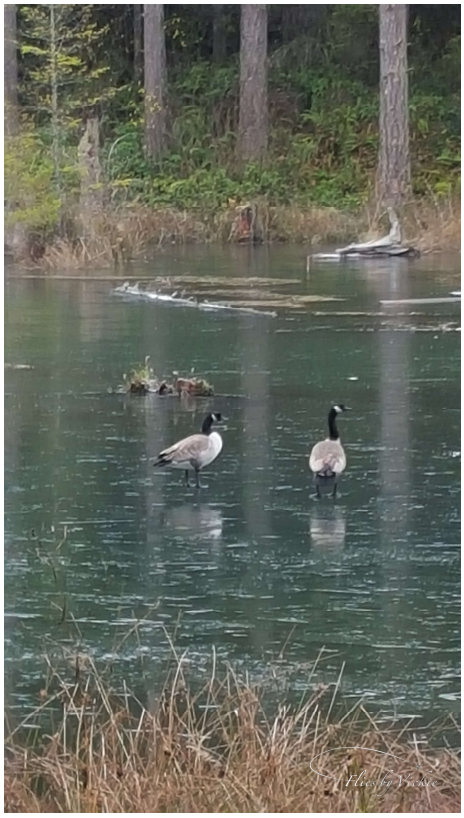
Wintry Conditions

Posted December, 2015 (Updated March, 2020)

Cold water temperature is one of the major factors affecting fish feeding behavior and will dictate the best type of presentation. In winter conditions when the water temperature is below 42 degrees, trout metabolism slows, and they become sluggish, and they exhibit lethargic feeding behavior.

When the water is cold, trout will be scattered throughout the lake and positioned in the top four to six feet of water. The bottom of the lake may not have enough oxygen and the top layer of the water often is colder since water freezes from the top down. Therefore, with colder water temperatures, it is better to fish midday when the water will be its warmest.



Lake frozen over

A break in December's cold Northwest winter storms turned my thoughts toward grabbing my rod and heading over to a private lake close to Portland, Oregon. My palms became clammy with anticipation of feeling a tight line straining against the pull of a leaping trout. That compelled me to brave the wintry conditions. However, upon arrival my first mistake was not to get back into the car and head to my favorite coffee shop: 80% of the lake was frozen over.

Fishing in these conditions required maneuvering my SuperCat pontoon boat through thick, viscous, and frigid water while breaking the ice with the fins on my feet. This conjured up visions of the Titanic and its disastrous fate. The water felt so viscous it was like paddling through molasses.

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I started by using a floating line with an indicator and my UV Midge fly pattern. While this approach is known to be deadly effective in cold water, the ice limited access to different areas of the lake and created a challenge for me to locate any fish.



Vickie's Caddis Brown UV Emerger

I switched to the Cortland Clear Camo Intermediate Full Sink Line – which sinks approximately one foot every ten seconds – and my UV Emerger fly. I then made 40-foot casts between the ice sheets where I knew the water depth was seven feet.

Without moving the line, I counted 30 seconds, allowing the line to drop 3 feet below the surface, then used a very slow, 4-inch retrieve, pulling the line vertically up through the water column. This technique rewarded me with two 16-inch trout and another soft strike in 30 minutes.

Most likely an even larger fly such as a leech or seal bugger pattern would have worked. The key to success was being able to probe the water column at the depth where the fish were feeding and triggering a reactionary response to the fly.

I continued fishing until the ice began to reform around me, risking my safe return to the shoreline. Realizing I could be stuck in the lake until the spring thaw, I grudgingly worked my way back to shore, breaking the ice with the butt of my rod, and returned home to my fly-tying bench. I left the lake satisfied yet eager for warmer conditions.

Vickie Loftus

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