

May 2013



Driftless Days . . .

Today is the seventeenth of March, and I'm not sure exactly how much snow remains on the ground. It's a lot. Do you measure the drifts and the gigantic windrows rippling throughout the fields and ditches, or do you simply pick a nice low spot out in the yard that's only a foot or so deep? I just looked at the weather forecast and we have a possibility of another five inches of snow coming our way by tomorrow evening, but I don't think anyone cares anymore. We'll probably just drive around in it for awhile longer until it finally decides to go away.

Yesterday I ventured out of town twenty miles or so and fished a stream I haven't been on yet this year. The last three or four miles of gravel were treacherous and even local residents weren't out on the road. There are a few rustic rental cabins up on the hill along the way and I noticed one guy had buried his pickup to the axels on the way up to his cabin. Two other vehicles were stranded at the bottom of the driveway and their drivers were staring up the hill, wondering what the hell to do next I suppose. They might have been spring turkey hunters. Most fly fishermen don't wear that much camouflage.

I caught a half-dozen trout on a streamer pattern and didn't see a single rise all afternoon. The last appreciable snow the stream valley received was a little over a week ago, and I saw only one set of footprints besides the ones I was making, so no one else had been down there for awhile except for that lone angler or trapper. The stream showed evidence of minor flooding over the week, probably due to the inch of rain that fell last Sunday on top of the snow. If it hadn't been as cold as it was, I suspect things would have been a *real* mess as opposed to the relatively partial mess I trudged through. I thought I might find a pod or two of feeding fish, but I didn't and the trout I managed to hook were few and far between.

Last year I saw our first Hendrickson mayflies on the sixteenth of March, and there had been good Blue Wing Olive and *baetis* hatches since mid-February. I've yet to see a good Blue Wing Olive hatch this spring, and I've found only one nice *baetis* hatch. That was three or four weeks ago and the average angler wouldn't even have noticed it if he or she hadn't been looking *very* closely. The flies were a #24 and extremely quiet about it.

It's odd how one can become spoiled by last year's weather, as though that's the way it's always *supposed* to be. Even so, this year our average daily March temperatures have been running about twelve degrees below normal, so it actually *has* been unusually wintry. Generally we are

comfortably in the lower forties by now, with the occasional day reaching the fifties or even the low sixties. Yesterday the temperature topped out at twenty-eight degrees (maybe), and my rod guides were iced-up all afternoon long. The extended forecast calls for current weather conditions to continue through the very end of March, and if that's the case we're still going to have a lot of snow on the ground at the beginning of April. One could say that March has been more like what March traditionally feels like around here, with more snow and colder days thrown in for variety. There *have* been years in which I've fished the Hendrickson hatch with snow on the ground, and in a few instances with snow coming down.

Yesterday if I happened to be standing in the sun, the ice impacting my rod guides wasn't quite as solid as it was when I was standing in the shade. Small wonder Larry and I were glad to get out of northeast Iowa during that first week of the month.

And of course we were barely able to get out of town.

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We were to leave at five in the morning on Wednesday, but on Monday evening it began to storm again and by noon Tuesday we'd received another eight inches of new snow. I'd never seen every single area school closed on the web site I normally check for weather and road conditions on winter mornings, but it happened Tuesday. The closings covered schools in northeast Iowa for about eighty or ninety miles beyond Decorah, including those listed in southeastern Minnesota and southwestern Wisconsin. Larry and I finally decided we'd just see what things looked like Tuesday night and go from there. There really wasn't much else we could do. By the looks of the radar report it appeared we might be OK if we could at least get through the first two hours of driving, which would put us halfway to Des Moines.



Larry arrived a little before five in the morning. We quickly knocked the driveway snow off my gear, threw it in alongside his and took off. Larry is not the type of guy to be late for a fishing outing, apparently even when surrounded by blizzards. When I'd been getting things together out in the driveway about half an hour before, I slipped on the ice for the first time this winter and came down hard on my left arm. I knew I hadn't broken anything, but I also knew I was going to have a very stiff shoulder in the near future. As it turned out I had problems raising my arm much above shoulder-height for a week or two, but that's the way it goes if you're going to live in this godforsaken country during the winter.

