

October 2008



### Driftless Days . . .

I may as well admit I love winter fly fishing with a passion. Winter fly fishing can be every bit as interesting and rewarding as fly fishing in more temperate seasons, though certainly on a different scale. Rarely does one land as many trout during a winter outing as one does in spring, summer or autumn adventures, but they are hard-won fish taken in very challenging circumstances and that alone makes the winter experience worthwhile. Winter is a beautiful season in Northeast Iowa and winter fishing affords one an interesting and unique perspective on our landscape and ecosystem, not to speak of having an opportunity to shake off the “shack nasties”. Iowa is the only state I am aware of other than Colorado that has a year-round open trout season, and I’ve always appreciated that. Occasionally I run into fellow fishermen on the water during winter months, but fishing pressure is minimal on Northeast Iowa streams in winter and under the right circumstances I’ve had wonderful outings in the snow. For example, on my last cast of the 2005 trout season, at about 4:30 PM during a snowstorm on New Year’s Eve, I hooked and landed a twenty-two inch Brown trout with a split-cane rod. The fish was suspended in about five feet of water next to a logjam, and on a previous cast I thought I’d felt the slightest bump to my streamer, just enough to make me wonder . . . But I spend a great deal of time “wondering”. I made perhaps twenty casts to the same location, trying to hang the fly next to the logjam with as little movement as possible, when the streamer just stopped dead in the current and I set up hard on my biggest trout of the year. That was a very subtle take; quite common in winter fishing. The trout made two strong runs to other logjams but I was lucky enough to steer him clear of those, and in the end the battle occurred in open water, usually to the fisherman’s best advantage. It was an incredible way to end a great year of fly fishing, and I was able to do it by braving just a bit of adverse winter weather.

In my mind, winter fishing in Iowa comprises the months of December, January and February. We certainly have wintry conditions at times in November and March, not to speak of October and even April, but those months generally include excellent dry fly fishing days, so I don’t tend to count them as “official” winter months. My preferred pattern for winter fly fishing is the **streamer**, and the best time to begin streamer fishing is in late November or early December, just after it has gotten cold enough to shut the autumn Blue Wing Olive hatches down. Often a couple of consecutive ten degree nights are a good indicator for me to tie on my favorite streamer pattern the next time I find myself on the water.



Streamer fishing is excellent early in winter, as the water temperature has not dropped enough to affect the metabolic level of trout; they will feed heavily on forage patterns in anticipation of winter and fewer available nutrients. In some years this heavy feeding pattern will extend into mid-January, but by then the water temperature generally will have dropped significantly and the

fishing **may** slow down. I've always found February to be our most difficult fly fishing month, as water temperatures are then normally at their lowest levels of the year. I usually tie a lot of flies in February! "Winter thaws" often do not improve late-season winter fishing. The ambient air temperature feels wonderful and it's very comfortable to be out on the stream, but again the water temperature remains very cold and the trout can be quite torpid. Two or three trout are a very good effort late in the winter season, and any more than that can be considered a great day. It's possible to get skunked in January and February, so be prepared for that!

Believe it or not, there are often excellent dry fly fishing opportunities in winter. Whenever you spot a rising trout, you have your invitation to try the dry fly. I once went sixty consecutive months landing at least a single trout on a dry fly each month, which of course included five winter seasons. Very small **Blue Wing Olive** or **Midge** patterns usually get the job done in these cases, though I remember once landing sixteen trout on a winter afternoon fishing a #16 **Blue Wing Quill** pattern. On that particular afternoon the hatch was heavy and the flies were large; normally it is difficult to even see the small dun on winter water, and one has to fish the rise form with the assumption that the fly is very small. I remember another winter season on North Bear Creek when I could almost count on a 1:00PM **Blue Wing Olive hatch** in a great riffle stretch I shall not identify at this time, if ever! The Blue Wings that winter were in the range of a #20.



One winter afternoon, again on North Bear Creek, I'd had a modest outing and hooked three trout. It was very cold and the fishing had been slow. On the way back upstream to my vehicle, I passed a large stretch of flat water and about twenty feet from the bank a fish rose very aggressively to something on the water's surface, which surprised me as I hadn't seen a rise all day long. For lack of a better idea I tossed out the non-weighted woolly buggler pattern I'd been fishing, which was frozen solid and caked with ice, and as soon as the fly hit the water a trout rose and clobbered it just as though it were a summer grasshopper. **That** was weird, I remember thinking. I made a second cast to the same spot, which at that time was I suppose eight feet deep, and this time the fly sank about two inches before the second trout came up and struck. On the third cast the fly sank about six inches before the third trout took. By the time it was all over I'd landed nine straight trout on nine casts, each fish taking the fly at a deeper level than the preceding trout. I swear the ninth trout picked that streamer up from the bottom. In retrospect I realized I'd run into a pod of feeding trout that were equitably suspended throughout the depth of the water, and that I'd probably hooked each and every one of them. Strange things happen in the world of fly fishing, and they can happen at the strangest and most unexpected times. That's part of what makes it all so interesting. That's also why I like to fish until dark if possible, regardless of the season. You never know what might happen.

Speaking of being frozen solid and caked with ice, there are a few practical matters to keep in mind when fly fishing for trout in winter. It doesn't happen often, but if I should happen to slip and get wet, my trip is over. I suppose there's a trout out there somewhere that's worth a bout of pneumonia, but I'm not sure I want to be the one to catch it. On the few occasions I've had this happen, I walk briskly back to my vehicle (which will keep me warm), start it up and head for home. A brisk hundred-yard walk at any time during the outing is always a good idea. You'll be



amazed at how the increase in blood circulation will drive heat into your fingers and toes. If you're still cold after a short walk, pass up the good water and walk further! You can't fish it anyway if you're too cold. It's not illegal to go back to your vehicle for a nice cup of hot coffee with the heater blasting away either; a pleasant break in the middle of your outing can be just the thing to warm you up again.

