



Beauty, Solitude, Ice Chasing Winter Trout

(Henry Koltz)

By Todd Franklin

A bitter winter breeze embraced me as I stood at my tailgate rigging up my fly rod. I looked at my destination across a rolling field of flattened, snow-covered canary grass. In spring, the quarter-mile walk was a brief stroll. Not today. Wading through the knee-deep snow is a mental and physical challenge, but my goal — the cold, clear meandering braids of a favorite trout stream — should generate enough incentive to carry me through the trek.

To my initial glee, Mother Nature has left a crust atop the snow strong enough to support me. After a few steps, however, my smile vanishes as my left boot breaks through. My attempt to get back up on the crust ends when my right foot breaks through. I picture my snowshoes hanging on the moose antlers back at the cabin. I won't make that mistake again.

The stream now looked a lot farther away, but I'd come this far. The lure of flowing water and the prospect of seeing a few trout drew me onward. I knew this stretch of water featured the deeper, slower runs where winter trout shack up. Approaching the stream with stealth is essential but impossible on this day. However, as I finally eased

into the water, the only sounds were the gurgling of the stream and the chime of moving water and ice. In the solitude, I quickly forgot about the trek behind me.

My efforts were rewarded with ideal winter conditions: a bit of sun to warm the water and soul, and only a light breeze. If I caught a fish — just one —

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it would all be worth it. I tied a pinkish scud below a somewhat heavy, black girdle bug, which is basically a hook wrapped with extra weight, a body of black chenille and some black rubber legs. It would quickly reach the depths where the slow-moving, cold-blooded trout might be hanging out. It would also sink the lure designed to look like a scud — a tiny, shrimp-like critter that

makes up a sizable portion of a trout's diet, especially in winter.

It's not uncommon to try numerous flies before you find the right one for the conditions. This day turned out to be one of those rare outings when the flies I started with were still attached to my line as I struggled back to the truck, but not before two fat 12-inch brown trout mistook the meaty-looking girdle bug for something alive, and a few curious little native brook trout fell victim to the pink scud. The precious colors these trout displayed seemed even more brilliant against the backdrop of snow and dried grasses. All were quickly released to provide memories for the next angler.

Why do it?

Those really hooked on pursuing trout will fish in winter simply because they can. Not many years ago, winter trout fishing was either illegal or severely restricted, but when research showed little harm to trout populations from winter fishing, states expanded opportunities.

"I look forward to some pleasant days (above 35 degrees, usually) to get out. I think the solitude is a draw, and I love to hear the creek rustling along

the icy edges,” said Duke Welter, Trout Unlimited’s Driftless Area restoration outreach coordinator.

Welter lives in Viroqua, Wis., considered by many to be “Trout Central” in Wisconsin’s Driftless Area, surrounded by hundreds of miles of trout water.

“I grew up in northern Wisconsin, where everything was frozen six months of the year, so open water in these Driftless streams in winter is a real treat.”

When temperatures have been well below freezing for several days, you’re probably better off reading fishing books by the fire or sitting at a vise restocking your fly box.

“In winter you have to pick your days carefully,” Welter continued. “If it’s going to be sunny and perhaps a bit above freezing, then by all means, it’s worth giving it a chance. If you can find water warmer than 40 degrees, that’s even better, as trout tend to get lockjaw when the water is colder than that. Keep in mind that the water in most Driftless Area spring-fed streams comes out of the ground at about 48 degrees.”

Icy Guides

When a wet fly line meets the cold guides of a fly rod, ice builds up until the line can’t slide through the guides. You can crush the icy chunks with your fingers or put frozen guides in your mouth to melt the ice. Just don’t swallow, as that crystal-clear water may hold an array of microscopic critters that you

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don’t want plying your digestive tract. Your best bet is to just dip the rod into the water.

You can discourage ice from sticking to the guides with store-bought products like Loon Outdoors’ Stanley Ice Off Paste, waxy lip balm (e.g., Chap-Stick) or cooking spray (e.g., Pam).

