

April 2012



Driftless Days . . .

This winter was one of the mildest I can ever recall in northeast Iowa. I remember blowing off the driveway only three times, and I believe that was in one week's time. I don't think it was really necessary the third time, as most of the snow melted away shortly after that single particularly snowy week. I must have wanted to stay in practice.

If nothing else, a mild winter precipitates a lot of fishing. I usually consider "winter" as the months of December through February, and I got out to fish more times this winter than I ever have before in the nearly twenty years we've lived in Decorah. And this winter I landed well over half of my trout on the dry fly, which is a bit unusual and something else I don't remember ever doing before, at least to that extent. Occasionally there were a few *baetis* on the water, but most of the time I was fishing to midges. I don't think there were necessarily more midges hatching this winter than in other winters, but there's no doubt it was much more comfortable fishing small dry flies. I wouldn't say it was as comfortable as it is in April, for example, but apparently it was plenty comfortable enough, or I wouldn't have been doing it.

I've fished many an April Hendrickson hatch in driving sleet or snowstorms, so most things are relative, as they say, especially on the cusps of Iowa seasonal changes.

Some years ago I recall a whole winter during which we had no snow at all, but I also remember that winter as being incredibly cold. Sometimes snowfall acts as a bit of an insulator, and winter sunlight reflected from snow can lend a feeling of warmth, whether imaginary or real. A twenty-mile an hour "breeze" over frozen ground can be rather bitter, if not downright brutal. I guess that's what hot coffee is for.

Looking back from the vantage point of an eighty-degree day, it doesn't seem that fishing a #24 Thread Wrap pattern with 7X tippet on a twenty-six degree afternoon in a high wind is what many anglers would call *comfortable*, but at the moment it seemed fine. One thing about winter fishing days is it gets dark early and you can only freeze until four in the afternoon or so. Sometimes that helps, and of course sometimes it doesn't. I guess that's what that extra big pink comforter is for.

On heavy fishing winters, one thing that seems to suffer, aside from my wife's general attitude, is my fly tying. As much as I enjoy tying flies, I'll take fishing before tying any day of the year. At least that's the way it's always been, and still is. I had a number of winter afternoons during which I found myself out on a stream rather than behind the vise in my fly tying room. At the time I thought I might tie more flies in the evenings, but this winter it seemed as though I often found myself behind a good book after a fishing outing rather than the vise. As it turned out, I had quite a few flies left over from last season and I tied a good two hundred or so more for this year, so it wasn't like I didn't get *anything* accomplished in the way of tying. I'd wanted to tie around four hundred flies, which is closer to a good winter norm for me, but this winter I just didn't get it done.

I did read a number of good books.

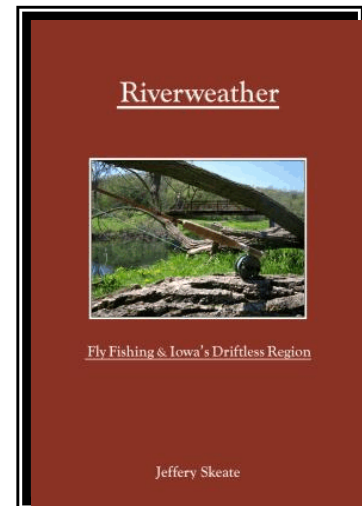
Sometimes there's something about a good cold day on the stream, a good book and that old pink comforter that is very appealing. One of the books I read seemed quite boring, but I'll always remember it for reading one paragraph and subsequently passing out into a deep winter's sleep, so maybe it wasn't so boring after all. Perhaps I needed the extra sleep.

Over the winter I tied a dozen or so streamers I haven't tied before. Ethan Roffman demonstrated his "Rabbit Leach" at a meeting recently and mentioned he found his black pattern a very good one for walleyes on a local river or two, so I bought some black rabbit strips and copper coneheads from Dan Bailey's and tied up my own. I have another friend who knows where the walleyes are around here and I'm going to make him divulge his secrets so I can become a meat fisherman for an afternoon or two later this year. On January 1st of this year I fried up a pound of walleyes he'd filleted and given me (in cornmeal and olive oil) for my first meal of 2012, and I haven't had a better tasting breakfast, lunch or dinner since that New Year's morning nearly three months ago. I also tied up a few Light Spruces, which is as beautiful a pattern as I've ever worked with. They also really catch trout. Garylee Thurm, an Iowa fly fishing shop owner, recently found me a beautiful Badger hen neck for the Light Spruce wing feathers, and I'll be able to duplicate the pattern for quite some years to come now that I have a good new neck. Badger hackle necks are becoming extremely difficult to locate these days, one reason perhaps being that tiers are not tying some of the old classic streamer patterns that require them anymore, so breeders are simply not propagating chickens with badger feathers, there being little demand for them.

