As we approached the fish I reeled as fast as I could to maintain pressure. I was convinced we were stuck but as we got closer the fish began to head shake, and then suddenly charged downstream. We gave chase but the fish soon turned and headed back to shore. I reeled furiously and tried to find an angle to get the fish to net. The fish was holding near the shore in a deep pocket and we chose to land the boat and jump back out.



**Chasing Steelie from the boat**

Almost immediately the fish screamed back out and tried to get positioned in some faster current. I thought we were done for if the fish managed to get broadside in faster water so I tried to keep as much pressure as possible. We followed and ran down the beach. Just then a boat came roaring toward us and the line. "We have a fish!!" we yelled, thinking other anglers would be respectful as soon as they saw what was happening. The boat got closer and we yelled and gesticulated for them to back off. They came perilously close to driving over the fish and then roared past. Perhaps the fish was tired, or maybe the jerk boat helped to push it back in but the fish made an upstream charge and came to rest again in the deep pocket not far from shore. "OK try to lift his head, so we can net him" said Pierrot.



**Back on shore chasing down the beach**

I tried, and tried but it felt like the fish weighed a hundred pounds. "I don't get it" I said, the fish is not moving. "Really lift" said Pierrot. I did and the rod bent over and the line refused to budge. "The line is definitely stuck", "I think the fish must be under a log". Arghhh !! I can't believe it. After all we had been through already. Pierrot agreed that the line seemed to be completely stuck. "I will go in and try to free the line, but you have to realize that the fish will probably get off if it hasn't already". "OK" I said.

Pierrot grabbed the line and waded into the Skeena. He followed the line until he was waist deep, then felt the line below the water. Briefly, most of Pierrot disappeared under water and he came surging up holding and pulling a small but long log. He grabbed the line and untwisted it from where

it was stuck. I was shocked when almost immediately the line came under full tension and the fish was clearly still there.

After another brief run the fish clearly was ready. Slowly and carefully it was brought close to shore and Pierrot was finally able to get the net under this brave Skeena warrior.

After high fives and a brief visit with this beautiful steel wonder, we said our goodbyes as this marvelous child of the BC wilderness swam free and returned home. In my mind Pierrot was forever elevated into the category of Master Guide that day. I was elevated to the pristine emotional highs that can only come with an epic battle won against all odds.



**Finally in the net**