Slowing Down

During the warm months, trout strike a balance between eating and being eaten, venturing into shallow water or riffles to eat, if there is cover to protect

them. In winter, with streamside vegetation long gone and their cold-blooded metabolisms slowing down, trout congregate in deep pools, especially those with good cover, such as submerged logs or trees. They favor pools with slow-moving — but not still — water. Almost everything a trout eats is brought to them by flowing water.

For fly anglers, cast a scud, woolly buggie or girdle bug into these deep spots, let it sink, wait as long as you can stand it, so the fish forget about whatever just splashed into the stream, then slowly retrieve. Vary your retrieve until you find one that works, from shorter twitches to longer, slower crawls.

Advice

A thermometer is a vital tool for winter trout fishing.

“They have to eat, and so we can fish them. I think water temperatures provide a series of thresholds for feeding activity. Below about 40 degrees, they do feed but don’t seem to take eagerly or move far to take food. Around 45 or 46, they feed more eagerly, so it’s wise to seek out springs at about that temperature and find them there. Usually you don’t see much surface feeding until it gets into the mid-50s, although some winter-time midge emergences come off in much cooler water than that,” Welter explained.

Welter says that trout are typically active for only a short period each day in winter, usually only a couple of hours at midday.

“It’s probably a combination of sun-warmed water and rising air temps. A downward temperature shift of a half degree can shut them off in a few minutes.”

Welter fishes a lot of leech and scud patterns during the winter, often with a zebra midge dropper. He says some anglers use an orange scud throughout the winter and swear by it.

Are winter anglers crazy? “Not on your life,” Welter responded. “We’re possibly a wee bit cold-addled, but good clothes can

A beautiful brown trout falls prey to a black girdle bug. (Todd Franklin)



Shelf ice frames a stream bank. (Mike Kuhr)

Winter Fishing Seasons

Driftless Area trout streams in Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin provide a variety of winter trout fishing opportunities.

Iowa is heavily into stocking hatchery trout but also has some streams that sustain wild populations. It allows year-round trout fishing and allows you to keep fish on nearly all streams. Just a few streams have special regulations.

Southeastern Minnesota's streams in Dodge, Goodhue, Fillmore, Houston, Mower, Olmsted, Wabasha and Winona counties have a catch-and-release season that begins January 1 and goes through mid-April. A few have a catch-and-release season running from mid-September to mid-April: East Beaver Creek in Beaver Creek Valley State Park; Forestville and Canfield creeks, and South Branch Root River in Forestville/Mystery Cave State Park; and Middle Branch Whitewater River and Trout Run Creek in Whitewater State Park.

Several Minnesota trout streams are accessible by wheelchair.

Wisconsin's early catch-and-release season goes from the first Saturday in January to the first Saturday of May. Only artificial lures or flies are allowed.

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address that. That, and a good brandy after you get done."

Dress for Success

Layer up with plenty of synthetics (no cotton), from long undies to fleece, then finish off with a windproof, waterproof and hooded shell. If you're a duck hunter, or just happen to have insulated waders, then put them to use. Hip boots work in a pinch but can limit where you can fish or cross a stream. Most trout anglers simply use breathable stocking-foot waders and layer up.

Don't wait until a blustery January outing to discover that your waders fell victim to thorns or rusty barbs last summer. Check them for leaks ahead of time, or pick up a new pair.

Keep your hands warm, but handling a fly rod or spinning rod with gloves on is nearly impossible. Invest

in a comfortable pair of gloves with the tips missing. I have a pair made of a breathable synthetic material that dries quickly. Skip the cotton. You can customize a pair by removing the tips from only the most necessary fingers and thumbs. You'd think your fingertips would go numb, but most days the gloves will keep the blood in your hands warm enough to keep your fingertips from numbing. You can even put handwarmers inside your gloves. If these techniques don't work, it's probably time to call it a day. 🌊

Todd Franklin is a freelance outdoor writer from Verona, Wis. He is also editor of Wisconsin Trout, the official publication of Wisconsin Trout Unlimited. He spends most of his free time plying trout streams in the Driftless Area and hanging out at his stream-side cabin near De Soto, Wis. This is his first story for Big River.