Experience will determine what is appropriate for you in terms of clothing. Every individual has their own idea of what's best for warmth while allowing for good upper body movement. A pair of long underwear, an insulated shirt, a blaze-orange hooded sweatshirt over the insulated shirt (to let the hunters know I'm there), a Bomber hat and those combination mitten-gloves with hand-warmers tucked away in the mittens all go a long way towards keeping me comfortable on a winter's day. The hand-warmers are a requirement for me. Neoprene waders, either waist-high or chest-high, are almost a must as neoprene **really** cuts out the wind. I prefer waist-high waders for winter. Chest-high waders may get you in deeper than you want to go for safe winter fly fishing. **Seriously**. I use an inexpensive pair of wading shoes specifically for winter fishing, generally a canvas-style rather than a leather or simulated-leather style. I would suggest **never** wearing your best summer waders and wading shoes for winter fishing; the ice and freezing water will absolutely ruin them. Neoprene waders and canvas-styled wading shoes withstand freezing very well and a single pair of each can last you through many winter fishing seasons. After your trip, **always** bring your wading shoes and waders into the house or a warm garage for storage. Leaving them in your vehicle or outside in an unheated garage while wet will destroy them, too. (Your wife or girlfriend's pillow can be an interesting storage area. You know, the same place you put your cricket and grasshopper patterns. No, forget that one.) Usually I gear up at the house before a winter fishing venture, and I take it all back off in the entryway after I return home. That way I don't have to do it outside in cold weather. When I get to the stream, all I have to do is put on my vest, string up the rod and hit the water. When my trip is over, I start up my vehicle, take down the rod and drive home, leaving the rest of the "take-down" for the warm house as mentioned.

How cold is **cold**? That will vary from fisherman to fisherman as well. A Trout Unlimited friend recently told me he experienced some great fishing in Montana late last autumn in eighteen-degree weather. For me, that's **cold** and getting near my bottom line. The coldest I've fished for trout was about ten degrees and I remember that being a very short venture indeed. I've always "pushed the envelope" in fly fishing and weather extremes fascinate me, but fishing when it's **too** cold is dangerous and besides that, it's not much fun. Fly fishing is too great a sport to be miserable while doing it. I like it above twenty degrees.

As far as winter rod and reel gear goes, I wouldn't take any of my good dry fly rods out in winter. Rods will ice up at the guides and often I have to pick ice away to make a cast. Also, you'll want your guides clear of ice if you happen to hook a fish, particularly a bigger one. An older, beat-up rod might be best; something that wouldn't be the end of the world if broken. It's easy to shatter a graphite rod tip in extremely cold conditions. I've done it four times. A shorter, two-piece rod does not have as many guides to pick ice out of, and you only have one ferrule connection to deal with, both pluses. It's a myth that you can't fish a split-cane rod in rainy or wintry weather, but a shorter, heavier, two-piece rod works best in winter for the above-

mentioned reasons. Just be careful with it! As always, if you slip and fall, try to toss your rod **gently** to safety on your way down. Your reel will ice up as you fish; again, an older or inexpensive reel is definitely OK for winter fishing. Normally everything works quite well around twenty-eight degrees and above, especially with some sun in the picture.

In winter, my experience dictates that fish tend to hit in the same type of water stream-wide on a given day. In other words, if they're hitting in the riffles, I fish the riffles. Maybe they'll hit in flat water on a dead drift. Sometimes they want a bit of movement. Sometimes they want a lot of movement. Watch out for shallow water; you'd be surprised at how many winter fish can be taken in six inches of water along a slow bank or shelf. That's where the water is warmest. Sometimes trout will move out from bank hides to take a streamer. Do some experimenting until you discover how the fish are holding and how they **might** be taking. When you find the hot button, continue to push it. Remember to thoroughly work the seams along riffles. Try different depths and speeds. Learning to fly fish in winter is the same as learning in other seasons. It's just different! Greater skill comes with lots of practice. You can even call it "research" if you like!

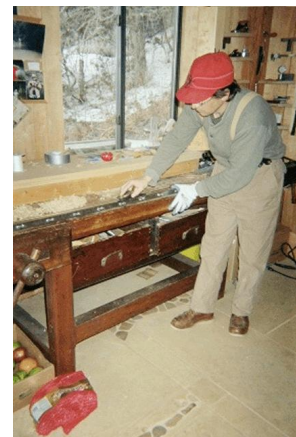
Some years ago I hooked a winter trout with a large streamer pattern on yes, you guessed it, North Bear Creek. I was standing at the top of a riffle and the fish took in shallow water just off the right-hand seam. To this day, that trout is the only fish that ever completely cleaned me out. There wasn't a thing I could do except hang on until it was over. He had a lot of water to run to downstream, and all I saw was the wake! How big was that trout?

I don't know, but I've been trying to hook him ever since. See you on the **ice**!

*"Henry Beston wrote of splendor. On the Rapidan one day I saw snow fall through blooming dogwoods. I do not expect to see such a multiplication of whiteness again in my lifetime, but it is a part of me to be lived again whenever I pull a Rapidan trout into our half of the world or, for that matter, when I contemplate these words which somehow seem to tumble together toward poetry, or song:*

*Rapidan.  
Rapid Anne.  
Rap-i-dan.  
Rapidan."*

*Howell Raines, from  
Fly Fishing Through the Midlife Crisis*



**Be Vigilant!**

*"Red" Canoe*

*Trout Unlimited  
Iowa Driftless Chapter*