



March 2009

Driftless Days . . .

It's hard to say how much luck is involved in hooking a big trout, or any fish for that matter. I suppose the fisherman must be in the right place at the right time for the big event to occur, and those two circumstances might be ascribed to fate if one is so inclined. On the other hand, if the fisherman puts himself in position often enough to run into bigger trout, maybe the odds improve. And then again perhaps they don't.

I've never made a thorough study of statistics, which would be interesting, but I know I haven't caught a trout yet from my desk chair.

A friend of mine has a young son who hooked and landed quite a large bass this past year. Considering the young fellow's age (seven), one could say a lot of luck was involved with the hooking and landing of that particular fish. On the other hand, he was with his Dad, who took him to the spot where the fish was caught, and his Dad is one heck of a fisherman. So maybe the young fellow's odds were vastly improved through his Dad's direction and knowledge? I would certainly think so.

God helps those who help themselves. He may also help those who hang around with great fishermen.

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Last Saturday it looked like we were going to have a temporary break in what has begun as a good old nasty Iowa winter. On Tuesday we received ten inches of new-fallen snow, and our temperatures have been well below the normal seasonal average for at least two weeks now. A week-long bout with the flu didn't help matters, either. I missed a day of work because of the snowstorm, but I was too sick to enjoy it. *That* is indeed bad luck. As much as I love winter fly fishing, I wasn't able to get out once during the first two weeks of the month.

But once Saturday rolled around, I'd had enough of the chillbains and thought a good brisk walk in the snow (with a flyrod) might do wonders for both my mind and body. Particularly my mind,

which for various reasons we need not explore, needed a little help. I seem to recall some Christmas shopping looming out over the vast horizon.

The day's highest temperature was expected to reach the mid-forties, as well as Sunday's, before an arctic blast arriving Sunday night would bring daytime temperatures down to the sub-zero area for the next few days, or weeks, one point being that sometimes fish feed heavily before a dramatic weather change, regardless of the season. As though I needed an excuse . . .

I pulled up into the little parking lot next to the stream, got my gear together and strung up a rod. My friend Sam Fox had recently entirely refinished an old beat-up split-cane Heddon rod for me, and that was the rod I'd decided to fish with. Sam did an incredible job on the rod, which included the fashioning of two new tips. I've caught a few big trout with that rod over the years, particularly during the winter, and there wasn't much left of the single tip that came with it originally. When I told Sam I had a sentimental attachment to the rod, he didn't ask any questions.



I walked upstream about a half-mile along the road, looking for a good place to begin fishing. An hour or two of fishing downstream would bring me back to the van, where I could take a break and warm up if I wanted to before proceeding further downstream. That has always been a nice plan for me on this particular stretch of the stream, especially during the winter months.

When I'd walked upstream about as far as I cared to go, I looked down into a pool that I seldom fish for some reason. I don't know what that reason is, but this time around something unusual caught my attention. I didn't notice a single track in the snow anywhere near the pool, and the last snowfall had been five days ago. Any trout that *might* be lurking in the pool hadn't seen anything but natural food sources for at least a few days, and that's as good a reason as any to give a stretch of water a try. That's one of the things I look for along *any* stream I happen to be fishing during a winter with snow cover. Even in northeast Iowa, I can remember two winters in the past fifteen years in which we had no snow at all to speak of, but when we *do* have the usual snow cover, any fisherman can easily see whether a stream has recently been fished hard or not by looking for tracks.

I clambered down the bank and worked my way up to the top of the pool, where a little riffle spilled out over some rocks. It's a nice spot to feed a streamer pattern into the current and work it on further downstream. I made a roll-cast out into the current, quickly fed out some line, made an upstream mend in the cast and gave the streamer a nice little twitch. A trout struck immediately, and I was fast into my first fish of the December month. A good start, I remember thinking; a trout on my first cast of the morning.

The trout stayed rather deep in the pool, which caught my attention. It felt like a good fish, but sometimes that can be rather hard to ascertain until a fish has been "on" for awhile. Then, at the blink of an eye, the trout tore off twenty feet of flyline and I *knew* it was a good fish. He went to the tail of the pool with the run and held in very deep water, a heavy and powerful trout.

