

Winter Trout Fishing

by Ben Moyer photos by the author

Wading into the slushy anchor ice oozing over Meadow Run's rocky bottom was a little unnerving. Ice, everyone knows, normally floats, but anchor ice forms infrequently when frozen crystals tumbling in turbulent water adhere to super-cooled underwater rocks that protrude above the surface into cold air. As more bubbles and crystals mass together, this odd ice, textured like a snow cone, creeps over the bottom like lava over a volcanic beach. Once you've inserted a foot, the slush sucks at your waders like quicksand.

Glancing over my shoulder to check the escape trail I'd plowed through the gray mire, I lobbed a splitshot and No. 12 Prince Nymph into the dark channel still free of underwater ice. One upstream mend corralled the short hunk of fly line so that it angled nicely into the depths, trailing the rod tip downstream through the run. As it neared the drift's end, the line faltered and shuddered sideways. I lifted the rod against the solid weight of the first trout I'd hooked since the grouse, duck and deer seasons had wooed me off the streams.



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The fish was silvery and slim as trout often are in the depths of winter. Released, it hovered a moment in the eddy behind my left leg, then streaked away.

The setting for this brief encounter was stunning. Icicles draped from ledges,

boulders brooded under white mounds, and the slopes above stood stark in shadow and snow.

Why fish for trout in winter? It's trout fishing, and because, in some ways, fishing for trout under snow clad hemlocks is no different than fishing a soft evening in June.

But catching trout from winter streams does present its own seasonal challenges. If you adapt your technique, tackle and mental outlook, winter fishing can be effective and fun.

Some anglers avoid trout streams in winter because of what they hear or read about trout winter behavior—that they're as lethargic as sodden logs and just as likely to take a fly or bait. I think that's exaggerated. True, when streams

chill to the 40s or lower in temperature, trout don't flash around much or feed on the surface. But, that's partly because, there is less insect activity in the water around them. If they never fed, trout wouldn't survive the winter. A properly presented fly or bait will tempt them even when less adventurous anglers are content to stay indoors.

Your chances of catching winter trout are best when you drift a fly or bait along the bottom, at the current's natural pace, through places where fish are likely to hold. Currents flow with less force along the bottom and a trout expends less energy by stationing at that location. Also, it's along the bottom that trout find the errant insect tumbling along, easy to pick off.

Look for pockets of slack current surrounded by faster water or where a riffle dissipates into deeper, slower flow. Seams where two currents collide, creating cushions of slack flow, are especially promising. Learning to spot such a high percentage lies will improve your fishing year-round, but it's especially critical in winter. As a winter angler, your challenge is not that trout won't feed but finding the best place for trout to be when an opportunity to feed presents itself.

Once you've identified likely places for trout, your task is to present the fly or bait so it can easily pick it up and detect the strike.

Don't hesitate to use a splitshot. Nothing makes a fly cast appear less elegant, but appearance is not your objective. If you are out there enduring the elements, you want to hook some fish. Shot will get your fly down into the payoff zone quickly and keep it there throughout the drift. For a simple rig, fix a splitshot 8 to 10 inches above the nymph (or bait) and experiment with it. If you're not getting takes, add more weight. If you can feel the weight ticking along the bottom rocks and snag occasionally, your ballast is about right.

Here's a trick for determining if your fly is drifting just off the bottom where it needs to be. Carry some big, garishly visible flies. Large, glossy yellow and orange egg patterns like steelheaders are ideal. Tie on a high-vis scout fly, and drift it through the run you intend to fish. Unlike your real offering, which you'll send through in a few minutes, you'll be able to track its progress and see if you need to add or remove weight. When you've got it right, tie on a Prince Nymph, Hare's Ear or Pheasant Tail to the same setup. Instead of guessing, you'll be zoned in.

With the fly tumbling along at the right depth, you've reached a critical point in the process of catching winter trout—detecting the take. I don't believe that a trout's underwater take is any tougher to detect in the winter than it is in the spring. Much of the difficulty in detecting strikes can be attributed to tackle and technique, not the time of year. There are a number of things you can do to know, or at least sense, when that magical act happens.

I learned to fish nymphs before strike indicators achieved their modern popularity, and I still believe that it is the best way to fish, especially on smaller streams in the winter. Indicators are clearly helpful on big streams and rivers, where casts are long and you cannot be in intimate contact with your fly. But in winter, big rivers can be tricky places to fish in regard to safety.

