

Long Slog at Williams Fork

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It may seem odd to thaw your feet in 38 degree water, but after a two hour hike through the meadow next to Williams Fork, the frigid Colorado felt like a hot tub. Let me explain. Those of us who are sufficiently mentally impaired to go stream fishing in sub-freezing conditions are seeking certain benefits uniquely available during the winter. The number one benefit is that there are less people fishing. On this particular day, I fished alone and saw no one except for a solo cross-country skier on a ridge trail above me. You could argue he was more suitably equipped for the conditions. The other benefits of winter fishing include ... actually, there are no other benefits. In the winter, your rod guides freeze-up, the fish are picky and lethargic. When you catch something it's so cold you don't want to put your hands in the water. Re-rigging is difficult due to the small flies and trembling hands. Once properly dressed, you move like the Pillsbury Dough Boy. And oh yeah, I almost forgot, the days are short.

By mid-afternoon, I found myself near the top of this two-mile stretch of tail-water. The cloudless day had warmed up to a balmy two degrees. Realizing sunset was at 4:30, it was time

to reel it in. After all, as soon as that fire ball hit the horizon, those precious two degrees would vanish like spooked trout.

I had already decided to take the short-cut through the meadow that runs alongside the river. Meandering down the stream would take too long and it would be tempting to stop and catch just one more fish. I had planned well for the trip but even older fishermen are subjected to the unknowns of new experiences. In this case, I did not anticipate the effects of 6 inches of snow and 2 degrees F would have on wet wading boots. Within 50 yards, my boots and lower waders had turned into a solid blocks of ice. My comfortable stride had devolved into the stalking plod of Frankenstein's monster. I looked towards my destination and realized that this was going to be a very long and very slow mile and half. I decided not to look up again and to review how I got here and events of the day...

The day began at 5:30am. I was staying at a friend's house in Tabernash. If Fraser Colorado is considered the "Ice Box of America", then Tabernash is its "crisper drawer". It was a powder day. Normally, I would have freshly tuned skis loaded ready to go and reminding my skiing partners that if they weren't in the car in 20 minutes, I wasn't waiting. After all, there are no friends on days when you can get fresh tracks in Colorado champagne powder. Instead, while my friends would be getting knee-deep on the slopes, I would be alone in a lovely valley with a fresh blanket of snow and probably more than a few trout. The solitude and quiet interrupted by the sound of splashing Browns has become more appealing than crowded slopes and the continuous drone of chair-lifts. So, in the dark, my friends went up-river to Winter Park and I went down-river to Parshall which would be "The Freezer Section" of the Fraser Ice-Box.

Some folks think that Parshall is spelled Partial because it's not much of a town. But its 200 plus residents disagree. It has a bar (The Parshall Inn) and a general store ... what else do you need? The parking area to access the Colorado River is just downstream of the town, when I arrived it was seven below zero.

I suited up with every layer available, and consequently struggled to bend over to put on my winter boots which are oversized and have studded Aquastealth soles. Felt soles collect layers of snow creating platform boots in just a few steps. On my wading belt I clipped on a water bottle and my foldable wading staff. I use the staff less in the river and more on land, particularly in the winter when the footing is sketchy. It can be used to probe suspicious footing, knock away ice jams, and best of all when your rig gets hung up, you can use the staff to free it up, without getting your hands and arms wet. Staying dry, while wading a winter river, is not just a matter of comfort.

I sprayed the rod guides with Pam to delay the inevitable ice-up, grabbed a couple of candy bars for lunch, put on my rigging lanyard, lumbar pack, wool ski hat, winter fishing gloves, clipped on my net, found an easy pocket for my car keys, and waddled twenty yards to the river bank.

Looking at a river with snow on the banks, you think it's actually going to hurt to step into it. But it doesn't. After all, it was still just below zero outside and if the water is flowing, it's above 32 degrees. It's actually a relief once you step in. Winter water levels are usually low with incredible clarity. Sight-fishing is preferred but not necessarily required in the fishier lies. Fly selection is fairly easy as the only things they are eating are midges and eggs. They might eat a streamer, but see how fast your rod ices up casting those things. I pre-rigged my 4 weight the night before with an apricot Otter egg, followed by a Rojo, followed by a Mercury Black Beauty.

After I crossed the Colorado, I worked my way up to the confluence with the Williams Fork. Along the way, I saw several Browns move from the banks to the center, shying even from my snow dampened footfalls.

At the confluence, the Colorado was but a frozen shadow of its “mighty” reputation. The eddy seam created by the entry of the Williams Fork was my first target. On the second cast I got the first hook-up of the day. The struggle was brief as he popped off one of the midges. Consolation prize? ... my hands will were still dry. That didn't last for long. Moving up the Fork, I netted a 15 incher at the next hole on the Otter egg. These trout had been actively spawning just a few weeks ago, so egg patterns still ruled the day. I took off my left glove and wetted my hand before handling the trout. Keep your gloves dry, otherwise they will never warm your hands. There is an interesting corollary to that rule: Keep your reel out of the water on sub-freezing days so it doesn't freeze-up, or you will never net a big fish (which will also keep your hands dry.)

The next few holes were equally productive, netting one or two trout roughly the same size. The sun was getting higher, the action was good so my spirits kept me warm. Before long, the thicker part of my leader and rod guides iced up so much that it was like casting a couple of ounces of lead. Unfortunately, I should have cleared the ice one cast before I hooked up another Brown that snapped off my rig above the Otter because it was stuck in the guides. Twenty yards upstream there was a sunny gravel bar spitting into the river from some bushes ... a perfect place to re-rig and relieve the pressure of too much coffee; not necessarily in that order.