We slid westward for a couple hours until the roads improved and we got outside the worst of the storm's path. It was clear sailing all the way out to western Nebraska once we hit I-35 north of Des Moines, an immense relief and a good omen we thought. Fishing trips during the winter

months are always a crapshoot. Sometimes you win and sometimes you lose, but you always proceed as though losing is not an option.

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We met Bob and Gene at a truckstop just outside of Omaha. Danny and Chris were already on the river and presumably we'd find them later. We had another four hours of driving before we arrived on the North Platte near Lake Ogallala, Nebraska, about a hundred miles east of the Colorado border.

My friend Bob had been inviting me to come out and fish his Nebraska home waters for some



years, and of course he offered to be the chief river guide and trip coordinator too, should I ever make the journey. There's not a lot of trout water in Nebraska, and some people are surprised to hear there's any at all. Bob and his Nebraska friends often come up to northeast Iowa and the extended Driftless Region to fish, in part because it's the closest area to them with consistently good fly fishing and lots of water to explore. That's more or less how we all met some years ago, and as is so often the case with anglers who've had amiable meetings on the water, we've kept in touch. Bob had talked about the North Platte at Lake Ogallala before and said

I should come out sometime in January or February. I believe he was somewhat surprised when I said this year by god I'd be coming, but somehow we quickly settled on that first week of March as a good time to try. I think Bob thought the weather might be better by then. Larry had never fished Nebraska trout water either and seemed delighted with the opportunity to go with someone who at least had one leg up on where to go and what to do, so we hit the road with thoughts of a good river ahead.

Bob says there are a few nice streams and ponds within striking distance of Omaha he fishes regularly but he isn't particularly forthcoming about where they are. He'd described the North Platte below Lake Ogallala as having some good water to fish, though not a lot of it. It would be a nice cozy place to try for a few trout, especially in the dead of winter when the weather might be tolerable and fishing pressure minimal.

He also said we probably wouldn't catch as many fish as we're used to in the Driftless Region, but there'd be a good chance we'd hook a few bigger fish. By bigger he apparently meant over twenty inches, or so he suggested at any rate. Sometimes the shit gets pretty deep when Bob and I talk, and we have to put our proverbial waders on to continue the discussion.

As we sped through Nebraska on the interstate and moved westward into the high plains, the changing landscape reminded me of the area south of Wind Cave in the Black Hills of South Dakota. You're suddenly wondering if there are any antelope around, which we never think of in the prairie lands of the midwest.

The northward migration of ducks and geese was in full swing, and at times flocks covered the sky as far we could see. Greater and lesser Canadian geese, snow geese and blues were either on the ground, in ponds or in the air all across Nebraska, as well as almost any duck imaginable. We also saw (and heard) a great many sandhill cranes, a bird not particularly common to northeast Iowa, though I am beginning to see enough of them even near home to identify them in the air, at least in part because of their unusual flight pattern and coloration.

Eleven hours after leaving northeast Iowa, we arrived at a nondescript Day's Inn in Ogallala and got ourselves checked in. Bob had made enquiries at a few lodges in the area, but some of them weren't open for the season yet and one thing or another hadn't worked out with the others. Larry hadn't got his Nebraska fishing license, and when we went to the conservation office to get one we found it had closed twenty minutes before, so we decided to just go down to the river and give it a look before morning.

I had never seen anything quite like it before and really didn't know what to think. After a long walk downstream, the only thing I could come up with was that it seemed "interesting", and Larry rather quietly concurred. There were three rock weirs below the main dam on Lake Ogallala that stretched all the way across the river, each making a very large pool (almost a pond) directly beneath them. The water was very low as the dam had not yet been opened during the winter months, and the three rock weirs were entirely exposed across the river so that one could clamber out on them and fish to deep water downstream. This was the preferred local method of fishing, and we were assured there were good trout in the deep waters below the weirs. The ponds below the weirs were also purported to drive off massive midge hatches, though none were coming off as we looked over the water. It looked like two dozen anglers might fish a pond below a weir without getting in each other's way. The weirs had been constructed with gigantic boulders for the most part and it appeared you had to be part mountain goat to negotiate them.

Chris had been on the water for two or three hours before we arrived and said he hadn't gotten a strike. He also mentioned there had been a great deal of ice on the river until late in the morning and he couldn't fish much at all until around noon.

