

Winter Troutng Tips
By Jeff Durniak, Georgia Wildlife Resources Division
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What's a "good day?" The definition of "a good day" may be three trout for a rookie, but it may be 20 fish including 3 whoppers for some of your veterans. To each, his own. We each have our own definition of a "good day fishing" and each person's opinion is equally valid. For me, fishing is not competitive. It's not how many I catch, it's about fishing with friends in scenic locales and hopefully catching some fish, maybe even a big one if we're lucky and have prepared well. And yesterday, it was not even wetting my line, but simply putting a friend in the right spot and watching the smiles on Mark's face as the rod bent. Indeed, my day was good!

Many of you on this email list are undoubtedly more gifted fly anglers than me. This note is simply aimed at the new folks among us who may benefit from some winter troutng tips. I met several of you streamside or in sporting goods stores this week. For the new folks, may I offer this winter recipe to help you through a fun but challenging season for Georgia trout, hopefully without breaking your dwindled, post-holiday bank account. There is not one "right way" of fishing. However, this way has worked for me and maybe it will work for you, too. And don't worry, it gets a lot easier in the spring, when the water warms and the fish will chase your offering. Here we go:

Obtain at least 3 of each of these flies:

- #10 black woolly bugger
 - #14 peach egg fly
 - # 14 prince nymph
 - # 16 hare's ear nymph
 - #18 pheasant tail nymph
 - #18 pheasant tail- soft hackle wet fly
- (No beads on the flies.)

Get a few 7.5 foot 3 X trout leaders and two spools of tippet (5x and 6X). Get 2 or 3 sizes of split shot: 1) the tiny shot, like Dinsmores, 2) size B, 3) size BB. Buy a few strike indicators.

Arrive at stream at 10 AM and fish til 3 or 4. Tie 18 inches of 5X to your leader's 3X end. Add enuf shot above that knot to let your fly tick-tick along the stream bottom. That may mean one tiny shot or 4 big ones, depending on the water depth and speed of each pool or run. Tie the bugger, egg, or prince to the 5X tippet end. Put your strike indicator way up your leader, toward your fly line. The length between the indicator and your fly should be at least 1.5 if not 2X or more the water depth of the spot you're fishing. Adjust as needed for each pool or run.

Toss this combo upstream at a 30 degree angle 3-6 feet above where you think the fish are holding and let it drift, drag-free, back down toward you. If you bump the fly along the bottom in a spot where fish are (slower areas during winter), you may get some hits. The strike indicator will show you those bottom ticks and the strikes. With the bugger, after your fly drifts downstream, well past you, twitch your rod tip and strip the fly back upstream in 6 inch strips.

Now here's the secret weapon. Many of our trout in these catch&release waters have, indeed, been caught and released. They smarten up and avoid big flies and beads, unless the water's muddy. Smithgall is the most extreme example of all! You'll have better success if you tie on 12-18 inches of 6X to the bend of the hook of the first fly and then tie on one of the small flies on the list, above. Start out "big" (size 14 or 16) and, if you don't get strikes, substitute the smaller flies. Sometimes I'll even go down to a #20 pheasant tail or soft hackle, but it's hard to hook fish with such tiny hooks. Roll cast or water load. Try not to false cast or do it minimally, as the fish are not in the air or trees, the branches and tangles are.

As a resource manager and fellow angler, each year at this time I often hear anglers' comments about their reduced catch rates. Their stated reasons often include "lack of stocking" and "poachers." Based on my experience, the reasons are more often: 1) released fish "smartened up" from their earlier experiences with you, 2) lethargic fish due to cold water, and 3) the angler's fly or lure not being down where the fish are, since those fish are not gonna come get it like they did in November, when the water was warmer and they were naive.

The "tiny fly off the back" technique works for me in these clear waters where the fish are now experienced and cold. Maybe it will work for you, too, if the water's 40F or warmer. If it does, you'll notice that you'll catch some more colorful and harder fighting fish- the earliest stocked veterans or even the wild fish. The fresh stockers will still slam your gaudy bead fly, egg or Y2K.

