



Situk Steel

By Dave Vedder

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Many of us who share a passion for steelhead have a list of top rivers we must fish before we make our last cast. For me that list has shrunk over the years until only the Situk and Dean remained. Over the years several friends, two of whom are steelhead guides, have raved about the Situk and the almost unbelievable numbers they racked up on their visits. They assured me that the Situk is a river every serious Steelheader must experience at least once before they hang up their waders. When I was invited to fish the Situk at **Glacier Bear Lodge**, you can be sure I jumped at the opportunity.



Ceaseless questioning of every acquaintance who has ever fished the Situk garnered the details I want before heading to a river for the first time. I learned that prime time on the Situk is April through late May. There are two components to the Situk steelhead run; the early portion arriving in November and December and the second wave that arrives in April and May. A review of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game website revealed that the Situk is, by far, the most productive steelhead stream in Alaska. In fact, they claim it may be the best steelhead river on the planet!

My friend Bill Herzog agreed to join me on what was also to be his first Situk adventure. We arrived in Yakutat on a rare day – a sunny one!

The tiny village immediately revealed its roots. In the harbor the piers were lined with dozens of commercial boats and handful of sport fishers.

The town is typically Alaskan with an eclectic assortment of buildings ranging from tin roof shacks to spectacular glass fronted edifices. Gentrification has largely eluded this blue collar town, but their legendary steelhead runs have brought them businesses not found in most Southeast Alaska towns. Examples include a rent a car company offering an assortment of beat up fishing rigs for access to the Situk, a hardware store that boasts an assortment of fishing tackle rivaling any big city tackle shop and a couple of the steelhead lodge, one of which new arrivals see as they exit the airport.

What Mother Nature brings to the party is breathtaking. Yakutat is ringed by spectacular mountains topped by 18,000 foot Mount Saint Elias. Everywhere we looked the scenery was simply amazing. Even in mid May, ten foot snow banks offered evidence of the long hard winter that was only now giving way to spring.

We checked into the lodge and discovered it too is quintessentially Alaskan. A huge malamute slept in front of the door. On the other side of the door, a wood floored barroom hosted a lively afternoon crowd of steelheaders, commercial fishermen and deck hands.



What You Need to Know About Situk Steelheading in Yakutat, Alaska

The River:

It's a small stream, barely big enough to accommodate a drift boat. If you hit it at low water expect to drag your boat a few times. Access is very limited. If you are on foot you can hike upstream from the take out area. You can also hike upstream approximately two miles above the Nine Mile Bridge to the upstream boundary; or downstream as far as you like. Know that deep snow often covers the ground until May.

Tackle:

Because the Situk is so small short rods are a good idea. Bill and I each have 10 1/2 foot Lamiglas signature series rods with our names on them. But we found little use for them on the Situk. Your best bet is an eight to nine and half foot rod. I prefer a spinning rod to toss small floats and jigs but Bill did quite well using his drift rods and level wind reels.

Fly flickers will find the upper river challenging. There is little room for a back casts and few pools are big enough to get a good swing. Still many anglers have had banner days with their bug rods on the Situk terminal gear needs to be small. The Situk is often low and clear. You many need to go with 1/16 ounce jigs or small drift bobbers. Leaders should be 14 pound test fluorocarbon. You need fluorocarbon because of clear water and you need the heavy leader to wrestle steelies out of the brush. (Continued on page 3)



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Situk Steel (continued)

Several patrons were still in their waders.

We met lodge manager, Sharesse Edwards, a gregarious dynamo, who manages the lodge, fills in as bartender, and keeps track of the guides, boats and a myriad other details all with a never wavering smile. Edwards explained that we were to be guided on our first day on the river. We had a drift boat reserved for two other days. In addition we had a halibut charter one morning.

The next morning we began our adventure under the tutelage of Situk guide Michelle Kluth Pavlik. Michelle is a gregarious lady and a true fish nut. She is one of those guides who fish for fun on their day’s off. Her knowledge of the river is excellent but she freely admitted she was only familiar with a few techniques. She had very little experience with either spoons of float and jig fishing. But she was eager to have Bill and I show her our favorite steelheading methods.

As we began the drift Bill and I were surprised at how little classic steelhead holding water the upper river offers. But,

even in what we considered marginal water we could see steelhead! Bill began with his classic B.C. Steel spoons and I, quite naturally, went with a float and jig. Less than five minutes into the routine Bill hollered, “There he is and set the hook on our first Situk steelhead. It was a dark buck, but fought surprisingly well before Michelle slipped the hook and set it free. She was a bit surprised both by Bill’s enthusiastic hook set and the fact that he had brought the fish out from under a brush pile ticked tight to the bank. In the next hour Bill hooked three more fish. I got to watch. Frustration was mounting, but what the heck, when you are fishing with perhaps the world’s best steelheader you expect to get your butt kicked. (For those who are not familiar with the name Bill Herzog, he is the author of two seminal steel heading books – ***Drift Fishing for Steelhead*** and ***Spoon Fishing for Steelhead***. In addition, he has written scores of how to articles on steelheading that many consider to be among the best how to articles written to date.) I was surprised and secretly a bit pleased to learn that no one in Yakutat seemed to have heard of Bill.

