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Winter Trout Fly Fishing

By Cameron Larsen

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by: **Cameron Larsen**

It is winter time now. One step on the frozen porch steps first thing in the morning removes any doubt of that fact. Winter time brings on many thoughts, holidays, dark afternoons, football on TV and for me some of the best trout fly fishing there is. That's right trout fishing, winter steelhead fly fishing has been around a long time, and gets more popular every season. But the truth of the matter is trout fly fishing can be excellent, the crowds are down to non-existent, the scenery and wildlife are plentiful, and it makes those long days of early spring with non-stop rain and overflowing rivers more tolerable.

When to go:

Winter fly fishing demands a little timing and planning on your part. One nice thing is, the weekends aren't crowded, so you really don't need to ask the boss for time off, to really get some peace and solitude. But other planning does need to be done. The first thing is checking your local regulations. Many, many places now offer year around trout fly fishing. A good portion of this is probably catch and release, but that only helps in further reducing the crowds. Some areas allow only lakes to be fished year round, some only allow rivers, but most places will allow something to be fished year round.

After you have your areas selected, you must really get an idea on the weather. Mild winter days, specifically afternoons, can provide some shirtsleeve fishing opportunities. Coastal regions that rarely get snow or ice, need to be checked more for river levels. Three or four days of steady rain can really put a river in at unfishable levels. It is also rarely enjoyable to fish in well below freezing temperatures. Even if you can dress warmly enough, the ice on the guides make casting nearly impossible, and the slickness of entering the river is extremely dangerous. Extreme care should be taken when wading in general, one slight misstep, can send you into the river, dangerous all year, this is multiplied by the cold air temperatures in the winter. Also light is much less, making it difficult to see the river bottom while wading. So step very cautiously. And always fish with a partner.

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OK, enough of the warnings, when to go is what we are after. I prefer a nice period of dry weather, with mild afternoons. I rarely fish in the early morning, in the winter, but if you can get a fogged over morning with nicely rising afternoon temperatures that reach in to the 40's, you have a day to hit the water!

What to wear:

A few years ago I switched to breathable waders and I actually have never been more comfortable while winter fishing. I layer underneath with two or three layers of thermal wear, including one layer of fleece pants. I can move much better than in neoprene's, and there is no clamminess to bring on chills. Socks are also important silk liners with thick winter socks work for me. I have a roomier pair of wading boots specifically for winter to allow for the extra bulk. I also don't cinch my boots down too tight, as that seems to cut off circulation, nothing will ruin a fishing trip quicker than cold feet.

Many angler's wear fingerless fleece gloves. I like them only if there is a biting wind, otherwise I can't

seem to keep them dry long enough to make them worth the effort. I can cast adequately with either hand, and will sometimes tuck my free hand inside my waders by my chest.

To me a hat is virtually as important as waders, and I layer shirts, remembering my vest will also provide some warmth. Don't forget the inside, a nice hot thermos of coffee, has brought many a sigh of satisfaction.

Fishing:

Winter trout fly fishing requires some adjustments. Plan on sub-surface fishing primarily. The warm afternoons like I mentioned above will produce Blue Wing Olive hatches in many locations, and midges hatch year round as well. Some dry fly action can occur, especially on smaller streams where options are less for trout. But by and large plan on fishing nymphs. And plan on fishing them deep. Depending on the size of water, a split or two is mandatory, and perhaps a sinking tip line. I usually use two flies, one as a dropper. Good patterns include, imitations of food sources that are available year round like San Juan Worms, Chironomid Pupae, Disco Midge, and Wd-40's. General nymph patterns like Hare's Ear and Prince Nymphs, will work to imitate the occasional nymph that might come in the trout's path.. Streamers also make excellent winter flies, including Woolly Buggers, Muddler's and Mickey Finn's. Don't forget that like trout, small fish and nymphs metabolism is slow as well, and they are apt to stick to the bottom, and out of the main current.

Winter fishing usually means clear water. I use lighter tippet than normal, because fish seem more easily spooked. Trout's metabolism makes them want to seek out pools near the bank that are warmed by the sun, so they are more vulnerable. I usually forgo strike indicators as well. Also remember that due to the slower metabolism, the fish will be sluggish. They often will bite gingerly, hook-ups will be primarily in the tongue. As trout may often go after several small insects in one mouthful. So rigorous setting of the hook is not required.

They are not likely to chase food down, as this will burn more calories than they will take in. Especially

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when fishing smaller patterns. While small pattern are very effective, in fact the first choice of many winter angler's, they need to be fished deep, and in front of the fish. Dead drifting nymphs is my first choice. If no luck I will try swinging streamers, second. I mend my line as soon as it hits the water, to ensure a drag free drift, and wait for the gentle take. I let the fish do the setting.

Once landed the winter fish might need more that it's usual care before allowing it to swim free. Landing fish should be quicker do to their lower energy, and then one must make sure the fish is 100% revived before it's release.

Summary:

There you have it, like all forms of fly fishing winter fly fishing takes a little practice, and a lot of patience. But the surreal beauty of winter combined the solitude it brings, makes this an especially rewarding time of year, to flog the water.

Cameron Larsen is a retired commercial fly tier and fly fishing guide. He now operates The Big Y Fly Company.

. He can be reached at

. This article will

appear in the Big Y Fly Fishing E-Zine at

General overview about Trout Senses

By Brett Fogle

When fly fishing for trout, it is of crucial importance to understand their senses. Trout are fish, after all, and make different use of their senses than we do. Understanding these senses can greatly increase the prospects of a successful fly fishing trip. Many anglers make the common mistake of thinking trout are not very smart. As far as hatchery born fish are concerned, this is mostly correct.

However, in Montana and many other prime rivers in the world, most of the rivers are not stocked with hatchery born fish. Instead, the trout found will generally be wild trout. And wild trout, whether they be rainbows, browns or brookies, are always smarter than their hatchery born counterparts.

Additionally, even if you are fly fishing primarily for hatchery born fish, it is still good to know how a trout uses their senses. Why? Quite simply, by knowing how a trout uses their senses, your approach and presentation will be better, leading to less spooked fish and thus better results in the stream. While hatchery born fish are rather stupid, they aren't so stupid as to sit right on top of an anglers foot, patiently waiting for that fake fly to float right by.

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It's also worth remembering that compared to other fish, trout tend to be smarter than most, especially the cunning Brown Trout. Because of this, when fly fishing for trout, don't go about it like you would go about bluegill fishing. If an angler goes about fishing for trout on the basis that they are stupid, the angler is likely to be disappointed. A trout that can survive the rigors of a trout stream, especially a Brown Trout, is a very cunning animal indeed.

To read the full article, click here:

Brett Fogle is the publisher of Fly Fishing Secrets, an insiders guide to flyfishing tips and techniques of the pros. To sign up for free flyfishing tips and other articles, please visit

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