



Outdoors

In winter, people are gone but not the trout

BY TEAK PHILLIPS
Of the Post-Dispatch

As Brent McClane cast to trout in a hole along a tree-lined bank, two of his friends guided him toward the fish.

"Cast a little farther up," one said.

His fly would drift a few feet then pause, and McClane would set the hook. Cast after cast, nice-sized rainbow trout took his fly.

McClane, 40, of Overland, was in Montauk State Park, one of four trout parks in Missouri, late last month. He had no problem competing for elbow room or casting space. He had the section of stream to himself, something he'd never get on a summer Sunday.

Known for attracting crowds on opening day and for shoulder-to-shoulder fishing, the parks attract few people in the winter season when regulations switch to catch-and-release.

"I like to go because there are no crowds," McClane said. "It's just slower. It's more relaxing."

Matt Tucker of High Ridge was one of McClane's friends watching for trout from the high bank. He, too, spends much of his winter fishing time in the state's parks.

"You can pick water by how you want to fish," Tucker said. "With the regular season, you're at the mercy of what's left."

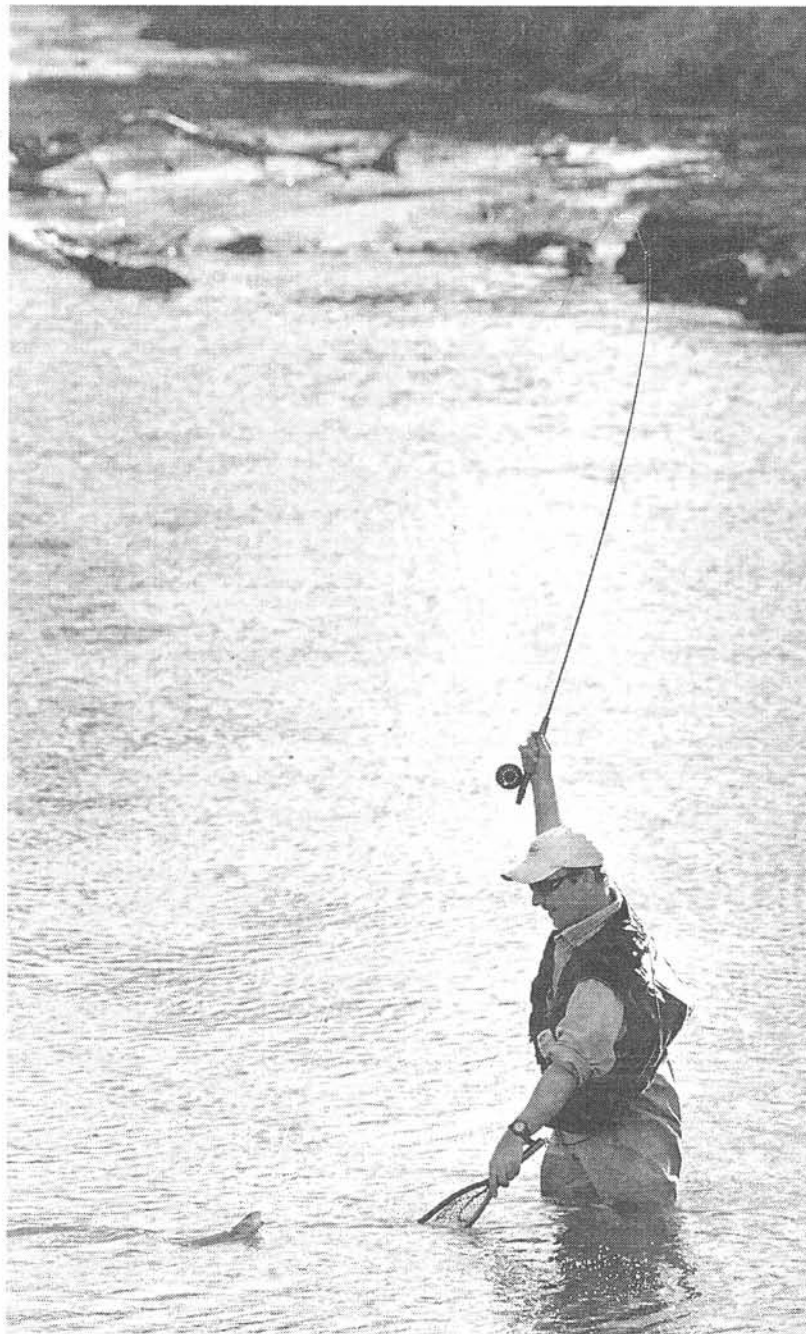
Mike Kruse, a fisheries biologist with the Missouri Department of Conservation, said that while stocking rates decrease in the winter, plenty of catchable fish remain.

"Normally we'll try to stock a few fish during the winter season to improve catch rates," Kruse said. "But generally, we don't load (the parks) up with big fish."

In addition to the parks, nearly 120 miles of spring-fed trout streams flow through the Ozarks. While many of the streams are popular for canoeists and floaters in the summer, they, too, are virtually vacant in the winter.

