North Fork Stillaguamish winter steelhead

Whitehorse Hatchery returns from WDFW weekly escapement reports (November through February, 2013–2026), plus when, where and how to fish the river. Prepared Nov 3, 2026.

154
median season total at the Whitehorse rack across the 11 seasons with a normal run (range 27–297)

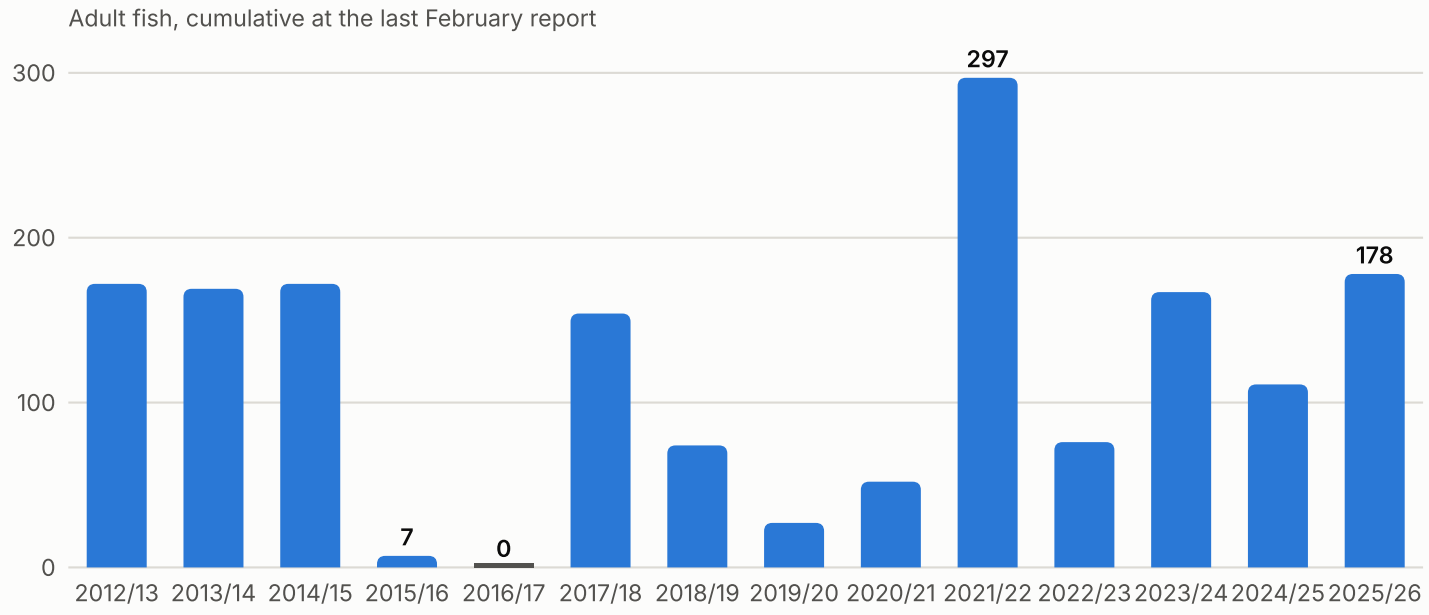
178
2025/26 total as of the Feb 26, 2026 report, the second-highest of the 14 seasons charted (after 297 in 2021/22)

54%
of fish reached the rack in January (Nov 2%, Dec 30%, Feb 13%), pooled across seasons

7 → 0
returns in 2015/16 and 2016/17, after WDFW released no winter smolts in 2014 or 2015

1. Whitehorse Pond winter steelhead returns, by season

Each bar is the **Adult Total** on the "Whitehorse Pond / Whitehorse Ponds Hatchery Stock-H" winter steelhead row of the last February report. The reports are cumulative, season-to-date, and WDFW labels every number preliminary.



Seasons 2015/16 and 2016/17 are the two years after WDFW stopped releasing winter smolts from Whitehorse (none in 2014 or 2015). The 2012/13 bar starts from the January report because the WDFW page's archive begins in 2013.

