



No Crowds, Plenty of Fish and Weather: That's Winter Steelheading

by *Linda Steiner* photos by *Bob Steiner*

Upstream, 70 yards away, I could see Lenny's rod bent from handle to tip in a pleasingly severe arc.

"Good fish," I thought, smiling to myself.

Lenny had driven nearly 300 miles for this opportunity. Back at work he would need no excuses, no reasons why he didn't catch any fish. If he landed this one, his buddies back at the job would understand why he had wasted two days of vacation to fish in the snow. He was onto a hefty steelhead.

I cast and watched my flies drift down through the run in front of me. The water was molten green, liquid mint-tinted milk glass. I looked back up at the epoch fight, but the scene had disappeared. Blowing wet snow had thrown up a wall between me and the action. I lingered, then cast again, getting no results. The storm subsided or the wind shifted or paused, and there they were again, still locked in a struggle that was destined to end with the death of a fine steelhead and, later, smoked fillets.

After a quarter of an hour, I began to slog against the icy, knee-deep current toward my friend. As I arrived, I saw what was causing the rod to stay near the breaking point. Wallowing on the surface was the fish of Lenny's lifetime. After dropping my rod, I removed the camera from my fishing vest and began to photograph a few moments of the crowning gem of a long fishing career.



Its fight all gone, the heavy fish—a little over 12 pounds and nearly 3 feet long, as we measured later—swung into the shoreline and gave one last unceremonious flop. Once the fish was secured on the stringer, the camera went back into my vest, and my hands went deep into my pockets to warm. Lenny blew on his hands to thaw them and then shoved them into the pockets of his fiberfill coat. It was cold.

We had selected this day for a lot of reasons. First, since I live only an hour away from Erie County's Elk Creek, it would be easy for us to decide on the spur of the moment which day we wanted to fish during Lenny's visit.

Today had sounded perfect. Storm and ice warnings south of my Franklin home would negate any fishing pressure the streams would get from the cities to the south. The crowds would most likely be small and actually proved to be nonexistent. The Erie weather was going to be relatively balmy for that time of year: low 30s, winds 10 to 15 miles an hour with scattered snow squalls. In Erie, this could be June. Elk Creek and the other tributaries were dropping after a high-water event and had not frozen even at this point in the winter. This should mean new, fresh steelhead low down in the bigger water of the streams, and it did. We had selected the perfect day.

We had learned years ago that to enjoy it, one must be prepared for the changeable weather of the Lake Erie shore-front. You can count on dealing with cold wind, so you must forget all about cotton. The exterior garments must be wind-proof and waterproof. If you think you can tough out a few hours in a cotton hoodie, you are dangerously mistaken. My outfit starts with polyester or silk long underwear. I top that with a layer of fleece and a layer of wool, top and bottom. Then, I put on my layer of breathable waterproof and wind-proof outer shell. I'm toasty.

Keeping your feet warm for winter steelheading is of utmost importance. I wear a size 7 women's shoe, but bought wading boots two sizes larger, with felts and cleats for gripping the slippery shale that lines the Lake Erie tributary streams. I layer with a pair of synthetic hiking socks and heavy wool socks. Next on are my neoprene-footed waders and then my wading boots. All suited up, if the fit is too snug, your feet will be cold.

All layers, except that outer windbreaker shell, go inside your waders. By wearing the windbreaker on the outside of your chest waders, the snow and icy rain stay outside your waders. Tuck in the shell, and you will collect water inside your waders. That is a lesson I learned the hard way after only a few trips. Wear the heaviest windproof hat you can find. My favorite is wool with a wind-blocker layer.

Full gloves are difficult to fish in, so I like wool or heavy fleece fingerless gloves. They don't keep your fingers warm but help with the rest of your hand. I carry hand warmers in a pocket for when my fingers start to turn blue, and I can no longer feel them. In winter, as in summer, good polarizing lens sunglasses are a must to see the steelhead below the water and fish to them.

Winter steelhead tackle is simple. Use the same rig as during the rest of the year. Fish slow and deep, and look for fish in the shallows. These are the ones most likely to hit. Cast to them repeatedly with small white streamers, egg patterns, little lures or your favorite bait. Sooner or later, they will have enough of your annoyance and hit. The action is seldom fast like in early fall, but it can be steady.



