

# Fly Fishing Tips for **WINTER** Steelhead

by Jeff Knapp

Steelhead fishing on Pennsylvania's Lake Erie tributaries can be broken up into fall, winter and early spring phases, each with its particular qualities and quirks.

Winter provides comparatively uncrowded sport with many potential anglers turned off by the extreme conditions. Erie wintertime weather is typically harsh; the extent of available fishing is at the mercy of air temperatures, streamside snow cover and stream conditions—a fact well-illustrated the past two winters when tributaries were locked in a coating of ice for weeks at a time.

The fly angler will need to make adjustments to his or her approach to consistently catch Erie steelhead during the winter months, which the following tips and observations address.

First, one must recognize the transition from fall to winter. Jeff Wasson, a talented multi-species angler who has logged many hours on Erie tributaries with a fly rod, sees the water temperature drop to 40 degrees F when the steelhead begin to act more sluggishly. According to Wasson, this typically happens around mid-December.

During the fall, steelhead are willing to move out of feeding lanes to chase flies. In general, this isn't the case once the water chills in winter. Consistent success means getting flies right in their faces.

Finding the right habitat is key to wintertime fly fishing success. Look to the deeper holes, particularly ones fed by a nice riffle. While steelhead can be in this type of water during the fall, they can also be in other places such as shallow riffles that many anglers pass up. But, this is not so in the winter.

Wasson uses two basic fly fishing approaches for winter steelhead. The first incorporates a tandem two-fly setup consisting of a streamer fly and an egg pattern. Using a 9-foot leader tapering down to 3x, he ties a relatively small streamer like a size 10 Woolly Bugger to the leader point. Then, he ties in an 18-inch section of 3x tippet material to the eye of the streamer. An egg such as a sucker spawn or Blood Dot is tied to the other end of the dropper. Above the streamer, Wasson pinches on a splitshot (or multiple shot if needed), and a teardrop shaped polystyrene strike indicator goes above the splitshot or multiple shot.

## Erie Brown Trout

For several years, the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission and local cooperative nurseries stocked Brown Trout fingerlings in select Lake Erie tributaries and Presque Isle Bay, Erie County. Subsequently, large Brown Trout have been showing up in angler catches, both in the lake and feeder waters. During a trip we made late last winter, Jeff Wasson landed a nice Brown Trout from an eastern Pennsylvania tributary. Annually, 50,000 to 100,000 Brown Trout are stocked.



Jeff Wasson with the nice Brown Trout he took near the mouth of an eastern Lake Erie tributary.

photos - Jeff Knapp

Given the weight of the shot and any additional weight tied in the flies themselves, a good-sized indicator is usually needed. A 5/8-inch diameter is usually the smallest indicator Wasson uses to float this setup.

Presentation is a key element of the streamer/egg method. The strike indicator is positioned far enough up the leader to allow the flies to occasionally tick bottom. Each individual spot has certain depth/flow conditions that call for the repositioning of the indicator. Casts call for a cast that's made about 45 degrees upstream. An upstream mend is often needed to allow the indicator to position itself above the flies and to keep drift drag free. The rod is held high to keep as much fly line off the water as possible and follow the indicator through the drift. As the indicator swings downstream, lower the rod tip and follow it. This extends the drift and helps load the rod for the next drift.

Borrowing a page from the western steelheader's book, Wasson also uses a method that swings a streamer through deeper water. He uses an 11-foot switch rod with a switch line to swing weighted streamers such as Intruders and Temple Dogs. The thick fly line is high floating, so Wasson uses a tungsten-weighted leader to quickly sink the flies. It's a modification of the west coast approach, which commonly employs sink tip spey lines, aimed at targeting our 4- to 6-foot deep holes rather than the 20-foot pools of Pacific Ocean feeder rivers. Wasson makes 45-degree downstream casts, allowing the weight of the leader and fly, which has bead chain eyes, to get down to the bottom. The current swings the streamer close to the bottom while Wasson imparts a subtle "jigging" motion by stripping and releasing fly line. At the end of the swing, he jigs the rod tip for a few moments before



photo-Jeff Krupp

A look in Jeff Wasson's streamer box shows some of the patterns that he uses for his streamer/egg tandem set up.

stripping in for the next cast. By working/wading slowly downstream, one can cover a lot of water with this technique.

Keep current on conditions. Lake Erie tributaries drain short watersheds, and conditions change rapidly. Fortunately, anglers have access to a variety of resources before making a lengthy trip. United States Geological Survey water flow gauges on Walnut Creek and Brandy Run are valuable. Wasson likes to see a flow between 100 and 150 cubic feet per second (cfs) on Walnut Creek, and on Brandy Run, 8 to 10 cfs is a good indicator that Elk Creek should fish well. Cold weather and ice can freeze up gauges during the winter, though. Erie bait shops are also good sources of information. Some post daily updates on websites or Facebook pages that describe recent conditions and fish activity.

If winter conditions preclude much in the way of fishing, the action can be good once things open back up. Heavy ice seems to prevent lake fish from running up into tributaries. Once ice is flushed out, fresh fish can access the feeders, creating sport that can last into the spring.

Safety is a prime consideration for Erie winter steelhead fishing. Aside from the normal hazards of fishing in freezing/near freezing conditions, the sequence of freezing/blowing out typically leaves bank sections covered in broken ice. Extra care should be given when navigating such areas. If the risk seems too great, skip potential spots. ☐

photo-courtesy of Jeff Wasson



Jeff Wasson with a winter steelhead.