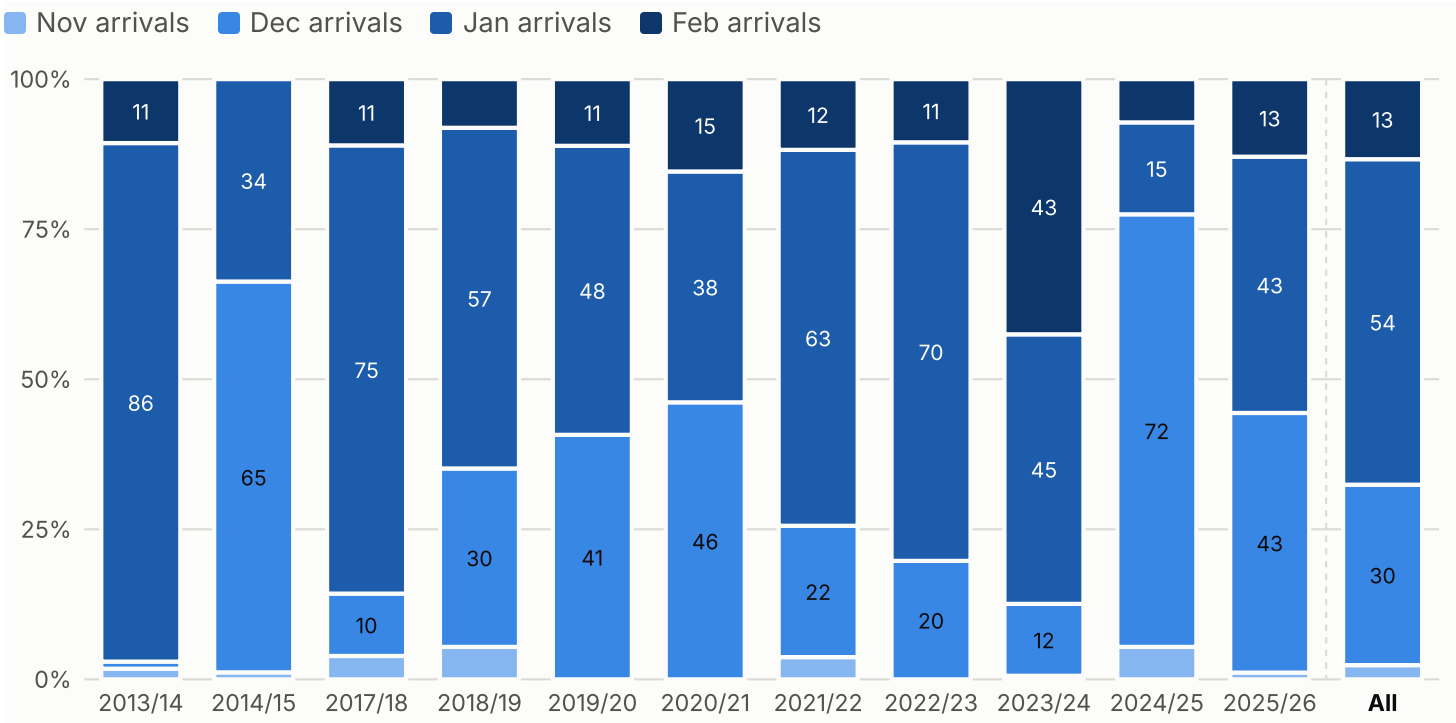
Month-end cumulative totals (adult fish) and smolt releases

Season	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Winter smolts released the prior spring	Rack fish per 1,000 smolts
2012/13	—	—	128	172	n/a	—
2013/14	3	5	151	169	n/a	—
2014/15	2	114	172	172	86,725	1.98
2015/16	—	—	7	7	0	—
2016/17	—	0	0	0	0	—
2017/18	6	22	137	154	122,311	1.26
2018/19	4	26	68	74	102,167	0.72
2019/20	—	11	24	27	136,270	0.20
2020/21	—	24	44	52	111,083	0.47
2021/22	11	76	262	297	82,489	3.60
2022/23	—	15	68	76	108,603	0.70
2023/24	1	21	96	167	55,503	3.01
2024/25	6	86	103	111	131,456	0.84
2025/26	2	79	155	178	112,728	1.58

“Nov” to “Feb” use the last weekly report of each month. “—” means the report had no Whitehorse winter steelhead row. Smolt counts are from WDFW's steelhead stocking page (2015–2025) and a Herald article citing WDFW for 2013 and 2014. The per-1,000 figure is indicative only: it assumes fish return about 1.5 years after release, and rack counts are not total river returns.