The trout did not try to run the pool, and I was able to check him at the tail. Sometimes large trout on small streams do *not* care to run their resident pool, or leave the area in which they are most comfortable, and that fact has often served me well when I've been fortunate enough to hook one. I regretted the 5X tippet piece I'd left on the end of my leader, and wished I'd cut it



back to the 4X section before tying on my streamer pattern. 4X tippet generally makes a remarkable difference in playing a good-sized trout, but in this case it was too late; I was simply going to have to be a lot more careful in playing the fish. I decided to hang the trout in the current and hold him for as long as I could. That way he'd have to fight both me and the current simultaneously and would perhaps, if nothing went wrong, eventually tire enough for me to work him over towards the bank below me, where I stood a fair chance of landing him. Not a particularly good chance, but a fair chance nonetheless. I could tell that this was going to take some extra time and patience, so I took a good deep breath and tried to relax, concentrating on not forcing the issue or overplaying the fish. My rod was a nine-footer and I made sure I could steer clear of the tree limbs just behind and above me,

taking care not to poke my rod tip up into a spot where I might either break it or lose the fish in some other fashion. I tried to get a good bearing on my position and situation, not knowing what I might have to do or where I might suddenly have to move to gain an advantage.

The trout made a few more short and powerful runs to various spots in the pool, but I was able to bring him back into the center current each time he ran. There were two substantial submerged tree limbs beneath the water's surface, and the trout ran for both of them a number of times, but luckily I was able to consistently draw him away from both hideaways before I got into any serious trouble. I thought it was miraculous that all my knots had thus far held.

Finally I could feel the trout begin to lift in the deep water, and soon afterwards he rolled on the surface for the first time before diving deep for cover. I was stunned with its size, but I did not panic. Much. He rolled on the surface another three or four times, always immediately diving down once again into the depths, but the more often a big trout begins to surface, the more fatigued he is becoming, and I began to feel I'd soon be able to at least *try* to land him. Often actually *landing* a good-sized trout is the most difficult part of the battle. Many good fish are lost right at the very end.

I made an attempt to draw the trout over to the lefthand bank below me, but he was still much too powerful to handle, moving quickly back out into the deeper water. The fourth time I tried to lead him to the bank, I thought I had a chance, and he did indeed allow me to bring him up against the bank. I took a few steps downstream and got the trout between my feet and the bank before I carefully laid my rod down in the snow, scooped up the trout and tossed him up into the snowbank. It wasn't my most graceful trout-landing maneuver on record, but it got the job done. I am not in the habit of carrying a landing net, but that wouldn't have done me any good anyway. The trout was too large for any of my nets.



The fish was a beautiful rainbow trout and measured just a shade over twenty-six inches in length, the second largest trout I'd ever landed.

I took a quick photo of the fish before bringing him back down into the water, where he soon revived and strongly swam off into the depths.

The next day I bought an inexpensive picture frame that would hold four photos. I made copies of four of the nicest pictures I'd taken on Saturday, one of them being of course the fish itself, held out at arm's length with my left hand, the photo being shot with my right. You can see the blaze-orange sleeve on my left arm from the sweatshirt I always wear during Iowa's autumn deer hunting seasons. Two other photos were nice shots of the pool where I'd hooked the trout, and the last was a pretty picture of the Sam Fox refinished Heddon rod, with the stream and snow-covered banks in the background. There was a small open square in the middle of the picture frame, and there I mounted the streamer I caught the trout with, which I'd remembered to snip off my leader and save. I used a pea-sized ball of "Stick-Um" candle adhesive to mount the fly, and that worked perfectly.



I liked my photo montage with mounted fly and thought it more interesting than having the trout mounted professionally, particularly because I printed the photos myself on my computer, the picture frame cost me only \$2.14 (a professional mount would have cost at least \$200.00), and the trout is still *swimming in the stream*.

I have never mounted a trout, and rather doubt I ever will. And by the way, I've decided it was nothing but total luck, pure and simple.

Be Vigilant!

*"Red" Canoe
Trout Unlimited
Iowa Driftless Chapter*