*Safety is a concern when winter steelhead fishing.
Don't fish alone.*

For winter, my steelheading buddies and I like long rods, with 6-pound test. Hooks are always double-X strong, but seldom bigger than a size 14. Floats and small split-shots are dictated by the type of water in front of us and the activity level of the fish. If they are sulking on the bottom, fish the bottom. If they seem to be cruising, fish under a small float.

Safety is a concern when winter steelhead fishing. Don't fish alone. If you must fish alone, fish where there are other anglers in sight. Watch the water. After a period of ice cover, it is tempting to fish when a warm rain or sunny day beckons. Heavily flowing water can create open fishing spots, if you seek them out.

On unseasonably warm days or after a rain—classic January or February thaw weather—watch for off-colored water. This is a sign the stream you are fishing is rising. An inch or two of stream rise can break loose massive amounts of ice upstream. The ice chunks float, swirl and sometimes

form dams. Water pressure builds up behind them and all can let go at once. I have scurried up the nearest shore on both Elk and Walnut creeks because of such natural events. Once Walnut Creek climbed 4 feet in depth in 10 minutes.

Once Lenny and I had warmed our hands enough to feel them again, he caught a half dozen or so additional steelhead that day, and I beached a similar amount. We kept another one or two and released the rest. After hours of periodic blizzards, wet snow, sunshine and hail storms, we were tired. We were tired of withdrawing into our insulated shells and hunching our backs against the wind and cold; tired of tying on hooks when the steelhead would break our line by taking the bait and running under the edge of the shore ice; and tired of retying hooks with our watering eyes, dripping noses and hands that seemed made of plaster.

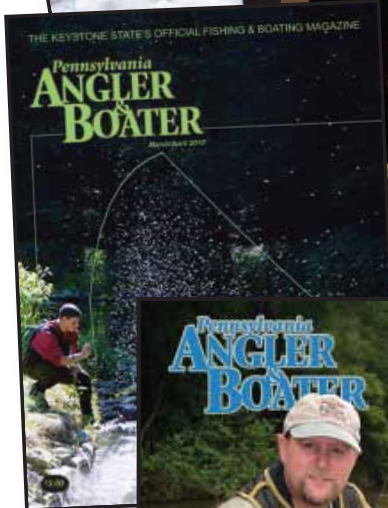
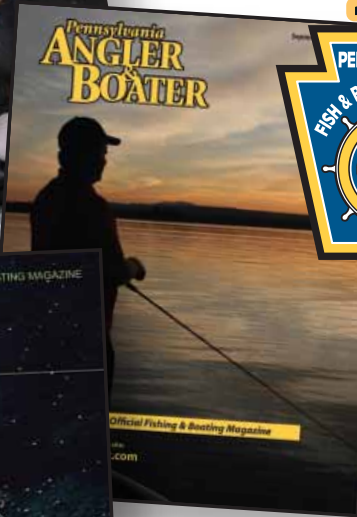
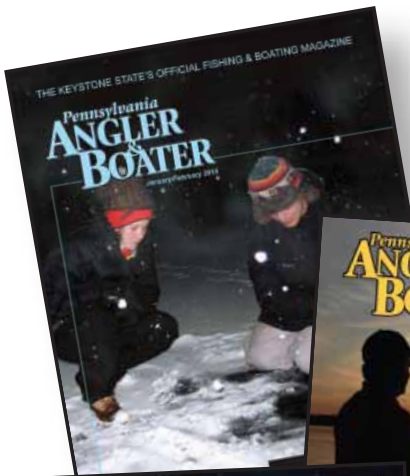
Starting for the car, we quickly warmed up as we climbed the hill with its six inches of new snow, dragging the day's

keepers behind us. The sun shone brightly as we kicked snow clumps from our wading boots and fought with the ice-hardened laces seeking to free our feet. In the plummeting temperatures of approaching evening, our waders had frozen and thin ice fell from them as we got ready for the ride home.

Winter steelhead fishing is just like fall steelhead fishing, only colder, with more room to fish and lots of fish that haven't been caught and released yet. Dress for it, pick your moments and have a world-class snow-season fishing adventure. ☐

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