Then my number came up. I cast my 1/16 ounce orange and white jig into the head of the first deep run we encountered. It went less than ten feet and yanked under hard. I was now only behind Bill by three fish and mine was an absolute chrome 15 pound hen. She put up a great fight making several attempts to hide in the blow downs that lined the run, but eventually I was able to subdue her. The next cast brought the same result, as did the next and the one after. In one small run I hooked five perfect spring steelhead. At every good looking run we took fish. In one run we hooked four double headers. By the day’s end we had lost count of the number of fish hooked, but needless to say, we were totally stoked. The Situk had lived up to its reputation.

We were pleased to learn that Glacier Bear handles all boat shuttles. Guests drive to the upper launch site, at Nine Mile Bridge where their boat awaits. At the end of the day their cars have been shuttled to the take out.

The next day was much the same except we had a better idea where the fish were holding and what they were willing to strike. On day one we learned that the upper river held mostly dark fish.

Situk Steel (continued)

The first chrome fish we saw were about four miles below the launch site. We soon developed a strategy of waiting to cast until we saw a pod of fresh fish. The older fish were in view almost continuously, but they were in a pre spawn pattern of holding in open shallow water. The bright fish were running in small packs of 10-20 fish, and they held in deeper water.

Due to low water we had to downsize all our gear. We did best with Okies and Cheaters in the smallest sizes and 1/16 ounce jigs in subdued colors. Many of the locals were surprised at our long leaders, light leaders and extra small terminal gear.

We broke up our steelheading with a half day of halibut fishing. Once again we had cool, but sunny, weather, which is far from typical in Yakutat, which often gets more than 100 inches of rain a year. We fished with Gary Klushkan, a middle aged Yakutat native, aboard his 24 foot aluminum boat, the "Hunt". Like so many in Yakutat, Gary fishes commercially when there are openings and guides the rest of the time.

The run to the halibut grounds took less than 15 minutes. We were surprised to find we were anchoring in only

in 50 feet of water, and were using weight of only 16 ounces. Terminal gear was the standard Alaska halibut rig, a 12/0 circle hook loaded with a cocktail of herring and salmon scraps. Less than five minutes after we dropped our gear I hooked and landed a 20 pound halibut.

We had four anglers aboard. And we had four rods were rigged with bait. The action was steady. In the first two hours we landed five halibut ranging from 20-to 115 pounds. Then Gary broke out a jig rod with an eight ounce, white, lead head jig. That rig was a real winner. Within 20 minutes the jig rod had hooked all three of the halibut we needed to fill our limits.

Our last day of steelheading was slow by Situk standards. Bill and I decided to push hard through the first seven miles of river to concentrate on the lower seven miles. We knew the lower river held the most fish and the brightest fish. It was a fine plan, but like so many fishing plans, it backfired. When we arrived at the first run we wanted to fish, more than six miles below the launch, a guide was already there. He ran up from the takeout, using a jet pump. There are only a handful of guides allowed to use motors on the Situk and all but

one are professional and courteous. The less said about the other one the better.

There were no less than ten rigs at the launch site. Michelle told us not too worry. She explained that the only possible drift is 14 miles long and the boats we moved a bit farther downstream and found fish in all the usual places, but the three finest runs were all occupied when we arrived. We managed to find a few pockets of unmolested fish, and they were willing biters. Bill and I took turns hooking fish in one small run eventually hooking seven fish. We ended our day with a double header which is all any steelheader could ask for.

I am pleased to have checked off one more river on my must fish list. The Situk was as good as promised. I later learned that 2007 was a relatively slow year on the Situk. I can only imagine what it must be like on a year like 2005 when more than 14,000 steelhead returned to the river. Now my dilemma is, do I return to the Situk next year or try to get to the Dean? It's a dilemma, but one of the very best kinds of dilemma.

What You Need to Know About Situk Steelheading

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Floating the River:

The only drift possible is 14 miles long. That's a mighty long drift on any river. Especially so on a river like the Situk that flows at a leisurely pace. Even a novice can easily row the Situk, but if you fish every run thoroughly you will be on the river well after dark. The drift will take a minimum of eight hours even if you keep moving.

Transportation:

Alaska Airlines has two flights daily into Yakutat. Flying is really the only reasonable way to get to Yakutat.

Lodging/Dining

The Glacier Bear Lodge is a great place to stay and to eat. They are owned and operated by steelheaders who know what you need and what you want. They will arrange for your guide or bare boat rental. In addition, they will handle your boat and car shuttle.

The Glacier Bear Lodge bar and dining room are among Yakutat's finest. (Okay I admit there isn't much competition in Yakutat, but these guys would stand out in large crowd!) Every evening the bar fills with an array of steelheaders, commercial fishermen, blue collar workers and local folks out on the town. Just sipping a libation and listening to all the steelhead chatter is priceless. Contact Glacier Bear Lodge at <http://www.glacierbearlodge.com/> or call them at 1-866-425-6343

