

Fishing the Little Black Stonefly Nymph

by Carl Haensel photos by the author

Fly casting in winter brings all sorts of challenges to the table. From iced guides to lethargic trout, the obstacles to success can be many. Still, when the variables are in your favor, fishing for mid-winter trout can do more than anything to get a person out of their cold-weather funk. When I'm on the stream in winter, small black stonefly nymphs have always been one of my go-to flies. They are some of the most common stream insects that are moving about and even hatching in winter, and trout seem to love them in a variety of sizes.

Planning for winter fishing success is far different than planning for summer fishing success in Pennsylvania. Often in the summer, you will need to fish in the early morning or late evening to be successful. Not so during winter, where warmer water temperatures can trigger feeding often during mid-day or afternoon. When the sun drops behind the trees, it's often time to head to the vehicle for a warm cup of coffee. While you may see some insect activity of emerging midges or small black stoneflies in winter, it is often more effective to fish the nymphs of these insects. The stoneflies offer a bigger meal, and trout are more likely to move slightly to take them, which can be a big benefit in cold weather. When you're searching for trout water in the winter, you will ignore places that you may have fished heavily in summer. Small pockets, steep riffles and fast runs will hold few if any fish. Large,



Much smaller than most summertime stoneflies, you'll need to keep your eyes sharp to see if little black stoneflies are active in the winter. Some anglers will fish nymph patterns matching them as small as size 16.



This nice wild brown trout fell for a black stonefly pattern. When the stream banks are brown or even white, make sure your fly box has some little black stonefly nymphs in it.

deep pools and slow runs will usually be the locations of choice. Only on truly warm winter days will good numbers of fish move up to feed in the faster water. When you're fishing deep winter pools, look for pods of fish. Often, both trout and suckers will be holding together in a dense school. Fish to these schools, if possible, and concentrate on keeping your flies at the level of the trout and moving at the same speed as the current. It is unlikely that the trout will chase a swiftly moving fly that is drifting even just six inches over their heads. Slow runs can be easier to fish and can be fished with nymphs as you might in summer. Remember to get your flies down to the bottom, and watch for subtle takes. A cold winter trout might move your line an inch or less when it takes your fly.

When you're fishing in sub-freezing temperatures, there's nothing that ends a day of fishing quicker than breaking the top 8-inches of your rod tip off due to ice. There are many things that you can do to make your fishing more pleasant and to avoid equipment failures. First, try to make your casts a similar length each time. Ice accumulates on your rod tip as you strip your line in through the guides.

you can deliver a cast without much line movement, you won't have to deal with this issue near as often. Try using an ice-off paste on your guides. There are a few on the market. Vaseline or similar petroleum jelly products can also work in a pinch. Clean any ice off your guides frequently, and don't twist it to break it off. Melting it slightly with your fingers, though painfully cold at times, is always better than a broken rod.