For some reason my curiosity had been struck while gazing far downstream. In the waning light I could see nothing but a ribbon of water flowing down along the western bank that simply disappeared into the horizon.

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It seemed like it had taken a long time to get to the river since getting up a little before 3:00 AM Wednesday. Larry and I skipped the group breakfast and headed directly out to the water early in the morning. Being the foreigners of the group, we were naturally more anxious to get started. We saw four large mule deer with racks along a ridge in the hills on the way in, close enough for a photo had we been quick enough. The high plains hills were dotted with groves of cedar, which mule deer like to forage on during the winter, and by the looks of things they had plenty to eat. We wondered why they still had racks, as most midwestern whitetails would have lost theirs a month ago, but Bob later told us Nebraska mulies often retain their racks until late March. The four deer must have been a late-winter bachelor group and they disappeared down and behind the ridge almost as soon as we slowed down to watch them.



The river had an unfortunate amount of ice on it Thursday morning, as Chris said had been the case the morning before. It was a little colder than we'd expected too, but that really wasn't much of a concern considering where we'd come from. There was no snow on the ground whatsoever, which seemed like a direct blessing from God himself. We found some mostly open water below the second and third weirs, but we didn't get any strikes at all in either location and saw no midges to speak of on the water. Eventually Larry wandered off upstream back toward the lake, and I hung out below the third weir waiting for midges that never appeared. Bob, Gene, Danny and Chris had arrived on the water by then and I could occasionally barely make them out along the banks upstream or crawling out on the rock weirs to try their luck. I spotted a few lone risers every ten or fifteen minutes, but the fish

were always out of casting range and they never came back up again in the same locations. I tried blind-casting a dry midge pattern for an hour or so hoping I'd run into a cruiser, but that didn't work either so I finally decided to take a walk downstream to explore, thinking I'd come back upstream later to fish the highly acclaimed mid-afternoon midge hatch.

I found a nice run or two downstream, though they didn't look quite as good up close as they had from a distance. I eventually came upon a better looking run that had a little more depth to it, perhaps four feet or so, fed by a small feeder creek that tumbled into the river just above it. The deeper water stretched out below the feeder creek a good two hundred yards downstream as the river widened, and I couldn't imagine it being fishless. Actually I had the feeling the whole river was lousy with trout, but I hadn't figured out where they were holding or how to catch them yet. And for some reason I'd suddenly become nervous as a whore in church, as my Dad used to be fond of saying, which usually in my case simply means there are fish in the area. I'm too old to get nervous about much anything else.

A fish rose directly in front of me and I covered it with the #24 Threadwrap midge pattern I still had attached to my 7X tippet strand. It struck immediately, and a short time later I landed a plump ten inch rainbow, my first Nebraska trout ever and a handsome little fish at that. Among other things, I was delighted I hadn't got skunked after eleven hours of driving through the Arctic Circle.

I made a number of casts with the midge pattern after landing that first fish but could not entice another strike, though I covered two more good rises. I knew there *had* to be fish in the run, as it just looked too damn good for there not to be. I'm usually the last guy on earth to change to a streamer pattern rather than sticking with the dry fly, but I decided to try a Light Spruce for at least long enough to see what might happen. The old and beautiful Light Spruce (originally designed by the Pacific Northwest Godfrey brothers early in the twentieth century) was a streamer pattern meant for steelhead, and I saw no reason why a big Nebraska rainbow trout might not eat one too.

I tossed the Light Spruce out against the far bank, gave it a slight upstream mend and let it sink a little before beginning a tentative retrieve. A fish hit it very hard and my line parted ways with the fly before I knew what happened. I thought the trout had broken me off at the fly but soon discovered it got me at a tippet knot further up the leader. I didn't think it was a poor knot and guessed it might have gotten nicked somehow, subsequently breaking at a bad time. I retied my leader, put on a fresh Light Spruce and tried another cast in the same general location.



Another fish struck hard and this time I hooked it well. The trout was a powerhouse and made a number of strong though relatively short runs before I was finally able to bring it to hand nearly fifteen minutes later, a gorgeous rainbow of just over twenty inches, highly-colored and broad as a football, or so it seemed in all the excitement.



