Fly angler and Wildlife Commission biologist Kevin Hining explores the river for winter trout.

Bumping the Bottom for

WINTER TAILRACE TROUT

Effective techniques for fooling tailrace trout during the cold months

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The big game wouldn't start until 6:30 p.m., so I had several hours to kill before I was supposed to be at Dad's house. The temperature was about 38 degrees, and along with the passing clouds there were a few snow flurries. I thought, wouldn't it be cool to go trout fishing on Super Bowl Sunday? The stream would probably be deserted and if I caught just one trout, that would be icing on the cake. So I called for the wheel schedule report of the closest tailrace river and, just my luck, they were not generating. I hung up the phone, pulled on my waders and was out the door.

With the added layers of long underwear under the waders, the stream didn't feel too cold. I started casting a double nymph rig with an indicator to the edge or to any break in the current, hoping a hungry trout might be holding there. I followed each drift attentively as the indicator twitched along at the nymphs crawling across the bottom.

I continued casting and drifting until the indicator darted abruptly. The rod tip came up and I was into a fish. The fish stayed down in typical brown trout fashion and did a couple of short runs before coming to the net. I scooped up 13 inches of bronze, thick, tailrace brown trout that took the bottom fly. After releasing him, I continued fishing the long run and picked up several more on the nymphs. All of the trout were 12 inches or better with one brown trout that measured 18 inches. Not bad for a couple hours fishing and I arrived in plenty of time for the big game.

Most anglers wouldn't consider wading in an icy trout stream in the middle of winter in pursuit of catching a fish. The truth is, winter trout fishing is a wonderful cure for cabin fever. You don't have to wait until spring to catch trout. With the right techniques on the right streams, you can catch them during the cold months.

There are two types of streams in North Carolina that hold trout—freestone and tailrace. Freestone streams are the spring-fed, plunge-pool types that usually trickle down from some mountain to eventually form into creeks. Tailrace streams are usually larger and are created at the foot of a lake where a hydroelectric dam is present and the water is regulated according to power demands.

The key part of successful winter trout fishing is water temperature. The trout in the freestone stream this time of year are the same temperature as the water. Due to snow runoff and frigid nights, the water is about 33 to 35 degrees. The fish will probably be sluggish, hovering behind a rock while expending as little energy as possible and will be difficult to entice with a fly. The tailrace river is about 8 to 10 degrees warmer, allowing the trout to be more active and increasing your chance of a catch. Tailrace fish are usually larger due to increased food intake and can be choosy for the same reason.

All of my tailrace fishing starts with a phone call to find out what the projected wheel schedule is. That schedule can change. Sometimes due to power demands the generators may get turned on regardless of the wheel schedule, so it pays to know the places you can get in and out of. In the winter months, I only fish if the generators are off. A couple of hours of fishing are usually enough to take the edge off. If I fall in the river, the trip ends and I head for the warmth of home. There's no enjoyment in fishing cold, plus you're at risk for hypothermia. Sunny days may be a little more productive than others because just one or two degrees of warmth may cause insects and/or trout to be more active.

Pools are good choices to start looking for fish because the pool water is slower, so a fish can hold in them and eat while expending little energy. Sometimes, tailrace trout will congregate in pools, so fish pools thoroughly. I probe any kind of break in the current or edge. One warm January day several years ago, all of the trout I caught came out of one large pool. A shelf was under the water and the trout were a couple feet downstream, lying there and eating nymphs that tumbled overhead. When the day warmed up, some fish moved into water maybe a foot deep in the head of the pool. In addition to a few feisty 12-inch rainbows, a 17-inch brown trout also nailed a stonefly nymph, the best fish of the day. Sometimes if I don't get any takes, I move on upstream or "rest" and come back later.

Depending on where I'm positioned, I may downstream-drift the flies. I usually do this if there's a particular section of water that I can't reach. Sometimes, at the end of the drift, I'll twitch the indicator before picking up and casting again. On occasion, this happens by accident. One day while drifting downstream, I attempted to mend some line to extend the drift. In doing so the indicator twitched, immediately followed by a hard yank. Maybe the fish mistook the nymph for swimming or struggling because this was clearly out of the ordinary for dead drifting.

Riffles and runs are approached more methodically. As I wade to the nearest part of the riffle or run, I begin casting and drifting. Depending on the size of the water, I try to cover the entire section from head to tail. These sections are usually faster, so it may take a couple of seconds for the flies to get down along the bottom. Many times I'll throw the fly into the head of the riffle and let it drift down below me. This allows time for the nymphs to reach maximum depth, causing the fly to remain in the strike zone longer. I may run the fly through the same exact drift a couple of times, especially if the drift has been known to hold fish. If I don't repeat the same exact drift, then my next cast is a couple of inches over, essentially paralleling the previous drift. I'll continue to do this until the entire section of water is covered.