During the winter, the department's Trout Management Areas, which are managed as put-and-take fisheries, receive minimal stocking. But hold-over fish remain from the fall stocking, Kruse said. Many of these areas are just below trout parks, and fish sometimes wander into the management areas.

Special Trout Management Areas, which are stocked primarily with brown trout, receive a spring



TEAK PHILLIPS / POST-DISPATCH

Brent McClane of Overland takes advantage of the catch-and-release season to land a rainbow trout at Montauk State Park.

stocking and, in a few cases, another in the fall. The fish in these areas are protected by 15-inch or 18-inch length limits to allow for a more sporting fishery.

"Brown trout are harder to catch," Kruse said. "They survive after stocking better than rainbows. We're expecting these fish to grow to a larger size on their own."

In addition, 33-miles of streams

in Wild Trout Management Areas receive no stocking. The wild, stream-bred rainbow trout in these streams are protected by 18-inch length limits or catch-and-release regulations to keep the population healthy.

Fishermen who can't get away, or who don't want to deal with wading to catch their fish, can turn to the state's urban winter trout

Missouri deer season

Antlerless-only: Through Dec. 21 (only in Units 1-27, 33-38, 58-59)
Shooting hours: 30 minutes before sunrise to 30 minutes after sunset.

Source: Missouri Department of Conservation

Illinois deer season

Muzzleloading rifles only: Through Dec. 14
Handgun only: Jan. 16-18
Shooting hours: 30 minutes before sunrise to sunset.

Source: Illinois Department of Natural Resources

If you go

Maramec, Montauk, Bennet Spring and Roaring River state parks offer a winter catch-and-release season. They are open Friday through Sunday through the second Sunday in February.

Busch Wildlife Area lakes 21, 22, 23, 24 and 28 are stocked with catchable rainbow trout. Tilles Park in Ladue, Suson Park in south St. Louis County and Carondelet, O'Fallon and Forest Park in St. Louis are stocked with trout.

The Meramec and Current rivers can be reached from St. Louis in about 1½ and 3 hours, respectively. They are both Special Trout Management Areas.

Check size and daily limit regulations of each fishery.

Equipment

Ultra-light and fly tackle are the preferred methods for winter trout fishing.

■ For spinning tackle, use 2-4 lb. test line with rooster-tail spinners, globes or marabou jigs. Be sure to check

regulations, which vary between facility. Treble hooks, soft-plastics and live baits are prohibited in many areas.

■ For fly-fishing, use rods for 3-5 weight line, 7½- to 10-foot leaders and 4X to 6X tippet. Popular flies include pheasant tail nymphs, hair's ear nymphs, scuds, crackle backs, olive leaches and elk-hair caddis and Clouser minnows. Fly fishing is allowed in most areas.

■ Waders are essential for getting to the fish. Modern, breathable waders worn over layers of synthetic, warm clothing are the most comfortable. Neoprene waders are also appropriate. Felt soles on wading shoes will help prevent slipping.

The weather can be unpredictable, so dress in layers that will keep you comfortable in cold and mild weather.

■ A free brochure and map of trout fishing opportunities is available at most Missouri Department of Conservation offices and area tackle stores or by writing to the Missouri Department of Conservation, P.O. Box 180, Jefferson City, MO 65102-0180.

— Teak Phillips

OUTDOORS CALENDAR

Today: Gifts from nature at Busch Memorial Conservation Area, from 10 a.m. to noon. An informal, go-at-your-own-pace program for all ages, using natural materials to create holiday gifts and decorations.

Today: The rocks of Rockwoods at Rockwoods Reservation, from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. Explore the area's unique environment and learn about history, plants, wildlife and natural geology of the area. Wear warm clothes and hiking boots and bring drinking water.

Today: Holiday songs at the hearth at Powder Valley Conservation Nature Center, from noon to 2 p.m. Come sing traditional holiday songs, some with a conservation theme.

Tuesday: Rudolph's friends in Missouri at Busch Memorial Conservation Area, from 9:30 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. and 11 a.m. to noon. Ages 3-6 learn about what the deer in Missouri have in common with reindeer. What's the difference?

Wednesday: Snow watch at Busch Memorial Conservation Area, from 10 a.m. to 11 a.m. Ages 9-12 learn why certain animals hibernate.

Thursday: Carnivores and raptors of Missouri at Busch Memorial Conservation Area, from 9:30 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. Ages 7-12 learn about Missouri's most effective hunters and why it is so important to protect these efficient predators.

program. The department stocks 16 area lakes with trout, including the reconstructed Jefferson Lake in Forest Park. Other parks include Suson Park, Tilles Park in Ladue, Fairground Park in St. Louis and several lakes in the Busch Wildlife Area in St. Charles County.

Some of the lakes have no length limit, and some are catch-and-re-

lease for most of the winter.

"Mainly, what you have in the winter time," biologist Kruse said, "is a chance to access the fish that are there without nearly as much competition from other anglers. That's the beauty of it."

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