I figured I'd at least caught one of the big ones Bob had spoken of, which certainly wasn't all bad. Then I hooked another big trout and landed it a few casts later, and by the time I thought I'd make the trek back up to the vehicle for some coffee I'd landed five trout, four of which ran over the twenty-inch marker wrap on my Sam Fox Heddon #10 cane rod.

I don't know why it is, but every time I fish with a Sam Fox refinished cane rod weird things happen in the area of big trout. Or perhaps I should say that every time I get into big trout, I seem to have one of his refinished rods in hand. Whichever the case, I still don't understand it and probably never will.

Everybody was back up at the parking lot when I arrived except Larry, who the guys said had gone up to prowl around the lake shore above the main dam. I mentioned I'd done OK and had hooked a big trout or two, and that maybe Bob wasn't as completely full of shit as I'd sometimes suggested in the past. I took the liberty of toning things down a bit, however, as the rest of the group hadn't done so well upstream and a local fisheries biologist was visiting with Bob and

Danny. After my afternoon coffee (some leftover morning dregs as I'd forgotten to bring my thermos from home) I said I thought I'd walk back downstream. And that's what I did.

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I fed the Light Spruce down a deep slot I hadn't thought looked so good in the morning, but suddenly looked a lot better. I hooked another good fish in the deepest part of the run and managed to bring it to hand some fifteen minutes later. That fish cleared twenty inches too and had a lot of moving current to work with. At one point I thought it was going to run the pool and take off downstream, but it didn't quite make it. I was luckily able to check it at the very tail of the run and bring it back upstream.

I put another cast just off the far bank near the spot I'd caught my first smaller trout and hooked yet another sizable fish, which I was just in the process of beaching when Larry walked up. By that time I'd given up on normal landing techniques and had begun backing up on the bank cobbles while carefully sliding trout up between safer-looking rocks, most of which were round and about the size of softballs or baseballs.



Larry had caught a few decent trout upstream, but not so many of the larger ones. He figured he'd better come down for a visit after he ran into the rest of the group, who told him they didn't know what was going on but that for some reason I'd been downstream all day long.

It had gotten so pleasantly warm (almost sixty degrees) I'd taken off my heavier jacket and gloves. After exchanging tales of how the day had gone thus far, Larry and I took a few civilized photos of each other in normal spring fishing attire (without any background snow) and headed off further downstream.



We had a great afternoon and each caught a few more trout before heading back up to the parking lot near dark. At one point I connected with a big fish that ran all of my flyline out upstream before turning tail and rocketing back downstream. The fish was moving so fast I couldn't keep it on the reel so I stripped line back as fast as I could, letting it pile up in loose coils around my feet. When the trout passed by me and went further downstream, I lost it when I inadvertently stepped on the flyline as I turned to face the running fish. That was a very clumsy mistake and I think it might have been the biggest trout I'd hooked that day, but I put on another Light Spruce and caught three more trout in rapid succession as the sun went down over the river and Lake Ogallala, all in the same run, so things were well once again. Other than the fish I'd just lost, the fish that broke me off in the morning and another morning trout that threw the hook when making a spectacular leap, I landed all ten of the remaining trout I'd hooked, which I thought quite good considering the size

of the fish. On the day, Larry and I landed ten fish each, fourteen of the twenty being between twenty and twenty-four inches in length.

The North Platte rainbows ran hard and leapt high, often three or four times after being hooked. They generally hit the streamer on the swing and were already moving fast at the take, so strikes were sweeping, powerful and very exciting. I never let a trout get into my backing, but I did a lot of running along the banks to keep that from happening. For the most dramatic example, I covered almost a hundred yards of bank before losing that evening trout by stepping on the flyline. Most of the better trout took out the regulation eighty feet of flyline before I thought I'd better run



them down. My Heddon #10 is a light 7wt or a heavy 6wt, depending on nothing in particular other than the caster's opinion. I'm glad I chose the rod to fish with at the onset. The local fisheries biologist told us that some rainbows surely escape from the lake to the river through the bottom-draw dam, but the river is not stocked and natural reproduction of rainbows has been heavily documented for some miles below the dam. We'd like to think we were hooking trout that had been born in the stream, though that is uncertain.

