



Oregon Sea Grant Extension  
Sustainable Tourism &  
Outdoor Recreation Program

# Interpretative Fact Sheet Steelhead (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*)



The following short article is from the [Oregon Coast 101 Species](#) collection used by the Guide and Outfitter Recognized Professional (GORP) training program. These articles are intended to provide interesting facts you can share with your clientele and add value to your services.

An Interpretive Fact Sheet has been written about each species. We are currently uploading these blogs and creating the links.

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# Steelhead (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*)

 [tourism.oregonstate.edu/steelhead-oncorhynchus-mykiss/](https://tourism.oregonstate.edu/steelhead-oncorhynchus-mykiss/)

By  
flatherc

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Steelhead are native to North America west of the Rockies. This popular sport fish has been introduced to almost every other state and on every continent except Antarctica.

You may be surprised to learn that steelhead and rainbow trout are the same species, but rainbow trout live only in freshwater and steelhead are anadromous, meaning they spend part of their lives in freshwater and part of their lives in the ocean.



Steelhead (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*)

Because of their different lifestyles steelhead and rainbow trout are different in appearance, most noticeably in size and color. Rainbow trout derive their name from their beautiful, multi-hued coloration.

Steelhead are generally more streamlined in shape and silvery or brassy in color as adults. Adult steelhead/rainbow trout range in size.

They can reach 45 inches in length and weigh over 50 pounds, although they are usually much smaller. A typical weight is about 8 pounds.

Because steelhead spend 2-3 years in freshwater followed by 2-3 years in the ocean they are typically larger than rainbow trout.

Steelhead/rainbow trout have a varied diet and will feed on just about anything, including zooplankton when they're young and fish eggs, small fish, crustaceans, mollusks, insects, and even mice as they mature.

This fish is also a food source for many different predators depending on the region and habitat. Their predators include lampreys, fish, birds, bears, river otters, raccoons, and humans. In the ocean, steelhead are eaten by many species including seals, sea lions, and orcas.

Steelhead have been called the ultimate game fish. These elusive and challenging fish can test an angler's patience and persistence, but the reward is hooking into a fish that is famous worldwide for its line-peeling runs and spectacular, acrobatic fight.