2. When the fish arrive

This shows each season's fish by month of arrival, as a share of that season's February total. January is the biggest month in 7 of 11 seasons; December leads in the other four (2014/15, 2020/21, 2024/25 and 2025/26, the last by a single fish). 2013/14 is the most January-heavy year at 86%.



Eleven seasons with at least 25 fish and a complete Nov–Feb record. The “All” bar pools every fish (2 Nov, 30 Dec, 54 Jan, 13 Feb, in % of 1,477 fish). Median end-of-month cumulative share: Nov 1%, Dec 35%, Jan 89% (range 57–100%).

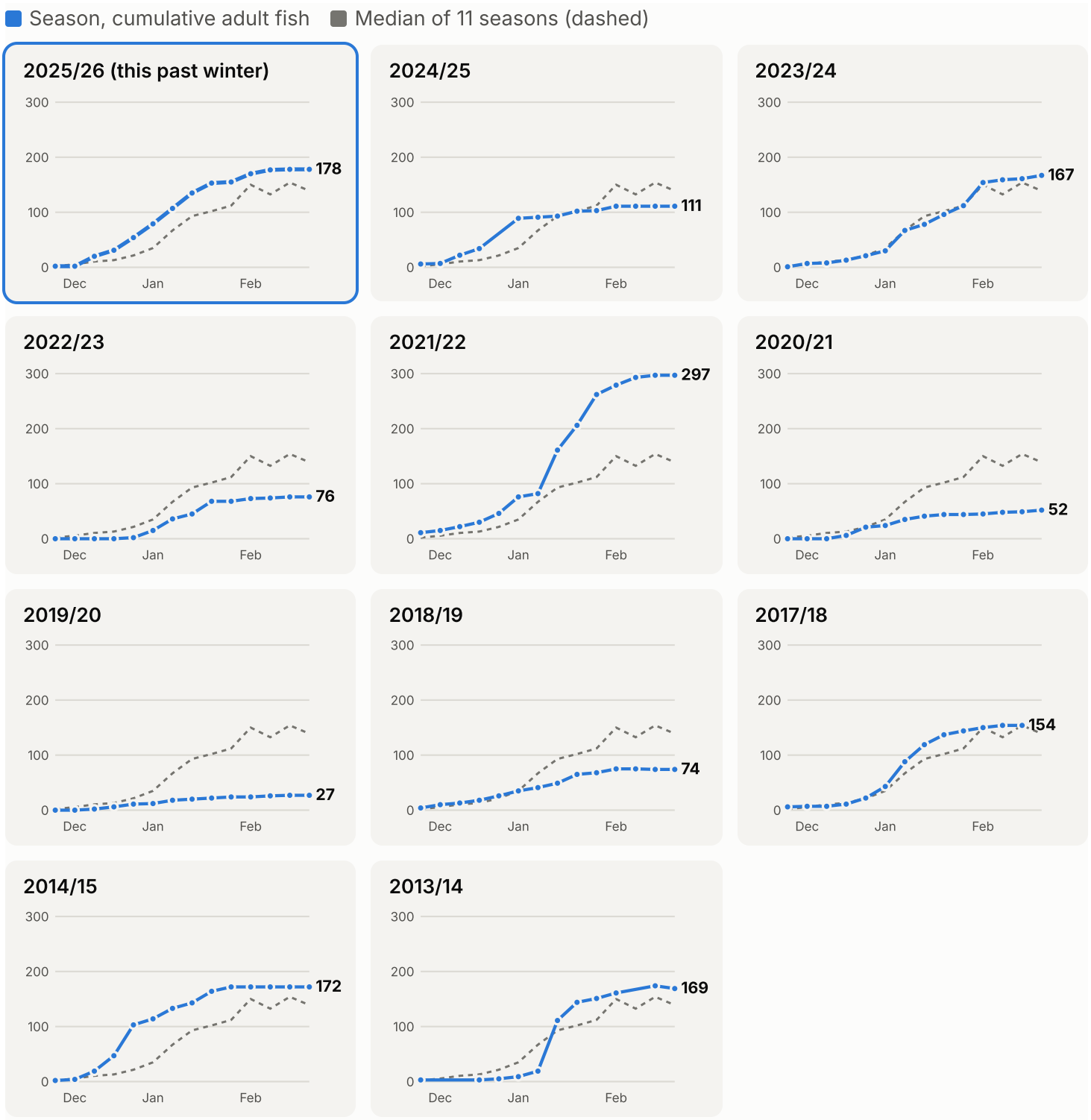
Summer steelhead at the same rack

The report also carried a Whitehorse summer steelhead row through 2020/21: adult totals of 242–243 (Jan/Feb 2013), 166 (2013/14), 92 (2014/15), 80 (2015/16), 63 (2016/17), 27 (2017/18), 44 (2018/19), 42 (2019/20) and 61 (2020/21). There is no row from 2021/22 onward, and WDFW's stocking page lists no summer smolt releases after 2019.

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3. Week by week: how the numbers build

These panels use the weekly WDFW reports (December through February, plus the last November report) for 11 seasons. Each solid line is that season's cumulative Adult Total at the Whitehorse Pond winter steelhead row. The dashed line is the median of the 11 seasons for the same week.



2025/26 against the median. The season trailed the median by 3–4 fish at Dec 4, then ran ahead every week from Dec 11 to the end, by 10 to 51 fish. It added 11–28 fish a week for six straight weeks (week ending Dec 11 through Jan 15), then 18 (Jan 22), 2 (Jan 29), 15 (Feb 5), 7 (Feb 12), 1 (Feb 19) and 0 (Feb 26).