PS- there is no substitute for the experience of a "guide" or mentor. See below. Offer to pay for his/her lunch or for the gas tank fill-up for the next fishing trip.

Good luck!
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Winter "Chuck and Duck"
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I had three good reports over the extended weekend from the Hooch in Helen, the Tallulah, and the Broad on Russell WMA. Fishing was better as the air and water warmed thru the holidays. If the coming weekend warms into the 50's, trout fishing across north Georgia should remain good if the water stays over the magic 40 degree mark. Grab a kid and some nightcrawlers or salmon eggs and enjoy a sunny afternoon astream!

This trend was true for us, too. Our Eskimo foursome played hooky and headed to the Chattooga DH last Friday. Water temp at the start was only 36 and warmed to 41. We only caught a combined 10 fish in the cold water, but their quality made up for their slight quantity, as four browns ranged from 16 to 20 inches (photo- Windknot with the assist). Fly patterns: peach egg, Kyle's copperhead. While the catching was slow, the fishing was great with 3 good friends on a crystal clear river set against a deep blue sky. One need identified: a deeper net.

What a difference a few degrees make. I headed back to the same river section with a different friend on Tuesday and the river's switch was "on" from 11 til about 3. Water temp at the start was 41 and some blue wing olives were hatching. The temp went up a few more degrees. We landed more than 20 fish between us, and the catch included many rainbows, a few brookies to 14 inches, and a few browns up to a 17 inch bruiser. Two-thirds of the fish were on the egg pattern and one-third, including big boy, hit the #18 pheasant tail nymph dropped off the back. We could not buy a fish after about 3:30.

Tip- fish deep and slow. And I mean deep- on the bottom. Most unsuccessful anglers I meet streamside seem to fish too shallow because of a short leader and/or not enough weight.

If you're brave, try the "chuck and duck" with this leader setup I'm experimenting with. For a leader, tie as much 6 or 8 lb test mono to your fly line as you can handle. Try 8 or 10 feet to start with, then work up to 12 feet for the really deep pools. To the end of the mono, knot on 18 inches of 5X tippet and put enough split shot above that knot to get your fly ticking along the bottom. I use the Water Gremlin removable split shot and will adjust my weight at each pool according to water depth and velocity. I'm typically using from one to four size BB or 3/0 shot in those big Chattooga pools. (Leave those tiny Dinsmores home til spring brings the fish closer to the surface.) Put your strike indicator right up next to the fly line. Sometimes even it will be 2-3 feet underwater, too, as you dredge the big pools with a DRAG FREE drift..

On the end of the 5x tie the egg or bugger. Off the bend of the first fly's hook tie another 18 inches of 5X and then tie on the pheasant tail. Limit backcasting to one false cast or roll cast or, better yet, a water load.

The deep, slow pools hold the most fish right now and the slow velocity gives those sluggish critters a chance to consider eating your offering. Same goes for bait anglers on our general regulation waters- get your offerings down. Many of the strikes are very light, so be ready. The light mono prevents a lot of slack, drag, and curves in your leader, and allows a straight line right to your offerings, which plummet straight to the bottom. Bring at least 6 flies of each favorite pattern and plan to leave many on the bottom as dues for your wonderful day away from responsibility.

"Chuck and duck" is not as much fun to cast as a nice dry on a tapered leader on a warm May evening. But I like catching more than casting, and the winter fish are untiring in these cold waters. A big, bulldogging brown is better than a hand warmer in improving your circulation!

I hope a few of these tips will help you to be even more successful. Most of us are not experts, but we enjoy the sport and enjoy sharing some helpful hints with others so that they can have more success, too. Feel free to share your tips with the rest of us. I have learned a lot already from many Georgia anglers, young and old, and thank you for them.

To close, one old friend has said to me, "you don't have to believe this story if you don't want to," so I'll offer the same courtesy to ya'll!

Best wishes for a happy and healthy new year.
Take a new friend fishing and send us your pictures!

http://waterdata.usgs.gov/ga/nwis/uv/?site_no=02177000&PARAMeter_cd=00065,00060

Good luck!
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