

This Michigan winter's Cicely-plus snow piles would have Dr. Joel Fleishman looking twice. The towering size of our endless piles resolved any doubt that the snow we remember from childhood really was that big, not like the myth of large drinking fountains in elementary school. We all of us will always remember this winter even through any coming dementia haze

But there was a first for me this winter in early January arriving at my cabin. While unloading I heard or rather didn't hear something that was always there---the river. The North Branch flows fast and strong, a symphony of tones, as it rushes to its nearby confluence with the Main. Its sound is as much a part of the landscape here as the pine scent and seemingly unnaturally bright star light. Yet this winter it had frozen over completely somehow. The quiet was deafening. Weeks, then months passed without even a sliver of open water.

After snow-blowing yesterday, both at home twice and the office twice, what seemed like yet another eight inches, I was still on top of the week's work, [Weather.com](#) said Grayling would be 45 degrees on Friday (so fishable), I needed another day at Duane's to finish work on my new bamboo rod, and Bonnie had to work late Wednesday and Thursday. So I loaded up and headed Up North for a couple of days, knowing I could work from the cabin, or at least I convinced myself I would.

Just south of Saginaw the temp dropped to single digits but there was no snow on the roads and it was clear there hadn't been any. As I drove, I puzzled over where I would fish and when. There is little open trout water this year---Keystone or down below the dam at Mio, where I waded a week ago, had been my forced substitutes for two months. Neither had been productive the last two months

The season's snow pack on my wooded driveway had melted now and then frozen again leaving a thick, slick sheet of ice, making the

steep hill down to the cabin particularly tricky. Trickier was carrying my unloaded gear over crunchy snow and ice without falling. As I paused at the door to find my key in the dark; everything went quiet----except the river. I looked out over the rail to see it was open and not just a little

So the next day I could fish the convenient, familiar nooks and log jams of the North Branch, hoping to renew acquaintances with certain brown trout that stalk these waters on occasion.

It may not actually be spring yet but open water was the first sign the back was broken on this very grumpy old man winter for this old man.

Busy the next morning with various client emergencies, real and perceived, and that afternoon scuffing then varnishing the guide wraps on my new bamboo, it wasn't until the late the next afternoon that I ventured down to the river, armed for battle—from waders to rod with a tail-biter olive streamer as ammunition.

Starved for new water of the winter's many snows by the ice that had covered it so completely, the water level had dropped as foot or more below the remnants of the almost three foot thick shelf ice. I stood for the longest time, not scouting the river for fish as usual, but trying to imagine the sounds and sights of the massive chunks of ice breaking then rolling down the river tumbling, colliding, pounding the shore ice, scraping the gravel bottom, dragging and pushing debris at will. Although I had only been away a week, I missed that show. Only a winter like this one could give us such a dramatic spring.

You can guess the one remaining sign of spring I stalked now. It was not from the easy, slow water but from the heavy, churning current mid-river. And it struck with force and fury, pulling line for the instant before I lifted the rod tip for the set, causing him to

jump from the water and then fight and fight as though it were
June, as though this brown trout was unaware he was supposed to
be lethargic with winter's cold, like the rest of us.
The instant I released him, he darted away full speed. It was spring
for him, too

Neil Wallace