

February 2012



Driftless Days . . .

Northeast Iowa fly fishing can be slow in December. Late autumn Blue Wing Olive hatches have died out for the most part, though occasionally they might still come off on warmer afternoons throughout the winter. There may be midges on the water and they can be fun to fish, but working with flies that small in cold conditions is not always an easy task. During the

winter I often resort to a favorite streamer pattern, but more often than not that might not produce many trout either.

Yesterday, on New Year's Eve, I ran into a young fellow who had driven all the way to northeast Iowa from Des Moines to fish late in the afternoon. That's a four-hour drive. He had just arrived on the water, and it was already 4:00 PM. In passing he also said he had to return to Des Moines that evening. I mentioned it was a long way to drive for little more than an hour's worth of fishing, and his response was that he just wanted to catch a trout. I guess I could understand that and politely suggested he stop talking and start fishing before it got dark. I hope he got one.

The young man from Des Moines was the first person I'd seen on the stream all day long. That is quite common in northeast Iowa during the winter months. A lot of fishermen I talk to don't like winter fishing, and most of the anglers I see during the winter are considerably younger than I happen to be. I guess the younger fellows are doing what I was doing at their age. I wouldn't say that winter is the best time of the year to fly fish for trout, but as the seasons go along I'm beginning to wonder if it isn't the most interesting.

For the record, I also wouldn't say I'm old.

I don't know why, but at this point I don't seem to get particularly cold in the winter while fishing. The way I look at it, getting a little chilled in the winter isn't much different than getting partially baked in July. It's just another interesting extreme. It's possible that being a Minnesota native has something to do with that, though I know a number of folks who couldn't wait to get out of Minnesota when the opportunity arose. Anglers who say they don't care for winter fly fishing almost always mention the cold as *the* main reason they don't like it. That, and not catching many fish to boot I suppose. To be fair, I generally choose days when the weather seems reasonably decent, though I normally manage to choose a few embarrassingly cold days too, depending on my degree of cabin fever. Perhaps it's odd that I might get cold in the winter

while Christmas shopping, for example, but not while I'm fishing.

On the other hand, perhaps that's not odd at all.

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Sometimes when the fishing is slow on a favorite stretch of water, I wonder whether there really are many trout left in the stretch. On one area winter stream, it's legal for an angler to take a limit of five trout per day all year long by any means short of dynamite or netting. One of my favorite places to fish is a privately owned section of water roughly one third of a mile in length, and a two-thousand trout per mile average on the entire stream would put six or seven hundred trout in that third of a mile length. If a five trout limit were taken from that particular section every day for two months, which could be entirely possible during a pleasant November and mild December season, half the trout in the stream might be gone. It's a fairly heavily fished section of water, so that guess might even be quite conservative. It seems a shame, particularly as both brown trout and brookies spawn in that part of the creek.

I suppose it's possible they're all still there and they just won't bite, but I really don't think that's the case.

Some years ago, I'd have to admit that most of my winter fish were stocked rainbows, and a fair number of them still are. I even have a wooly bugger pattern I devised that seemed (and still seems) particularly effective in catching them. The vast majority of regular season trout for Driftless area dry fly fishermen are browns, which though a wary and selective fish, rise freely to well selected and properly presented dry flies. During the winter when dry fly opportunities are limited, I often go sub-surface with a gaudy streamer pattern and that's where the stocked rainbows come into play.



Interesting enough, I believe the state of Wisconsin stocks no rainbow trout at all in state streams, or at least does so only where rainbows happen to be propagating naturally or would do so with proper management. Most of the better Wisconsin waters are managed for catch-and-release fishing on streams with natural reproduction of brown trout and brookies. Rainbow trout almost never reproduce in Driftless area streams and are essentially a "put-and-take" fish. It is assumed that very few of them survive midwestern winters, and those that do won't spawn in the spring anyway. The main issue with spring spawning of rainbows in the Driftless Region seems to be the siltation problem common to upper midwestern trout streams, though to be perfectly fair, rainbow trout were never common to the area anyway. Neither were brown trout, but as is well known, brown trout have spawned successfully throughout the United States and that's why they now are our predominant sporting trout.

In Iowa, the DNR raises rainbow trout in state hatcheries and distributes them equitably within appropriate streams throughout the spring, summer and autumn seasons, weather permitting.

When local streams are high and off-color due to flooding, stocking is suspended until things calm down, as recently stocked hatchery fish don't have much of an immediate or even short term survival chance under flood conditions. Sometimes when northeast Iowa streams have flooded heavily during the stocking season, a large surplus of trout remain in the hatcheries come October, and since they can't be held in the hatcheries over the winter, they're dumped into the streams in large numbers essentially to get rid of them. And that can be why in some seasons early winter streamer fishing can be particularly good. There quite simply may be a lot of fish out there to be caught.

We've had very little flooding over the past two years in northeast Iowa, so it is assumed the rainbow stocking program has been quite timely and efficient, with no great numbers of remaining October hatchery fish to be placed in streams.

And maybe *that's* why winter fishing sometimes seems slow, especially over the past two years.

The Iowa DNR is raising more brook trout in state hatcheries than ever before, mainly by using hardy (and presumably native) brook trout progeny from South Pine Creek, fish which Robert Behnke in *Trout And Salmon Of North America* gives a fair chance of having survived our last Driftless area glacial epoch some twelve thousand years ago. The brook trout are beginning to propagate naturally in the very carefully selected streams in which they're placed, and it's possible we may someday see a great diminishment in the numbers of stocked rainbow trout in Iowa.

It seems that would be a wonderful thing, assuming that both the brook and brown trout thus encouraged are properly protected from angling pressure.

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I'd chosen the Waterloo Creek in Allamakee County for my last fly fishing outing of the year on New Year's Eve. I normally don't fish the Waterloo during the winter, but this one has been so mild I decided to give it a try. I had an ulterior motive in my decision, too. After looking over a year's worth of journal entries, I found that, besides myriads of brown trout, I had landed exactly one more brook trout than rainbows during the entire year, something which had never occurred to me before. Deciding that I wanted to keep it that way, I chose the Waterloo, as it would be quite unlikely to catch a rainbow trout where I'd decided to fish, particularly as I'd also decided to end my season fishing a dry fly.



I got a little help with the brookie numbers from two spectacular trips to northern Wisconsin in May and August earlier in the year, but I landed far more brook trout in northeast Iowa this year than I ever have previously.

As it turned out, I caught nine brown trout in a few hours of fishing, all on a dry fly. For the record, I caught four of them on a #18 Thread Wrap and five on a #20. None of them were over twelve inches in length, but they all were beautiful and delightful stream-born fish. I had a wonderful time and managed to preserve my record brookie year in the bargain, not a bad way at all to spend New Year's Eve.

On New Year's Day I rather wanted to go out and catch my first trout of the new year, but we were weathering 50 mph wind gusts all day long and that kept up well into January 2nd. In winter fly fishing, as is really the case all year long, discretion is sometimes the better part of valor.

My cut-off point in windy conditions has always been 35 mph. At that speed, my hat blows off.



Be Vigilant!

*“Red” Canoe
Trout Unlimited
Iowa Driftless Chapter*

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