So perhaps this year I'll have made up in quality what I lack in quantity.

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With a mild winter and an early spring, stream hatches have been early in northeast Iowa. I found a few substantial Blue Wing Olive hatches on area streams at the end of February, which



was somewhat surprising. Normally I don't find that first good Blue Wing Olive hatch until somewhere around the tenth of March at the very earliest. This year they were already going strong at that point, a good ten days before I'd normally even begin looking for them. A #16 Blue Wing Quill is a beautiful and rather old-fashioned fly, but I got a good number of them tied early in the winter and had ample opportunities to use them during those first two weeks in March.

With the early-hatching Blue Wings, I couldn't help but wonder when we might see Dark Hendricksons, which normally don't appear until the very end of March at the earliest. In the past twenty years, I've seen them twice on March 23rd, but those two days were very early ones indeed for the hatch. I *look* for them during that last week of March, but I seldom *find* them until somewhere closer to April 1st. This year we had temperatures in the eighties the week of March 11th and I found my first good Hendrickson hatch on Friday of that week. The northeast Iowa Hendrickson hatch is normally quite reliable, and once it gets going it tends to keep going, sometimes for up to five weeks after that initial sighting. The Dark Hendrickson is a large mayfly and always brings good trout to the surface.

On Sunday March 18th Marv Slind and I went out to the Waterloo to try our hand at the Hendrickson hatch. Marv had never fished the hatch before, which might sound strange considering how much he fishes, but college professors are incredibly busy as the end of the spring term approaches and can't really get out to fish like normal folks. In my experience, I've noted that college professors are big summertime anglers. Last year I remember asking Marv if he could get away for some Hendrickson action, and he told me he couldn't because he had several hundred pages worth of research papers to grade in a week's time. And they were *long* papers. Once again I was forced to catch his half of the trout that day.



Even though the winds were gusting in the area of 30 mph, we had a superb day. Marv fished a section up in a wooded stretch that was somewhat more out of the wind. There's a little "warm-up" riffle on the way up into the woods, and Marv caught five straight trout on a #12 Adams to inaugurate his Hendrickson fishing career. After that I told him he was plenty warmed up and I was going downstream to catch some fish, which I certainly did.

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On one special spring Hendrickson outing I had the opportunity to fish my friend Tim Fleming's original and now antiquated Leonard rod. The rod is close to a hundred years old and I was a little nervous fishing with it, but things went marvelously and I caught more trout with it that afternoon than I probably should have. I missed a strike with my first cast, and then caught my first trout with the rod on my second, so I guess I could say I didn't screw around. Tim lives in Chicago and has come to the conclusion that his rod wasn't made to sit around the house as a

decoration, so he's more or less loaned it out to our Driftless Chapter membership and we're supposed to catch trout with it. I see myself as the "Curator Of Tim's Leonard", though he hasn't made an official appointment.

The rod, of course, has the words "The Leonard" and "H.L. Leonard Rod Co" stamped on the butt cap. It is difficult to describe an angler's connection to the historic fly fishing past when fishing a rod of this vintage.



I prefer a larger cork grip than is common on original Leonard rods. It is sometimes said that Hiram Leonard had small hands, though I'm not sure that's why he made his rod grips so diminutive. The small rod grip gives the rod a feeling of delicacy, but Tim mounted a rather special and expensive line on the Bronson Royalist reel he chose for the rod, and I was making sixty foot casts with no effort at all with the small grip.

So I think the grip on Tim's old Leonard is just fine. At the end of the day, I had no complaints at all.

And it looks like it's going to be another great year in northeast Iowa and beyond.

Be Vigilant!

*"Red" Canoe
Trout Unlimited
Iowa Driftless Chapter*