Typical pattern. Pooled across the 11 seasons, the five weeks ending Dec 25 through Jan 22 brought in 69% of the fish counted week to week (947 of 1,374), and the single biggest week was the one ending Jan 15 (278 fish, 20%). In 7 of 11 seasons the biggest single week ended between Jan 8 and Jan 22; the other four peaked at Dec 11, Dec 25 (twice) or Feb 5.

Cumulative adult fish, week by week

Season	Nov	Dec 4	Dec 11	Dec 18	Dec 25	Jan 1	Jan 8	Jan 15	Jan 22	Jan 29	Feb 5	Feb 12	Feb 19	Feb 26
2025/26	2	2	20	31	54	79	107	135	153	155	170	177	178	178
2024/25	6	7	22	34	—	89	91	93	102	103	111	111	111	111
2023/24	1	7	8	13	21	30	67	78	96	112	154	159	161	167
2022/23	0	0	0	0	2	15	36	45	68	68	73	74	76	76
2021/22	11	15	22	30	46	76	82	161	206	262	279	293	297	297
2020/21	0	0	0	6	21	24	35	41	44	44	45	48	49	52
2019/20	0	0	2	6	11	12	18	20	22	24	24	26	27	27
2018/19	4	10	13	18	26	35	41	49	65	68	75	75	74	74
2017/18	6	7	7	11	22	43	88	119	137	144	150	154	154	—
2014/15	2	4	19	47	103	114	133	143	164	172	172	172	172	172
2013/14	3	—	—	3	5	9	19	111	144	151	161	—	174	169
Median	**2**	**5.5**	**10.5**	**13**	**21.5**	**35**	**67**	**93**	**102**	**112**	**150**	**132.5**	**154**	**139**

Fish added each week

Season	Dec 4	Dec 11	Dec 18	Dec 25	Jan 1	Jan 8	Jan 15	Jan 22	Jan 29	Feb 5	Feb 12	Feb 19	Feb 26
2025/26	0	18	11	23	25	28	28	18	2	15	7	1	0
2024/25	1	15	12	–	–	2	2	9	1	8	0	0	0
2023/24	6	1	5	8	9	37	11	18	16	42	5	2	6
2022/23	0	0	0	2	13	21	9	23	0	5	1	2	0
2021/22	4	7	8	16	30	6	79	45	56	17	14	4	0
2020/21	0	0	6	15	3	11	6	3	0	1	3	1	3
2019/20	0	2	4	5	1	6	2	2	2	0	2	1	0
2018/19	6	3	5	8	9	6	8	16	3	7	0	-1	0
2017/18	1	0	4	11	21	45	31	18	7	6	4	0	–
2014/15	2	15	28	56	11	19	10	21	8	0	0	0	0
2013/14	–	–	–	2	4	10	92	33	7	10	–	–	-5

