

December 21, 2016 South Fork Boise River Winter Dry Fly Fishing Report: 26°/Stiff, cold breeze downriver/Ultra-blue sky and sunshine

I love dry fly fishing on a day like this. If you looked at today's weather:

- *26 degrees, never above freezing which means you can't full-on searcher fish because rod eyes freeze after every 6 casts.*
- *Stiff breeze downriver prohibiting an upstream approach.*
- *Bright blue skies, guaranteed to mute the hatch and limit rising fish.*

When you commit to dry fly fishing on a day like this, you are severely handicapped. You've knowingly stacked the deck in the fish's favor and yet you fished anyway. How would you know that you can unless you did? If you're willing to push the limits and accept this challenge, here are some tips to help you succeed:

1. *Know where the sun will hit the water for the longest time period and focus your efforts in those zones of water. You'll be more likely to find a hatch and you'll have less line freezing when opportunities occur.*
2. *Limit searcher fishing to absolute hot zones. Instead of covering the whole run with your searcher bug, focus the casts around sunken boulders, open pathways between moss beds, and exactly on the seams where slow water abuts fast current.*
3. *Spend a lot of time in zones of water that illuminate large sections of river below you. A dark rainbow head can be seen at 200 yards if it breaks a shiny surface.*
4. *Do more hunting than fishing. It's fairly easy to see a fish in open water on a reflected surface. But don't forget that big fish feeding right against the bank. He's much more difficult to see in shallow water against an edge because of his feeding pattern. A fish in that position eats on an extremely subtle, low-plane bite with only the very tip of its nose breaking the meniscus. There will be no rise ring to help you so you're literally hunting for the tip of a nose across vast swaths of water. He's there; it's your job to see him.*
5. *Cover a lot of water. In above-freezing temperatures, I will often fish one run of water all day. Not so on sub-freezing days. There will be runs with zero bug hatches and no rising fish. Searcher fish the hot zones then move on. Eventually you'll find bugs—maybe only a few. But a few bugs will always lure up the **lone wolf feeder** that can't resist a clean shot at food.*
6. *Hunt, stock, and deliver. If I'm working a line of water and a fish rises 100 yards below me, I don't move to that fish. I fish my way to that fish. On sub-freezing days, you rush the rise. Wherever a fish peeks its head up, you move to his location, plan an approach, predetermine the post-up position, and deliver the fly.*

7. Last but not least...try not to blow your opportunities because they will be limited.

I started my sub-freezing day around 11:30 on a big, flat riffle that flattened out into a deep slick out. I carefully entered the run at the top in shallow riffle water with a few sunken rocks. I turn my back to a stinging wind and start serving a Black Hoagie's Cripple #20 in and around the sunken rocks. The glitter of the sun is illuminating the entire run below me. I'm searcher fishing but I could also see a fish rise anywhere on the bottom of the run. For 20 minutes I slowly move downriver selectively serving the fly. In drifting range below me about 70 feet, the first fish of the day rises ahead of one of the sunken rocks. I had just changed flies to a #20 Blood Midge. I corridor the fly down to the fish because I don't want to walk through productive holding water. On the first drift, the fish eats the bug on a full-head out take. I land the first fish of the day—a fat 16 incher that jumped three times.

I then go back to searcher fishing the riffle. I can't get a fish to come blindly, but another larger fish rises below me in the center of the river. I move down in the run about 15 feet and shoot a corridor cast over the fish. Exactly where I'd seen the fish rise, he surfaces again and eats the Blood Midge. I set the hook and fight a beautiful 18-inch female to the net.

I'm feeling a bit optimistic. I'm only 40 minutes in with no hatch and two fish in the net. I don't get another opportunity on the first run and I walk downriver to another riffle. It is stone-cold dead; no rising fish and nothing comes blindly. I move back upriver to a run of water just below where I parked the car. Again there are no rising fish but I hook a pretty nice fish searching. I lost that fish in the fight when he raced for the far side of the river. I couldn't feed line through my frozen eyes fast enough and he broke the 6X tippet.

From there I moved downriver but the winter sun wasn't hitting many of the runs I wanted to fish. At Big Eddy I turn around and head back upriver. I settle in on another riffle bathed in sun. I get two targets in that run and both fish did the same thing: They came to the hook, false took, and never reappeared. It was about 2:15 and a few BWOs started showing up. I changed flies to a BWO Colored Emerger #20 and moved downriver to another riffle.

I hunt that run top to bottom with no rising fish. There's a long seam in this run and I searcher fish that location. Out of nowhere a fish eats my bug exactly on that seam. I land another 18-inch female. No other opportunities present themselves so I move upriver and hunt the run where my car is parked.

I'm on the far side of the river and the glow light is illuminating the entire run. Not a single fish breaks the surface. I go back to the run where I started the morning, walked down to another riffle and hunted one additional riffle without seeing a bug or a fish rise. I'm in the middle of a big dry spell and it's approaching 3:30. The sun will soon leave the river and the temperature will begin to plummet.

I then walk upriver to a big slick with multiple large boulders both in and

out of the water. The first thing I see on the slick out are small numbers of BWOs. I look up higher in the run and there are several fish feeding around a cluster of sunken boulders. I make a big loop and come in above the fish. In succession, I hook and land two fish: one 15 incher and a fat 17 incher. Neither of the fish hesitated eating the #20 BWO Colored Emerger.

I look higher in the run in faster-moving water and see two big fish rise. Again I make a big loop and carefully wade in above the fish. There's a cluster of sunken boulders straight out from me with a 30-foot soft spot behind them. At the base of the soft spot there is another cluster of sunken rocks. The micro currents moving in the soft spot are squirrely, boily, and moving in all directions. The main current moving along the soft spot is much faster than the water behind the boulders. I have to wade out far enough to place a reach cast into the soft spot to create a perfect drift. I wade into position and wait above the feeding fish. A fish rises at the bottom quarter of the soft spot and I immediately deliver the Colored Emerger. The fly is exactly on target and a real big fish eats it on a half-boy out. He rises straight at me and I see the massive width of his head and shoulders. I set the hook and a major battle ensues along a 100 yards of river bank. For 15 minutes of valuable hatch time I fight this fish and he will not let me move him out of fast current. Finally at the bottom of the run the fish plows into a moss bed and picks up about a pound of moss on my leader. The moss recedes down the leader and wraps around the fish's head. It blinds the fish and I immediately jump into the water below him. The fish is tired and he can't see me and he begins to wallow at the surface. I run upstream and scoop him into the net. This is a river monster about 24 inches long weighing maybe 7 lbs. It was a dark-colored male with lots of spots and brilliant red markings. His underbelly was even dark rather than the bright white of most fish. I revived him a long time and watched him swim away.

The sun had gone down, the bugs had disappeared, and there were no rising fish across the hatch flat. I went back to where I'd hooked the big fish because there were two other fish feeding there. I carpet bombed the whole soft spot and sure enough, one of those fish ate my fly blindly. I finish my day with a fat 17 incher in the bottom of the net.

I have always believed that a dry fly is a lethal weapon, and that includes fishing it in sub-freezing temperatures!

Flies that Caught Fish:

#20 Blood Midge

#20 BWO Colored Emerger