

Winter Fly Fishing Tactics *for Trout*

by Nick DelVecchio

There are few experiences quite like standing in a favorite trout stream fighting a fish as snow gently falls. The stillness of the air is only broken by the clicking of the reel. While many anglers opt for the relative comfort of spring and summer fly fishing, the winter months may offer anglers some of the best action of the entire season and with limited competition from others. Trout do not stop feeding just because it is winter, and anglers who brave the elements may be rewarded with great days on the water that will not soon be forgotten.

Probably the biggest adjustment to make in regards to winter fly fishing is the size of the flies. Gone are the days where size 10 Green Drakes are prevalent, and hopper season is nothing but a distant memory. Midges (and perhaps small mayflies, depending on the stream) dominate this time of the year and that should be reflected in the fly selection of anglers. Black, silver, brown, and green imitations in sizes #20 to #24 are normal. These flies can be fished in tandem or even on a three-nymph rig when practical. While there will be instances of larger bugs hatching, it is safe to assume



A wintertime wild Rainbow Trout.

photos-Stephanie DelVecchio

the bugs will be small during these months. Using flies to imitate small insects will create a realistic scenario in which our offerings match up with the diet of a trout and result in more fish caught.

During January and February, many trout streams start to accumulate ice and lock up. This can present a serious challenge to wintertime fly anglers but also a tremendous opportunity. The fish will congregate in deeper pools and fast runs that will not freeze at all or will not freeze the whole way to the bottom. Such an area of refuge may hold multiple trout, many more than during other times of the year, and create a honey hole of sorts that anglers may methodically work for quite some time. The ideal scenario is to look for a deep, fast run that empties into a larger pool that has limited ice. A situation like this will

create everything a trout needs in winter with cover, oxygen, and food coming into a spot where trout do not have to work as hard against the current. The conservation of calories is of the utmost importance during winter, and trout will likely hold in any open water where fish do not have to work too hard to stay put.

Another tactic to employ may seem like a contradiction to the last, but it follows along a similar line of thinking. While fall may be well-known as “streamer season,” trout (especially large trout) will still feed on these baitfish imitations throughout winter. During this caloric intake versus output struggle, any meal that provides a punch of protein will be well received, and anglers should be armed with their streamer boxes during these cold months. Since trout may be less willing to move several feet to take the fly, consider dead drifting a Woolly Bugger or crayfish pattern through likely spots and detect hits either with an indicator or tightlining. This is an especially productive tactic in deeper runs against log jams or undercut banks where large trout are known to reside.



The spoils of winter fly fishing for those who adjust their tactics.

Sleeping in is not usually something fly anglers are well-accustomed to, especially during the summer and fall seasons when the window of opportunity for feeding trout is usually in the early mornings and late evenings. That changes with winter, as fish will feed heavily during the warmest part of the day when the sun peeks out and water temperature rises a few degrees. This may trigger an insect hatch. Anglers are going to want to be out on the stream during this time. The hours between 11:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. may be especially good. As an added bonus, the slight bump in temperature may make things a little more tolerable for anglers.

Winter is a wondrous time to be on the trout streams of Pennsylvania. With less competition from other anglers and hungry trout, there are some great days to be had for anglers willing to brave the cold. It is important to understand and adjust to the changing habits of trout.

These tactics are a great start for anglers who want to make trout season something that never ends in Pennsylvania. ☐



The beauty of winter is apparent to those who get out and enjoy it.