One rule of thumb is to look for any kind of break in the current. Tailrace fish are notorious for holding in such places. To an angler, it may not look like much but under water, there may be a boulder or log altering the stream movement causing various breaks or a seam. A fish can hold in a seam and pluck bugs while spending very little energy.

A specific place that I'm thinking of has a boulder at the end of a run and a seam that's been created on each downstream side. One day last winter, I was working this spot and caught a 13-inch brown trout on the near-side seam. I drifted the nymphs through there again,

Tailrace trout, such as this brown, tend to be a bit larger than trout in freestone streams because the increased availability of food. In winter, water in tailrace rivers might be 8 to 10 degrees warmer than that in a freestone, thus making trout more active.

nothing. Then I drifted the flies through the far side seam, and bam! A 14-inch rainbow. This fish jumped a couple of times and I eventually netted and released him. I made a couple more drifts, nothing. Then I began to let the flies drift completely through the seam toward the tail. This time the indicator darted and continued to run away from me. The rod tip came up with a fish that was 15 inches. Every seam around the rock held a fish and on this day, I was able to catch one out of each seam. I've never done that before or since.

Any out-of-the-ordinary movement by the indicator gets a hook-set. It's as if the fish intercepts the fly during the drift. Most of the time, the fish opens its mouth and inhales the fly causing the indicator to stop. I set quickly, not allowing the fish a chance to reject the fly. Sometimes you hook the bottom. Usually a roll cast will unhook a nymph from the snag.

In addition to watching the indicator, look for any sort of flash or boil. When a trout takes a nymph, many times it will slightly turn to one side or the other. You may have a fish move out of its lie to inspect a fly; here you can also see a flash. Always make a mental note if you observe this so that you can come back later to exploit it.

My nymphing system involves two nymphs, an indicator and a small split shot. You don't have to use two nymphs; one will work just fine. I like fishing two nymphs, especially for tailrace trout because they usually have a lot of food items to pick from. I don't feel like I'm giving the fish a choice. Instead, I'm learning what they're feeding on and their location in the water column.

An 8½-foot rod matched with a 6-weight fly line turns the rig over just fine. The entire leader is about 8½ feet. The first 4 feet tapers from 25-pound stiff monofilament down to 8-pound stiff monofilament and here, I've threaded the indicator. I use the kind that has a small hole in it where you can break off a toothpick. Next, I tie on about 20 inches of 6-pound soft tippet and knot the first fly. In the eye of that first fly, I tie an additional 24 inches of 6-pound tippet and knot the second fly. In the middle of the two nymphs, pinch on a BB-size split shot. This allows about 3 feet from the bottom fly to the indicator and covers most of the waters I fish.

Usually the system is pre-tied on my rod so that no fishing time is wasted. It can be a bit cumbersome to cast, so I try to hold the back cast a split second longer, allowing the line to straighten out behind. But mostly, I fish a fairly short line. From the end of the rod tip to the end of the fly line, it's only about 20 feet. This allows better line control while drifting nymphs and better accuracy while casting.

Combinations can work well when fishing for tailrace trout. Try a small nymph, such as a Hare's Ear or Prince, as the lead fly. Tie on a 24-inch piece of tippet through the eye of nymph's hook and attach a larger nymph. Pictured (clockwise from left) are Yellow Stonefly, Bitch Creek, Tellico nymph and Prince nymph. Chris Wood (left), also a commission fisheries biologist, tries his luck with a nymph.

I do like the nymphs to tickle bottom some, but they don't always have to be there to catch fish. Many times the flies will bump the bottom and you may get hung up, which is OK. If you're hanging up a lot, adjust the size of the split shot or tippet lengths. You may be drifting through water that's 4 or 5 feet deep and the nymphs are suspended in the water column. If a fish is there and he's hungry and sees a nice, fat, juicy stonefly nymph passing above, it may be hard for him to resist. With one flick of the tail, that bug is food.

As for nymph patterns to choose from, the old standbys still do the job. Gold-ribbed Hares Ears in olive, natural, or brown are good. Pheasant Tail nymphs are a staple in tailrace fishing. Any peacock-tied nymph such as Zug Bugs, Prince Nymphs and Tellicos are always tied on as one of my flies. Sizes 10 through 16 will do fine. I usually knot the smaller nymph as the top fly. The bigger nymph such as Kaufman Stones, Bitch Creeks or Golden Stones in sizes 8 through 12 will work for good bottom flies. Also, if you know of local patterns that are proven producers, by all means tie one on. The bigger flies help get the nymphs down. But sometimes, if the fish seem to really like one fly or the other, I'll use two of the same pattern. And yes, you can catch two fish at one time.

Bumping the bottom with nymphs during the cold months offers solitude and satisfaction. And you can start the season early while taking off the rust until spring. As for catching trout on Super Bowl Sunday? It doesn't get much better than that. ◆

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