How cold-water conditions affect trout feeding behavior

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What is the most essential tool you should never be without when stillwater fishing, the one item that directs your choice of line, where and when you fish, presentation approach, retrieve styles, and fly selection? Did you guess thermometer? If so, you got it! When water temperature falls below 42 degrees trout feeding behavior is impacted. This is because trout are cold-blooded, unable to regulate their core temperature.

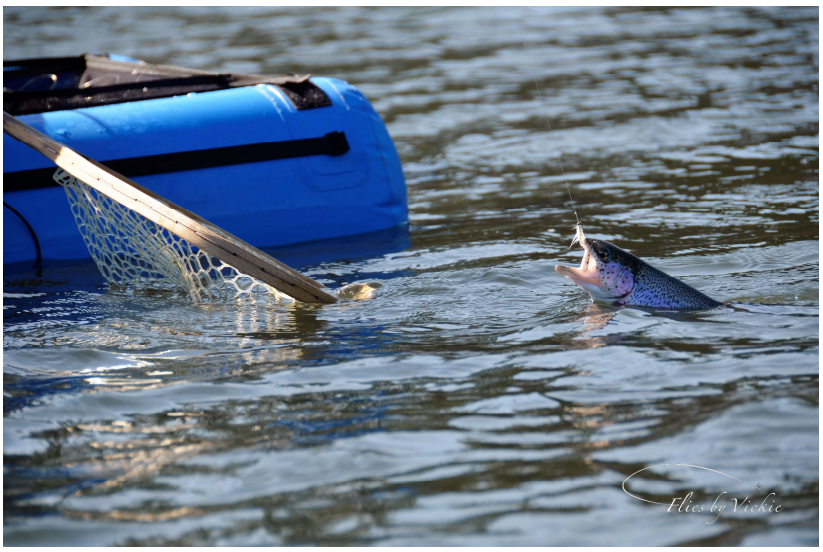
How trout adjust to cold water conditions

In colder water trout metabolism slows, their movements become lethargic, and their need for food reduced. When frigid air temperatures cool the surface water temperature, the water stratifies into layers separating the cooler water above from the warmer regions below. Trout will go where there is adequate oxygen and warmer temperatures in a layer referred to as the thermocline.

A thermocline layer develops which separates the warm and cooler levels of the lake. The timing is relative to external elements including elevation, size, and depth of the lake. The depth is normally 4 - 6 feet below the surface but may vary by lake. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thermocline) Thus, when fishing after ice out, I expect to find trout located at this depth.

For example, on a recent trip to a local lake shortly after ice out, I began by probing the shoreline because is where water begins first warming up. Yielding no results, I moved to deeper water, fishing depths of 4-6 feet. Using a slow 6-12 inch retrieve and incorporating long pauses I allowed the fly to sink deeper in the water column.

Lulled by this slow pace, I set down my rod and took a break from fishing to enjoy an energy bar. While eating my snack, a trout took the fly. My energy bar went flying and my rod started sliding into the water. I grabbed hold of my rod, quickly stripped the line, and landed the trout. While I yearned for the energy bar that had sunk to the bottom of the lake, the loss was quickly forgotten with the joy of landing that trout…and rescuing my rod!



Trout caught on Vickie's White Predator Bugger



Vickie's White Predator Bugger

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Target weed beds and underwater structure to locate trout

In cold water trout will be scattered, requiring the angler to cover a lot of area to locate fish. To narrow the search, look for underwater structure and weed beds where trout like to hold. Weed beds provide prime habitat for food as well as protective cover. Weed beds provide a rich source of oxygen which supports aquatic life. Through photosynthesis, plants in the top layers of the lake absorb energy from the sun, remove carbon dioxide from the water, and release oxygen.



Cast into open spaces between the weeds. This strategy will provide you with more hook ups from lethargic trout. Be alert, because trout may take your fly with very soft takes during the pause between retrieves.

I always start my day by taking the temperature of the water. When water temperature is below 42 degrees, trout feeding behavior changes and they become reluctant to chase the fly. When this occurs, make the following adjustments:

1. Slow down all aspects of the presentation to allow trout more time to see the fly. Retrieve twice as slowly as normal and slow down even more.
2. A floating line with an indicator can be a killer approach in attracting trout reluctant to move in cold water.
3. Probe shoreline areas where the water warms up first.
4. Fish between weedy areas.
5. Fish midday when the water temperature warms.
6. Use pronounced pauses in between each of the retrieves.

Watch for the February Blog which discusses the question - “Which is more important fly or presentation?”

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