Columns are the weekly report nearest each date, within three days. The median row uses only the seasons read for that week, so it can dip between weeks.“Nov” is the last November report. “–” means I did not read that week's report or the week before it, so the add can't be computed. A negative number means WDFW revised its cumulative count down. Weeks with no Whitehorse winter steelhead row are counted as 0. Not read: Dec 4, Dec 11 and Feb 12 in 2013/14; Feb 26 in 2017/18; Dec 25 in 2024/25 (its Dec 30 and Jan 2 reports both fall nearest Jan 1, so I used Jan 2, 89 fish; Dec 30 showed 86). Seasons 2015/16 and 2016/17 are left out (7 and 0 fish all season), as is 2012/13 (no weekly archive in the page).

4. Outlook for 2026–27

There is no published WDFW forecast. I found no 2026–27 hatchery return forecast for the Stillaguamish (Whitehorse Hatchery) in WDFW's steelhead pages, its season-setting documents or its emergency rules. WDFW has published such forecasts in past emergency rules, and a regional office may have an internal number. What WDFW does publish is the smolt release behind this winter's run: **90,780 winter smolts in 2025**, which WDFW says return mostly in the 2026–27 winter. The 2024 release was 112,728.

Rough estimate from past rack rates (my arithmetic, not WDFW's)	Rack fish per 1,000 smolts	Fish at the rack for 90,780 smolts
Median of past seasons	1.05	about 95
Middle half of past seasons	0.64 to 2.24	58 to 203
Lowest to highest past season	0.20 to 3.60	18 to 327
Last winter (2025/26), for comparison	1.58	178 fish

Method: the 2025 release multiplied by each past season's rack fish per 1,000 smolts (the ten seasons with a known release, 2014/15 and 2017/18 to 2025/26, with rates from 0.20 to 3.60; 2015/16 and 2016/17 are left out because no winter smolts were released in 2014 or 2015). The estimate ignores ocean conditions, closures and fishing that remove fish before the rack, and rack counts are not total river returns. Treat it as a rough range, not a prediction. Whitehorse's early-winter fish are also the first fish WDFW protects for broodstock, so closures can follow a weak start.

How long steelhead spend in the ocean

Steelhead do not spend just one year at sea. They typically spend about one to three years at sea, and a few spend four. The usual Puget Sound winter steelhead is a “two-salt,” a bit under two years at sea; fewer return as one-salts, and some as three-salts. The early-winter hatchery smolts in these reports are released as yearlings in spring and mostly return the winter after next, about 1.5 years later. Fish that stay out an extra year arrive the following winter, so one release can feed two winters, and my rack fish per 1,000 smolts slightly understate a release's total contribution. Unlike Pacific salmon, steelhead can survive spawning and return to sea, which is part of why wild fish should be released unharmed.

5. Best time to fish: lower, mid and upper North Fork

No creel survey or section-by-section catch data exists for this river. These recommendations combine the hatchery arrival timing above (measured), the river's regulations (verified) and local fishing reports and press (anecdotal). The upper-river call is the best supported; the lower-river call is the thinnest.

Upper: French Creek to Swede Heaven Bridge (Fortson Hole, hatchery water)

Best: Jan 1–Jan 31. Second: Dec 15–31. Tail: Feb 1–15.

This is the hatchery terminal area, and fish stack here until the rack takes them. Over 11 seasons 54% of fish reached the rack in January and the median season was 89% complete by month-end. Reports describe fish holding in Fortson Hole, with the crowd arriving after first light. Risk: in low-return years WDFW closes this reach to protect broodstock (Dec 2008, Dec 2010, Feb 2017, Jan–Feb 2019, and a Fortson closure that reopened Jan 24, 2014). Confidence: higher.

Mid: Hwy 530 (Cicero) Bridge to French Creek (Cicero, Hazel, C-Post Road holes)

Best: Dec 10–Jan 20, on a falling, clearing river.

Fish move through here in pulses before reaching the terminal reach, and local reports name C-Post and Hazel as productive holes in December and early January. This reach is bank-only: no fishing from any floating device is allowed. Confidence: moderate (reports, not counts).

Lower: mouth to Hwy 530 (Cicero) Bridge

Best: Dec 1–Dec 25, right after a rain pulse drops.