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On Friday Larry and I were again on the river early in the morning. I saw my first robin of the spring in Nebraska just before beginning our second day of fishing on the North Platte, and Larry had seen his first the day before. We began further downstream, roughly where our good luck had begun the day before, but this time we couldn't get a strike to save our lives. I got a solid bump from what probably was a good fish on my second or third cast, but after that neither of us had a touch for almost three hours. Eventually we split up and Larry went much further downstream, well out of sight.



I fished as diligently as I could, but nothing happened for what seemed like a very long time. Around noon, however, I made a long down and across cast and hooked a magnificent trout at the very tail of a good pool as the fly swung across in shallow water, and after a fairly lengthy battle I was able to bring the fish to hand. I was particularly pleased to land the fish as I guessed I might have made four or five hundred casts before it struck without falling asleep at the wheel.

I rounded the next bend and saw Larry fast into a good fish in a beautiful bend pool. After landing the trout, Larry told me it was the sixth fish he'd caught without even moving his feet, all of course in the big bend pool. We figured things were finally heating up and we were in for a

very good afternoon when we looked upstream and saw Bob meticulously working his way downstream in our direction. I knew something was up as Bob wasn't fishing his way down. I'd guessed correctly and Bob had indeed wended his way down to deliver unfortunate news. A storm was coming in from the northwest and blizzard conditions were expected to move into the area later that night, and it was already snowing hard in Colorado just west of us. Danny and Chris had already left for home, and Gene was waiting for Bob back up at his truck, packed up and ready to go too. It was sixty degrees without a cloud in the sky and we'd just landed a bunch



of big trout, so it was hard to believe (and accept) the weatherman's news. On the other hand we'd been watching the forecasts ourselves and knew we were fishing on the edge of bad weather, so I guess we thought it over with resignation more than anything else. We wondered if we couldn't fish until dark and take off early Saturday morning, but Bob said the storm was supposed to hit at 2:00 AM and we would not want to be on I-80 in Nebraska if that happened. Difficult as it was, we decided we'd better head back upstream and check out of the area ourselves. Bob and his friends were all Nebraska natives and if they thought they'd better get out, we thought we'd better follow suit.

As it turned out, that was the best thing to do. We left the town of Ogallala about two in the afternoon and by then it had already clouded up and begun that midwestern "light wintry mix". We saw a few vehicles in the median or in the ditches on the night drive back east across Nebraska, keeping in mind the black ice that probably put them there. Westbound semis were ominously backed up at rest and truck stops and clearly not too interested in proceeding along to the region we'd just left. The storm moved eastward and stayed on our tail all the way back to Iowa, but luckily we didn't have any problems except for extremely erratic interstate traffic and night driving through weird conditions.

We got to Des Moines before midnight and stayed the night at Larry's son Dan's home, whose wife Christy was kind enough to put up with two errant fishermen on very short notice. We left for home early Saturday morning and drove through steady rain for four hours with the temperature at thirty-four degrees. We made it back before it all turned into ice. Later we heard that on Sunday, the day we originally had planned to return, I-80 was closed from eastern Colorado almost to Des Moines.

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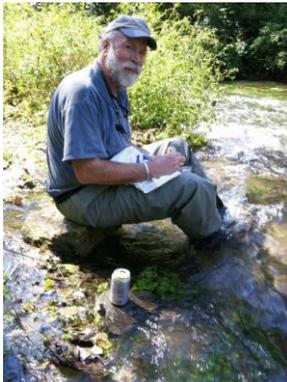
Our trip had been cut short by one day of fishing but in the day-and-a-half we were lucky enough to have, Larry and I landed twenty-nine trout all told, twenty of which were between twenty and

twenty-four inches in length. It was one of the damndest fishing trips I've ever taken, and sometimes I still can't quite believe it happened.

On the other hand, I don't know what else we really could have expected. Larry was fishing his Red Badger, and I was fishing the Light Spruce.



Be Vigilant!



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“Red” intends to take a break from his “Driftless Days” articles and very much hopes you have enjoyed them. A very special thanks to outgoing Chapter webmaster Marv Slind for his guidance and assistance in posting the “Driftless Days” pieces over the past six years and for many other Chapter and website contributions too numerous to mention!