



Winter Trout Stream Exploration— *Relieve Cabin Fever by Preparing for Spring*

by Jerry Bush

photos by the author

Pennsylvania has a vast variety of streams available to anglers during periods that may be considered “off-season”. This presents great opportunities to catch and release a few fish, but that is not the only reason to access streams during off-peak seasons. This is a valuable time to research, learn, and plan for the primary trout season. You may intend to learn a stream later, but when the action is hot and heavy, it is more likely you will remain anchored to a few favorite spots.

After mid-April, most fly anglers find themselves locked into old habits and previously known locations that produce fish and never learn more about their favored waters. Worse are the unfortunate anglers who find limited success and waste key time striving to learn things that could have been learned during the off-season. Regardless of which end of

the spectrum, the message is clear—the best time to access a stream to learn more about the water and the fishery is now, when competition is absent and concentration on learning supersedes the desire to catch fish.

From the moment fly anglers leave their automobiles, they should be reminding themselves that the main goal during this time of year is to experience a learning process. People willing to walk more and cast less at this time are likely to benefit when the fishing is best. There will be time enough for casting and catching trout at a later date.

Begin with careful observation of your surroundings. Are you aware of the stream’s insect production, or are you limited to using a few imitations that your friends long ago advised? Why not take advantage of this time to wade into a stream and turn over some stones? Do not overlook the saturated leaves that clutter shallow water near the riverbanks. What types of insects and larvae will you find? Do the imitations carried in your fly box match the natural invertebrates you observe? Perhaps, there are some noticeable color or size variations that should be

added to your fly box. You will have time to hit the fly tying bench or local fly shop between now and the official season opener.

Are your favored fishing holes still viable? For years, a small waterfall existed on one of my favored streams that led into a small but decent pool where a fish or two could nearly always be caught. The heavily oxygenated water below that low waterfall was particularly attractive to large trout. One year, I unexpectedly found the tiny waterfall had eroded and was gone. I mentioned it to a friend who fished that stream in fall while I was bowhunting. "Oh yeah, I meant to tell you about that, it was gone after heavy rains moved into Pennsylvania from one of those major hurricanes that came in through the Gulf." I felt like I lost an old friend, and after a few subsequent visits, I found that little pool was never again productive.

Be mindful that you may never visit the exact same stream. We may not think about it, but streams are constantly changing in some manner or another. Sometimes, precipitation brings too much water. Often, droughts bring



Of course, there is nothing wrong with catching trout while exploring.

low water situations. As you are accessing streams now, try to imagine both circumstances and how you would adapt. Did heavy fall rains or winter snow melts dredge larger cuts into the outside curves of stream banks, where some trout may take up residence? That may be worth noting.

How do you know if the stream changed since you were on it last summer unless you visit it now? One of the most common stream-altering occurrences in Pennsylvania are fallen trees, which drastically or slightly change the flow of water. It may divert currents to dredge the streambed in new locations, or such occurrences may ruin cherished holes. Pools may exist where the rapids of shallow water previously flowed. Naturally small limbs that fall into or hang just barely over the surface of deep pools offer new fish-holding structure.

Remember that Saturday last spring when you arrived to find others fishing your favorite fishing holes? Did you find yourself wishing you were more familiar with the stream and that you may know exactly where less crowded, harder to reach fish were waiting? Now is the perfect time to walk a couple miles up or down the stream with a handheld GPS and mark alternate points. A relaxing drive along roadways paralleling the flowing water may also be advisable, so you may locate shortcuts leading to backup access points. Assuming private property is involved, this is the time to seek permission from landowners to access their property.

Of course, the stream will change slightly before the traditional opening day, but 90% of what you need to know will be pertinent in April. Learn your streams well enough to form backup plans. Prepare for the popularity of spring fishing situations or other factors that may present a problem at your favored fishing holes. It is a great excuse to relieve cabin fever. ☐



Turn over some stones to observe natural invertebrates to imitate.