Position yourself to reach the pocket or run with a lob or swing cast and a stretch of fly line not much longer than the rod. Cast upstream. Then, mend the line to achieve a direct, but not taut, connection between the rod tip and the fly or bait. Allow the offering to drift with the current, but lead it through the run or pool with the rod tip, watching always for any faltering or dance where the line meets the water. When you see the line deviate from its natural drift, set the hook. Often, the take will prove false—a brief snag on a rock or root—but you can't afford not to strike. The next time the line jumps, it may prove to be a trout, and when you feel that life through the rod, you'll know why you ventured out.

Another reason that I like to fish small streams in the winter without a strike indicator is that I'm somewhat lazy—at least I'm reluctant to constantly change the indicator's depth setting with icy fingers. If I'm fishing without an indicator, I never have to face that task. Instead of adjusting the tackle in every new spot, it's a simple matter of learning to raise or drop the height of the rod tip during the drift to keep the fly in the hot zone. It takes practice and touch, but it works very well once you gain confidence.

If you must use an indicator, fish one that floats well and adjusts easily, and commit to tweaking the depth at each new location, cold fingers or not.

Long, wispy leaders are a hindrance in this kind of fishing. Loops and swirls in the leader only make it tougher to see strikes. In winter, I feel most confident when I fish leaders roughly two or three times longer than the stream is deep. Most times, a six- to seven-foot

leader—tippet included—is not too short. As for thickness, 4X tippets are about right. A fairly stout tippet casts a fly-and-shot combo better, and it makes it easier to sense the fly's location during the drift.

Nymphs will likely tempt the most strikes, but don't be afraid to experiment with bigger patterns on the Woolly Buggie concept. You never know when a trout might view a big, pulsating bugger as a way to glean a lot of calories with minimal effort. Especially on streams you know hold big fish. Big flies are worth a try, even in winter.

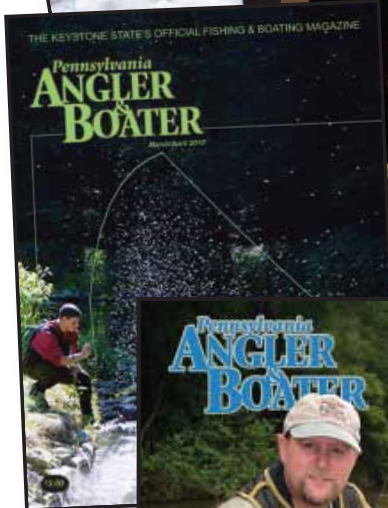
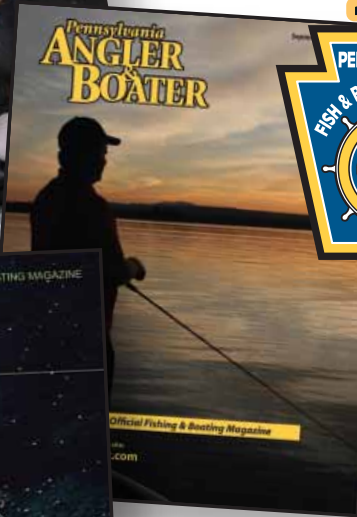
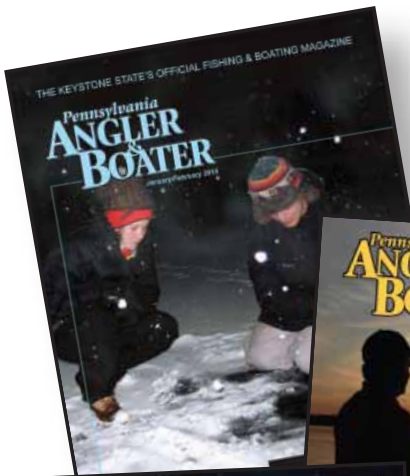
Winter fishing requires greater awareness of surroundings and conditions. To catch trout in the winter, think like one. If you can, fish at mid-day when streams warm a bit, and look around for patches of sunlight on the water. A run that produced nothing on a January dawn might yield several takes at noon with sun on the surface.

Watch the weather forecasts several days ahead of planned outings, or be ready to go when conditions are best. A warm rain after a long freeze can spike water temperatures and turn on a bite—just watch for ice floes in the current, dislodged from their upstream mooring.

Winter fishing calls for a few common sense precautions. Carry a waterproof pack with dry clothes to counter an unplanned dunking, or at least have a change of clothes in your vehicle. If you must fish alone, necessary at times to take advantage of ideal conditions, let someone know where you'll be.

You don't have to ski to enjoy the outdoors in winter. Catching a trout under winter hemlocks is too fine an experience to miss. And besides, it's great practice for spring. ☐





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