

Icicle Trout

Story by Paul Liikala

Photos by Mike Mainhart



Amidst the winter icicles, the author braves the cold for icicle trout.

Bill Kiel, a longtime fishing buddy, and I were standing in the river's fast-moving riffle. As it foamed and frothed around our waders, shards of ice swirled past us. Fragile ice necklaces fringed the river's shoreline. Mother Nature was reminding us that she was not ready to release her icy winter grip.

That morning Bill and I were seeking a cure. In spite of the 15-degree temperature, a burning fever was consuming us. Out of desperation, we had trekked forth seeking the Grand River's Lourdes-like healing waters. It held the tonic that could alleviate our malady – *steelheaditis delirium*. Severe steelhead fever causes an insatiable need to battle and land these fever-healing fish. This illness turns good men and women into possessed beings willing to undergo nearly unbearable conditions trying to assuage their fever. The cure is frigidly painful, yet necessary.

Grudgingly the sun peeked over

the ridge tops. It almost appeared to be avoiding the morning's chill. Its feeble rays provided little warmth to our freezing fingers. Yet the solar lighting provided a golden glow to the huge stalactite icicles clinging to the river's shale cliffs. Looking downstream I saw an almost mystical fog arising from the water's surface. Would

witchcraft incantations also be needed to execute a cure?

We stood at the edge of a clear, deep pool futilely casting our noodle fishing rods. The line guides kept icing up, making casting difficult. The quickest cure for the frozen eyelets was a baptism into the healing river waters. After several

Neither dams nor waterfalls can keep a steelhead from its destination.





Bill Kiel with a nice icicle trout

such immersions, the rods were cleansed from the ice.

Then, in the current's seam, where there once was a float indicator, now there was none. I jerked the rod tip heavenward and immediately the noodle rod bent into a straining parabolic arc.

Instantly, my fever broke. Also, my frozen fingers miraculously became warm. A huge silver form rolled in the water and took line from the spinning reel's drag. The steelhead trout surfaced once more; then my line went slack. But instead of a sickening feeling, a warm, inner glow ensued. I could feel the cure working. Within a few minutes, Bill also received an injection of steelhead serum, and he was able to net a 29-inch trout.

That frigid day, we landed 21 steelhead weighing between four and 10-plus pounds. Both the size of these fish and the numbers caught attract people from all over the United States to the northeast corridor of Lake Erie to do battle with these lake-run rainbow trout. At times, the number of steelhead caught is simply amazing. During prime conditions, it is possible to catch 20 or 30 fish a day. Portions of New York and Pennsylvania that abut Lake Erie get some steelhead runs. However, Ohio streams not only have large numbers of fish, but they also have many miles of dam-free waters.

The Ohio steelhead streams start at the Vermilion River and head east to the Ohio/Pennsylvania border at Conneaut

Creek. Steelhead start returning to the Lake Erie streams after a summer of feeding on the huge baitfish schools in the big lake. Their feasting makes them large and feisty. Depending on water flow and temperature, stream steelhead runs may start in October. Fishing continues through the winter, when the ice allows it. The number of fish in the tributaries really increases in the spring. Late March, April, and May are the spawning times. Then many fly-rod anglers sight fish for steelheads on the redds (spawning areas). Around mid-May the fish leave the streams and return to Lake Erie.

In Ohio more than 400,000 steelhead are stocked each year in the Vermilion River, Rocky River, Chagrin River, Grand River and Conneaut Creek. The majority of fish return to their release sites, but some visit other creeks and tributaries flowing into Lake Erie. The majority of these streams meander through magnificent valleys covered with hardwood and hemlock forests. It is not uncommon to come upon whitetail deer sipping from the stream. Numerous wild turkey strut across the forest floor in search of acorns and insects. Many an angler's heart has been stopped by the loud splash of a beaver tail smacking the water.

In the fall, these woodlands offer magnificent scenery as the leaves change from green to vibrant fall colors. Winter offers icicles on cliffs and knee-high fields of snow. During the more severe winters, rivers can freeze over. As spring comes, trout lilies, bluebells, trilliums, spring beauties and a plethora of other spring wild flowers cover portions of the forest floor.

On Ohio steelhead streams, there are equal numbers of noodle-rod anglers and fly fishers. Noodle rodders use 10 ½ foot spinning rods and reels. They often use natural baits, such as salmon or steelhead spawn sacks, beneath a float. This style of fishing is especially prevalent when fishing deeper pools.

Fly-rod anglers do well with black stonefly nymphs, woolly buggers, sucker

Fish the pool's headwaters for big trout.



spawn flies and Mickey Finns. In the spring, most fly-rod anglers wait until the sun has been up for a while. The warming rays cause the big steelhead to leave the deep pools and perform their courtships on the redds.

Be aware that when fishing Ohio streams, written permission is required for private property. While there are some public areas on all the major steelhead tributaries, the Chagrin River and the lower Rocky River flow through the largest public land areas.

Besides great steelhead fishing, northeast Ohio has special attractions for anglers and visitors. It is an unusual experience to be fishing beneath a covered bridge that was built before automobiles dominated the roadways. Ashtabula County is known as the covered bridge capital of



When the fishing rod guides freeze over, it's cold!

Ohio. It has 17 covered bridges, with the longest and shortest ones in the world. Best of all, some were built over scenic river valleys frequented by steelhead trout.

That evening, Bill and I joined a group of Ohio outdoor writers at Debonné Vineyards. The writers had been fishing several streams earlier in the day. Ohio

wineries, especially those in Lake and Ashtabula counties, win rave reviews and awards. In the two counties, there are over a dozen different wineries. We sampled different wines made from Debonné grapes. All the while, numerous fishing stories,

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After a fresh snowfall, the scenery in northeast Ohio's steelhead country can be breathtaking.



The Fairfax Hunt Point-to-Point Races




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some of them true, were told. Of course, in almost all the tales, the biggest fish got away. As the evening wore on, some of the lost fish seemed suitable for the *River Monsters* outdoors program.

Besides great scenery, fishing, and wines, there are a number of bed and breakfasts, golf courses, restaurants, and hotels in the immediate area. While we caught our icicle trout in cold temperatures, the steelhead action heats up during the warmer spring and fall months.

Paul Liikala has written for over three dozen magazines and newspapers. He was the past Ohio editor for *Outdoor Life* magazine, and recent articles have appeared in *Crappie World*, *Outdoor News*, *The Suburbanite*, and *Fur-Fish-Game*. He co-hosted the award-winning *Tackle Box* radio show and does public speaking.

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Ashtabula Convention and Visitors Bureau (800) 337-6746, www.visitashtabulacounty.com.

For detailed fishing information on where to go, how to fish, and what is needed, contact www.wildohio.com.

www.lakemetroparks.com has maps of their Lake County public lands on steelhead waters.

For an experienced fishing guide contact Jeff Liskay at silverfury@wowway.com, phone: (440) 781-7536.