

WINTER FISHING

Northwest Pennsylvania



photo-Denny Puko

by Charles N. Cantella

“Anyone would go fishing thinking you’ll catch something. It’s when you go figuring you probably won’t that you know you’ve crossed some kind of line.” John Gierach, At the Grave of the Unknown Fisherman (2003).

Everything slows down when it is cold. Even air molecules, when cooled, slow down. So, it should come as no surprise that life in rivers slows down. Bugs slow down, baitfish slow down, and trout slow down, too. The first rule of fishing for trout in the winter is to go low and slow. The fish will likely be deep, and the fish are not likely to move far for a meal. Whether you are fishing an egg, nymph, Woolly Bugger, or streamer, your lure may need to bump fish to elicit a strike. It is possible to have amazing fishing during the winter, but, a more likely scenario is that just a few, if any, fish will be brought to the net.

Winter fishing success hinges on a great deal more than simply the calendar’s declaration of winter. Some winters do not get as cold as others, while others have more rain and less snow. Occasionally, you will have a day where the temperature is above freezing, causing the snow to melt.

But, instead of raising the water temperature, the melting snow lowers it. So, a whole host of variables come into play during winter fishing.

Plan for the weather

Even with air temperatures in the 50s, hypothermia is possible. As per a University of Michigan study, “Hypothermia can occur when you are exposed to cold air, water, wind, or rain. Your body temperature can drop to a low level at temperatures of 50 degrees F or higher in wet and windy weather, or if you are in 60 degrees F to 70 degrees F water” (University of Michigan hypothermia). Most trout streams are between 50 and 60 degrees F at their warmest, so despite the desire you may have to seek solitude on these winter forays, it is always a good idea to take a friend along and have a dry change of clothes in the car.

Starting points

If you mention winter fly fishing in northwest Pennsylvania, the first thing most anglers think of is steelhead fishing in the Erie tributary streams. However, this article is focused on winter stream fishing in other northwest Pennsylvania waters. There are a multitude of



Wild Brook Trout

streams that may be fished in the winter. Most of the wild trout fisheries may be fished successfully in the winter. We will take a closer look at three geographically scattered streams, each with different regulations. This list is, by no means, comprehensive.

Allegheny River, Warren County

This 8.75 mile stretch of the Allegheny River offers anglers the opportunity to fish big water for Brown Trout. Stretching from the base of the outflow downstream to the confluence with the Conewango Creek, this section has special regulations (see sidebar). *Pennsylvania Angler and Boater* writer Mike Bleech offered this advice in his March/April 2014 article, "Serious Trout Fishing on the Allegheny" in the *Pennsylvania Angler & Boater* magazine, "...use big trout tactics to catch big trout." According to Mike Heck et al, in *Keystone Fly Fishing*, "There are two 'seasons' for fly fishers on the Allegheny-streamer season and the dry fly season. Streamer season is long lasting, stretching from October through May; it's when large trout feed on abundant baitfish" (Heck 13). This is big water with big fish potential.

Caldwell Creek, Warren County

This stream is managed with Catch and Release Fly-Fishing Only regulations for 1.49 miles from Selkirk highway bridge downstream to approximately 0.5 miles upstream of the Dotyville Bridge. Described by some as a "meandering stream", its slow, deep flows offer many undercut banks and deep holes. A parking area near the Selkirk highway bridge provides access, and Flat Road parallels the stream. In addition, the West Branch

Caldwell Creek offers a 2.75 mile stretch in the Catch and Release Artificial Lures Only Program from the West Branch Bridge upstream to Three Bridge Run. Many of Caldwell Creek's tributaries offer anglers the opportunity to fish for wild Brook Trout.

Oil Creek, Venango County

Oil Creek is a long, large tributary of the Allegheny River. With over 40 miles of creek, there is too much to cover in one article. So, I will focus primarily on section 7, which is a 1.55 mile stretch in the Keystone Select Stocked Trout Waters, Delayed Harvest Artificial Lures Only Program from the bridge at Petroleum Center downstream to the railroad bridge at Columbia Farm. This section is stocked

heavily early in the season but does warm up in the summer, hence the value of it being designated as Delayed Harvest Artificial Lures Only instead of catch and release. But, this section is slated to get stocked in October, so there should be fish through the winter. The section also offers easy access and parking at the Drake Well Museum and Park. The Oil Creek Bike Trail offers a path to follow the stream between the Drake Well Museum and Park and Petroleum Center.

When the days get shorter, grab your rod and give winter fishing a try. ☐

Regulations

Allegheny River below Kinzua Dam, Warren County

Allegheny River – 8.75 miles from the outflow of the Allegheny Reservoir downstream to the confluence of Conewango Creek.

From 8 a.m. on the opening day of the regular trout season through Labor Day, the minimum size for trout is 14 inches, and the daily limit is 2 (combined species).

From the day after Labor Day until 8 a.m. of the opening day of the trout season of the following year, no trout may be killed or had in possession.

It is unlawful to fish in rivers and streams designated as stocked trout waters open to year-round fishing without a current Trout Permit or Combo Trout Lake Erie Permit.