



# Winter Opens Non-Ice Fishing Opportunities in Northwestern Pennsylvania

by *Darl Black* photos by the author

Some people love winter. They can't get enough of the cold, the snow and of course, the ice.

I'm not one of them. I don't like the cold, the snow and most of all the ice on lakes and streams.

Make no mistake about it. Given the choice between ice fishing and casting in open water, I'm going to take open water every time.

But, this is northwestern Pennsylvania. Where can you find open water in January and February? Perhaps, more places than you may think.

First off, our winter weather in recent years has been unpredictable to say the least. Some years have featured intense cold with a thick layer of ice on all water, like last season. However, there are also mild winters with minimal snow and thin ice cover on lakes.

During a normal winter in northwestern Pennsylvania, we can expect skim ice cover on most lakes around early to mid-December, thereby rendering boat launching and shoreline fishing on impounded water null and void. However, flowing water remains open for some time after lakes freeze over.

As winter cold continues, flowing water will chunk-up with edge ice and eventually the pool sections will freeze over. An unexpected mid-winter warming trend in late January or early February often melts sections of the creeks and streams, while an extended period of warmth may even open the Allegheny River.

If these warming trends do not occur, there are still some spots in northwestern Pennsylvania where you can cast a line in open waters. Before identifying these sites, let's take a look



*The steelhead above was caught on Walnut Creek, Erie County.*



*This is the fishing platform downstream of Pymatuning Reservoir, Crawford County, outflow.*



*All trout caught in the tailwaters of Kinzua Dam must be released during the winter.*

at flowing water hotspots, which are last to freeze and first to open under a warming trend.

**Lake Erie tributary streams:** During the fall, anglers travel long distances to fish for steelhead in Lake Erie tributaries. By December 21, the first day of winter, only hardcore steelhead anglers will be found on the creeks, right up until ice makes fishing impossible. With the right presentation, steelhead are certainly catchable in the coldest of water. Live minnows are the choice of bait anglers, while fly anglers usually turn to small nymphs or egg patterns. The most popular winter streams are Elk Creek and Walnut Creek on the West Side and Sixteenmile Creek and Twentymile Creek on the East Side. During severe winters, the tributary streams eventually freeze sufficiently to shut down fishing with the exception of lower Sixteenmile Creek.

**Middle Allegheny River:** From Kinzua Dam to the I-80 Bridge at Emlenton, this 107-mile stretch of the free-flow Allegheny River offers outstanding fishing opportunities for Walleyes and Smallmouth Bass during the coldwater period. Northern Pike and Muskellunge may also be encountered. The sheer water volume of the Allegheny River will usually keep the river open into January. As long as the ramps are not iced-up and floating ice does not create a boating hazard, it is possible to catch the gamefish mentioned above regardless of water temperature, although bites are few and far between from bass once the water falls into the 30s. Hair jigs, tube jigs, skirted jigs with crayfish trailers or leadheads tipped with live creek minnows are the top fish-getters for Walleyes, bronzebacks and pike. A large bucktail jig or slow-swimming minnow plug will attract Muskellunge. There are 14 boat launches on this

section of the river, although not all will be useable during the winter. If edge ice has not formed, shoreline fishing can be productive in select deeper eddies where public access is possible. If you are unfamiliar with this river section, obtain a copy of the Middle Allegheny River Water Trail brochure from Warren County Visitors Bureau, Forest County Visitors Center or Oil Region Alliance.

**French Creek:** Other than the Allegheny River, the largest and longest flowing water stream in northwestern Pennsylvania is French Creek. With a high volume of flow and moderate winter weather, French Creek will be fishable through a good part of the winter. Targeted species in French Creek are Walleyes, Northern Pike and Muskellunge. French Creek has an excellent Smallmouth Bass population, but winter anglers rarely catch French Creek Smallmouth Bass. The winter higher-than-summer flow makes for better Walleye fishing. Casual fishing by paddlecraft is not recommended due to strong current and dangerous strainers. An irregular bottom with sudden depth changes makes wading treacherous as well. That leaves shoreline fishing. However, accessibility to the desirable deeper winter holes and pocket eddies is often impeded by deep snow and slippery banks. At Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission

access sites, anglers can find a suitable winter-over hole to fish within sight of the parking area. Local anglers also know of additional pull-off sites along a streamside road where winter holes can be reached; one of the most recognized sites is the confluence of Conneauttee Creek, a couple miles downstream of Cambridge Springs. Referred to as The Point, Muskellunge and Walleyes are taken from the current breaklines of the two merging streams, while crappies are caught in minimal current backwaters of Conneauttee Creek. For more detailed access, request a French Creek Water Trail map from VisitErie or Crawford County Convention & Visitors Bureau.

And, what about those spots that never freeze (the tailwaters of dam outflows)? These include Shenango Dam, Pymatuning Reservoir, Lake Wilhelm Dam, Woodcock Creek Dam, Tionesta Dam and Kinzua Dam. The amount of fishable water ranges from a single 50-yard pool at Lake Wilhelm Dam up to several miles at Kinzua Dam. All have relatively easy access, although ice and snow can make for slippery bank conditions.

Higher stream flows seem to attract gamefish from downstream to the outflow section, likely arriving to dine on stunned baitfish that have come through the dam. The high water creates shoreline pocket eddies, which generally hold catchable fish. However, extremely high discharge rates create dangerous fishing conditions. This is particularly true at the Kinzua Dam outflow where low flow actually creates better fishing opportunities.

Depending on the specific outflow, species may include trout, pike, Muskellunge, Walleyes and sometimes panfish. Here is a rundown of the most likely species at each tailrace.

**Shenango Dam tailwater:** Northern Pike, Walleyes and trout can be caught from the dam outflow to the first bridge downstream. The best winter access is found by parking at Log Cabin at Sandy Beach Bridge. Then, walk up the Canal Towpath trail. There is also a trail on the opposite side of river.

**Pymatuning Reservoir tailwater:** This is roughly a 1-mile stretch of fishable water. In the main current seams, expect to catch Walleyes, occasionally Muskellunge and sporadically a hybrid striped bass from downstream Shenango River Lake. Also, small crappies, perch and Bluegills are found in a backwater pool at the mouth of a seepage stream that is 100 yards south of the parking lot.

**Lake Wilhelm Dam tailwater:** A short pool right below the dam holds a few Walleyes and panfish.

**Woodcock Creek Dam tailwater:** A deep, strong current pool of perhaps 75 yards yields Walleyes and the occasional Muskellunge.

**Tionesta Dam tailwater:** A rocky shoreline makes for difficult access near the outflow, but the water flow remains open downstream. Species mix includes Walleyes, Muskellunge, Yellow Perch, the occasional Rainbow Trout and the only recorded Paddlefish caught and released on hook and line in many years.

**Kinzua Dam tailrace:** This is perhaps the best winter big trout fishing in Pennsylvania. The 8.75-mile stretch from the dam outflow to the confluence of Conewango Creek is strictly catch and release for trout during the winter. The river may be accessed from both sides, and wading is popular below the outflow pool. However, local anglers do not venture into the water unless the flow is less than 1,800 cubic feet per second; most prefer a flow around 1,200 cubic feet per second. Fly anglers employ big streamers for Brown Trout and Rainbow Trout. Spin anglers typically use small marabou jigs or long suspending minnow plugs. ☐



*This winter steelhead was caught on Sixteenmile Creek, Erie County.*



*Gaining access to the better winter holes on French Creek can be difficult in the winter. Only someone who knows the stream section very well should undertake wading.*