

Jeff Currier *global fly fishing*

Winter fishing is cold, wet and lots of fun

Jackson Hole News & Guide

By Paul Bruun, Jackson Hole, Wyoming

December 15, 2010

The radio dispensed strains of Christmas music as the Dodge crept down its driveway that demanded four-wheel-drive, or else. Several orange-clad, elk hunting diehards at the Bubba's/Orvis intersection gave curious stares to the passing pickup towing a sleigh-like driftboat skiff. Reading their thoughts was easy: "Who in their right mind would drag that craft into a snowstorm like this?"

Silly question.

Those who never get enough river time realize December may be enjoyed during the same conditions savored by skiers, elk and duck hunters. Launching the boat can be challenging. Getting it out is even more fun.

Adjusting to shorter periods of December daylight, skinny winter flows and trout relocation to deeper winter holding areas is paramount.

Addicted, late-season angling veterans Tom Montgomery and Jeff Currier created a plan, catered food and beverages, and supplied youthful launch and retrieval energy. My tasks were to deliver the lightest skiff possible, a 4WD truck wearing new snow tires and chains from Shervin's (were an emergency extraction necessary), flashlights and yards of sturdy rope.

Surviving a snowy winter day afloat must begin with thoughtful layering — based upon thin wicking socks and underlayer garments and topped by an application of heavier synthetic and merino wool insulation — all carefully sandwiched inside waterproof/breathable outer shells and roomy waders. Plenty of experimenting ultimately influences both comfort and survival at this game.

As in clothing, rigging for winter fishing requires pre-trip planning but less equipment choice than during other parts of the season. With minimal river flows, presentation rather than pattern variety needs attention. Tiny mayflies — emergers and dries — as well as a container of both pupa and adult midge stages, are necessities along with 5, 6 and perhaps 7X tippet. Lighter shades of polarized sunglasses help spotting and casting accuracy. To support older eyes, clip-ons or over-the-glasses magnifiers are essential when attaching dandruff-sized flies.

Trout, especially cutthroat, enjoy moving ultra-shallow during later daylight periods. Locating and then presenting a pattern to these fish in scant inches of water requires delicate technique and lightweight lines, from three to five weight.

Winter topwater fishing varies greatly by location. One riffle corner or inside run may be alive with feeding trout while the next three similarly appearing locations are deserted. Any breeze, however subtle, disrupts a trout's enthusiasm for surface feeding.

Launching streamers and sinking flies at winter fish is standard operating procedure on most portions of the Snake and surrounding open streams. At this game, my two companions set the gold standard but in different ways.

Jeff Currier, the only American to ever win a medal in international fly fishing competition, is a highly aggressive wet fly-fisherman whose three-fly, Aqualux clear intermediate line techniques are fascinating to observe.

Tom Montgomery, a veteran river guide and accomplished photographer, is a purposely relaxed caster whose rod stroke turns into artwork during his presentation of a super-fast sinking 24-foot Rio integrated shooting head. Wise trout dive for deep hideouts when both of these guys are throwing.

Despite lower water flows, winter fishing is location-specific because trout aren't widely distributed. By December, they have settled into pools and deep runs, moving around only when presented with a feeding opportunity. On larger rivers, it is difficult to pass up ordinarily productive banks in order to concentrate on specific locations. Fail to follow this discipline guarantees your trip an awkward end in the dark, a long way from the take-out.

One day in the pelting snow, midges paved the surface and dry fly-fishing for pods of sipping trout was nonstop. The next day a consistent downstream breeze replaced the snow, and temperatures warmed slightly. But the midges were mostly absent, as were feeding fish. That's when the Currier three-fly package of various sized streamers performed well.

For those not in shape for endless, T-shirt ripping power casting at the Currier skill level, I suggest using one and at the most two streamers, unless you have a surplus of leader tippet and tangle removing skills. Multi pattern casting allows experimentation with different colors, sizes and fly weights. Ironically, Currier rarely changes his fly selection until another color shows an edge.

Hurling streamers from a boat covers lots of water, which is optimal. Trout can be close to banks, along drop-offs, on the edges of riffles or positioned in the middle or insides of pools. Their locations and depths may change from day to day, which is what makes winter trout fishing so interesting.

Retrieving boats from steep ramps covered with snow and ice requires preparation. Even a small boat trailer can cause a strong 4WD outfit to become stuck. Short of having a tractor with a snowplow, using lengths of rope attached to a tow rig located on flat ground is a secure method for boat retrieval.

Winter fishing is such fun and so relaxing that my thoughts have whimsically turned to obtaining a snowmobile as a boat retrieval vehicle. It's not out of the question.

Mix it up with Trout Unlimited

A Jackson Hole Trout Unlimited gathering and a clever online quiz highlight TU activity this week.

Phil Cameron, local TU president, invites members and friends to an early winter mixer this Thursday between 5:30 and 7:30 p.m. in the Clymer Room of the Wort Hotel. Along with appetizers and a cash bar, the TU board will present its annual chapter review and major conservation plans for the coming year.

Patagonia fly-fishing marketing veteran Bill Klyn will further warm up the evening with a program on the expanding efforts of the Bonefish and Tarpon Trust, of which he's a board member. For additional information contact Jackson Hole TU at 733-6991.

TU wonders if you know trout

I just took Trout Unlimited's online quiz, "You Don't Know TROUT!"

One question thoroughly tripped me up. Most readers will do better.

To take the quiz, go to www.youdontknowtrout.com and you will also be entered in a grand prize drawing to win a dream fishing trip on the Big Horn River in Montana and gear from Orvis.

Party at Jack Dennis Outdoors

"It will be kinda like the old days," reports Scott Sanchez, fishing department honcho at the Jack Dennis Outdoor Shop on the Square. From 4 to 8 p.m. Friday there will be plenty of holiday activity during an open house that begins with dedicated Wilson wildlife artist Meredith Campbell demonstrating oil painting in the upstairs Wyoming Gallery.

Downstairs, master illustrator Jeff Currier will be creating any sportfish, carp or other exotic species you order on a Cliff fly box or canvas. Sanchez will be personally autographing his newest book, "The Never Ending Stream," which illustrates and pays

tribute to legendary fly creators. Remington Firearms and North Face sales representatives will join the party along with plenty of food and drink.

Paul Bruun writes weekly on his adventures and misadventures in the great outdoors.