I placed the rod in the upper part of the bushes, unhooked the net, slipped off the lumbar pack, took off the jacket, undid the wading belt, approached the bushes, peeled off my gloves, rolled down the waders, unbuckled my pants, slid down the fleece liners, long underwear,

boxers, and discovered how astoundingly cold it really was. There has to be an easier way. I don't think that astronauts and mountaineers are sharing all their tricks. Of course, right after I reassembled myself, my first thought was "Wouldn't a hot cup of coffee be just perfect right now." A candy bar and few sips of ice water was the better (and only) choice. The water bottle would be frozen solid by the end of the day.

I re-rigged, moving the Black Beauty to the middle fly and put a #22 Barr's Emerger (curved shank) at the end. While I rigged and snacked, I watch a promising riffle the other side of the gravel bar. I wasn't the only one chewing. Glimpses of white mouths and fish sides appeared steadily in the slower spots. Fed, rigged, and ready, I targeted a spot high on the riffle and led the flies down through it, with the rod horizontal, and my hand held high. On this first drift, a 17 incher snatched the Barr's and cut across the riffle instantly setting himself. I moved to the tail of the riffle. The Brown splashed the surface twice, then back across the current before drifting back. I grabbed my net which was (you guessed it) frozen. I swished the net in the water furiously, thawing it in time to catch the trout.

That spot yielded four more hungry Browns; time to move on. Picking my way along the west bank I thought I heard something rustling ahead in the winter stripped thickets. Soon after that, I came upon large circular depressions in the snow; probably deer beds. Apparently, there was other wildlife moving about besides Brown Trout and a deranged old fisherman. Maybe, I could get lucky and find a Rainbow.

The Williams Fork River is primarily a Brown trout fishery. Most of those fish average between 13-17 inches. However, there are a few Rainbows lurking, and most of those are jumbos. On my last trip there, a couple of months ago, I landed a 19 incher with an enormous belly. After 20 minutes of working the water above the deer beds and catching nothing, I saw a

large rock a few feet from the east bank in the shade. The main current was pillowing on it, leaving a deep hole below it. I casted into the main current above the rock hoping my rig would drift into the hole. As the strike indicator floated by the hole just inside the main current, it came to a sudden stop as if it had snagged on the bottom. But you never really know do you? When in doubt, set the hook. If you don't, you will never feel that shake, rattle, and roll of a hot fish.

In this case, it felt like a rock on the bottom with a small twitch. I became instantly alert with a new kind of chill running up my spine. In my experience, the frequent first move of a large Rainbow is to go the bottom and freeze, perhaps hoping whatever is causing the tug in the lip will just go away. The little twitch, in what otherwise would be a snag, is the giveaway. Keeping the line tight, I moved directly (and carefully crossing the main current) downstream of the fish and began to move up the eddy hole slowly reeling in line to keep the connection tight. Within two rod lengths of my stalking approach, the possum playing piscis decided it was time to shake his tailfin and find another sanctuary. He cranked to the right, crossing the main of the current, turned downstream, and cleared water for at least a yard. The sight of a large Bow horizontally above the water will get your heart thumping and have the tendency to freeze your action. But, don't forget bow to the Bow while in the air to ease line tension and then be grateful you bought the reel with the good drag and it is set correctly. As my reel spun and I felt line slide under my finger on my rod hand I moved back across the current to the west bank. Running ... well, not really ... more like stumbling, and slipping ... along the snowy bank and icy rocks of the east bank, keeping my rod hand held high. Eventually I got even with the fish and began to apply pressure sideways. The new direction of the tug stopped the downstream escape and the Bow began to work upstream against the current and against my pressure, moving from one side to the other in strong spurts that still tested my reel. Finally, I could feel the fish tiring after ... who

knows? five minutes? ten minutes? ... time is meaningless during those kind of events. He took one more dash to the left and I realized he was back in the same pool, where I set the hook. I unclipped my net and let it dragged it in the water (to thaw once again) while slowly walked and reeled up the eddy. He slid into the net easily and exhausted. From the fork of his tail to the tip of his hooked jaw he was 20 inches.

Taking off both gloves I said out loud, "Buddy, I bet you're going to freeze my hands," knowing that he might take some time to revive. Indeed he did. I smiled when he eventually swam away. And while I was drying my red-chapped hands, I looked across the river and saw I had an audience. Two whitetails, a doe and yearling, stared back at me. I wondered how long they had been watching me. I waved at them. No, they didn't wave back, but they didn't run either. There are a lot of deer where I live. They are Mule deer. I had never seen Whitetail before and therefore didn't realize that my deer ... that is to say... the deer at my house are merely "trailer park" deer. The Whitetail has an elegant line from its body, to neck, to head that is worthy of a modeling career. The fur appears unruffled, smooth, and perhaps silky to the touch. The tail is fluffy and broad; not a sprig of a useless appendage. My hands warmed. The deer wandered off. And that's when I realized it was time for me to go...

My reverie of the day was replayed many times during my long slog through the meadow. It was interrupted by ditch caused depressions in the snow that could be anywhere from ankle to thigh deep. But mostly, it was interrupted by raising my head too early and seeing that the cottonwoods lining the destination were still far away. My frozen boots were bruising my shins, and blistering the outside of my foot. I had brought out my wading staff to use as support and

wondered if there was a way I could do this next time with cross-country skis. I envied the skier I saw who had long since glided home.

I reached the Colorado River, as the sun reached the horizon. My boots thawed instantly in the water, relieving the pressure on my shins and loosening my stride. The sunset gave the river's steam a pink cast. As I strolled downstream in the colored steam, I thought of the Rainbow again. Normally, big winter trout fight like an old boot. Normally, one can walk more freely out of the river than within it. But if it was a normal day, I wouldn't have been there. The things we miss on "normal" days are what I like the most.