It is mostly a travel lane. Only about 30% of the run is at the rack by the end of December, so fresh fish are passing through early, but one fishing-store account says the water below Deer Creek is usually blown out from August into winter. Treat it as an opportunistic option when the upper river is too crowded or closed. Confidence: low (inferred from run timing).

Wild fish are mixed in. Puget Sound wild steelhead are ESA-listed, so release all wild fish. Summer-run wild fish from Deer Creek are also still in the river in December and January.

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6. Most favored lure and method

Float (bobber) fishing with a pink, peach or orange jig or a small cured-egg cluster is the most consistently reported approach on this river.

- **Bobber and jig:** small pink/white, peach or pink jigs under a float come up again and again in North Fork reports. A local tackle shop told the Herald that anything in peach or pink had been effective.
- **Bobber and bait:** cured eggs or spawn sacks (pink, orange or chartreuse) under a float; one angler who fished the river hard for three weeks reported most of his steelhead on eggs under a bobber, a few on jigs.

- **Second choice, drifting from the bank:** a Corky with yarn and a small egg cluster, or a pink worm. This was the standard opening-night setup, with glow Corkies at night.
- **When the water is up:** heavy spoons (such as Little Cleo or BC Steel styles) in the buckets, a tactic recommended for the river by a sporting-goods writeup.
- The North Fork is a small river, and anglers advise light gear. Expect crowds at Fortson Hole and go early.

This is consensus from published reports and forum posts, not a measured catch-by-lure survey. I found no creel data that ranks lures on this fishery.

> **Rules for 2026–27 (eRegulations, last updated Oct 5, 2026; confirm in the WDFW pamphlet and emergency-rule page before you fish)**
>
> - November: fly fishing only on the whole North Fork up to Swede Heaven Bridge. General gear opens Dec 1.
> - Hatchery steelhead open through Jan 31 below French Creek, and through Feb 15 from French Creek to Swede Heaven Bridge. Statewide minimum size and daily limit apply.
> - Hwy 530 Bridge to French Creek: no fishing from any floating device.
> - Swede Heaven Bridge to North Fork Falls: selective gear, with no steelhead season listed.
> - I did not find a 2026–27 emergency rule for the Stillaguamish steelhead fishery, but WDFW has closed this river mid-season for broodstock several times. The 2025 winter smolt release was 90,780 (112,728 in 2024), and those fish are due back this winter.

Using this report. This is an independent analysis of public WDFW hatchery escapement reports, WDFW's smolt-release tables, published regulations and public fishing reports. It is not an official WDFW product. Hatchery counts are WDFW's preliminary numbers. Facts are as of Nov 3, 2026, and fishing rules in this area change with little notice, so confirm the current rules on WDFW's emergency-rules page or the Fish Washington app before you fish. Where a point rests on anglers' reports rather than counts or regulations, the text says so.

How the numbers were checked

- I read the last report of each month for Nov–Feb in each season (57 PDFs). The weekly reports in between are cumulative, so they add no new total.
- Text extraction scrambled the column order, so I took the Adult Total and checked it against the row's spawned, mortality and surplus columns. It matched in the cases where those columns were legible. I also read the original PDF pages for Feb 2026, Nov 2015, Jan 2016 and Jan 2017.
- Nov 2015: the report still showed the prior season's 172 fish and 198,326 eggs under “2015 Brood.” I counted it as no new fish.
- 2016/17: the rows list 69,723 to 273,496 eggs but no adult count. My reading is that the eggs came from elsewhere, which fits WDFW's note that Whitehorse had received no smolts, but the reports do not say so.

Sources

- WDFW hatchery escapement reports (weekly PDFs, 2013–2026)
- WDFW steelhead smolt releases
- Washington eRegulations, Puget Sound special rules S–Z
- WDFW emergency rule, Dec 2, 2015 (no smolts released since 2013)
- WDFW emergency rule, Dec 2, 2016 (no releases in 2014 or 2015)
- WDFW emergency rule, Jan 4, 2019 (broodstock closure)
- WDFW emergency rule, Dec 2008 (Fortson area closure)
- Everett Herald, Dec 6, 2006 and Nov 26, 2008 (North Fork reports)
- Northwest Fishing Reports, North Fork Stillaguamish
- Dennis Dickson, North Fork strategies (reach descriptions)
- Perfect Fly Store, Stillaguamish report (lower-river water conditions)