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SPORTS

Flies and Ice MARCH OFFERS ANGLERS A CHOICE
Charley Able; Rocky Mountain News Staff Writer
WESTERN ADVENTURE

As the sun rises higher in the March sky and weather patterns bring warmer air to the state, Colorado anglers face a pleasant choice: flies or ice.

While high country lakes remain capped by ice and the fish in those waters start their move toward coves and inlets, the South Platte River is warming and its fish are on the move.

The wakeup call came last week when the climbing sun's rays fell on parts of the river near Deckers that have been in shadows since fall.

The water of the South Platte, flowing at about 69 feet per second, is about 38 degrees and active trout scurry along its gravel bars and through the riffles, feeding on the minute aquatic creatures that comprise its forage base.

Upstream about 25 miles as the crow flies but three times that as the river runs is Elevenmile Reservoir, still locked in ice, but showing signs of thawing as pools of open water appear daily between shore and the ice cap, spurring trout and pike to move into the bays and toward the inlet.

Deckers and Elevenmile are linked by the strand of river stretching between them, but March fishing methods couldn't be more different.

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At Elevenmile Sunday, about 150 anglers stood above holes bored in the ice, peering intently at rod tips, waiting for a passing trout or pike to sample bait-tipped jigs.

At Deckers Saturday about 150 anglers were wading moving water, sight-casting tiny gnat and midge imitators to surface-feeding trout or delicately drifting nymphs past feeding stations - pools and riffles where fish wait for minute morsels.

I fished the Deckers area with David Birdwell, a former newspaper colleague who has honed his formidable casting skills in the waters around his home in Anchorage, Alaska.

The foray gave me a chance shake the dust off my fly rod and work out the rough spots in my casting over fat, feeding trout, scores of them. Casting a number 24 baetis nymph to already wary early season trout quickly puts a rusty fly caster to the test.

To tempt these wild and sophisticated fish, technique must approach perfection, but (fortunately) long casts are not required.

I watched Rim Chung of Denver delicately flex his 2-weight rod, deftly dropping his R-2 nymph at the head of a deep pool about 15 feet from his bankside position. As the fly drifted downstream, a foot-long trout struck and Chung set the hook.

The fish rolled at the surface, then made a few runs toward the center of the pool before pulling free at Chung's feet.

Chung's companion, Peter Delaney of Denver, then repeated the performance: same hole, identical trout.

Two fish from the same spot in less than 10 minutes, rising surface-feeders and the sight of dozens of trout darting through shallow water are sure signs that spring has returned to the stretch of the South Platte near Deckers.

Not so obvious, but just as certain, are the signs of spring at Elevenmile Reservoir near Lake George, Colorado.

Joining me on a Sunday foray to Elevenmile, Chris Gunderson, Herb Randall, Chris Merritt and Darryl Feezor came prepared for the

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elements. We had more cold-weather clothing than some sporting goods stores stock. But our precautions were just extra weight to carry.

Except for a short, blustery couple of hours in the early afternoon, the sun reflecting from the surface of the ice and relatively warm temperatures kept us toasty.

That and the rapidly weakening edge ice were the only visible signs of March on the reservoir, but under the ice, trout and pike are moving into the bays accompanied by schools of salmon and yellow perch.

Laying sprawled on the ice, heads covered by coats, jackets or ponchos, we peered through fishing holes as trout swam below, occasionally pausing to sample the bait dangling from our rods.

Some were hooked. Fewer were landed. Many were small by Elevenmile standards: 6-8 inches. But some were larger, including the one that bent Feezor's short ice rod nearly double before breaking off at the bottom of the hole.

Earlier, a prostrate Gunderson watched as a pike 20 inches or longer swam slowly up to his suspended jig, opened its wolf-like jaws, inhaled the tiny jig and swam away.

The commotion raised by the fish and Gunderson battling back and forth ended when the pike's needle-sharp teeth severed the line just above the jig. His frustration at losing the fish gave way to appreciation of the chance to fight what probably is the largest fish Gunderson has hooked in Colorado.

That is the lure of early-season fishing: a chance at a big one. Anglers only have to choose between the flyrod and the ice auger.

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Color Photo, Photo;

Caption: Rim Chung of Denver plays a fat and feisty trout on the South Platte River near Deckers. Chung fishes the river often and does well using a single fly of his own design, the R-2 nymph., drifting it through deep pools. By Charlie Able / Rocky Mountain News

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Staff Writer. Darryl Feezor loses an Elevenmile Reservoir trout as his jig pulls loose. By Charlie Able / Rocky Mountain News Staff Writer.

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