

Valley Angler It's Opening Day! By Bill Thompson

I was beginning to think that it would never come this year, but at last opening day has arrived. The fourth Saturday in April, at least for me, marks the real first day of spring. At long last the designated trout ponds are for fishing.

The problem this year may be that a lot of our local ponds may still be ice covered or the access roads may be impassable. I have been checking out my favorite pond for the last few days. It looks like the ice will be off, but it is unlikely that either of the roads in to the pond will be open. There is a good three feet of snow blocking both roads in. Needless to say the stocking truck will stay away at least another couple of weeks.

Because I travel up Route 153 from Freedom to North Conway every day I am able to keep an eye on the ponds that are along that stretch of road. At this writing Crystal Lake still is full of ice, but by Saturday it could be gone. Long Lake is completely ice free and in fact one of the resident loons has already returned. Purity Lake is also almost ice free. It is hard to say what Hatch Pond looks like as it sets back from the road and is hard to see. I would guess that it still has some ice, but should be ready by Saturday.

I have been told that both Profile, (now better known as Profileless) and Echo Lake in Cannon Notch are free of ice. This is rather unusual and I would guess that a lot of the ponds north of the notches are still socked in.

Knowledgeable anglers will probably plan their opening day outings to those ponds south of us. Duncan Lake in Ossipee is always a good bet for opening day. I would do some checking though before heading up to Conner Pond or any of the other ponds in higher elevations.

Still further south is Stonehouse Pond in Barrington. This has become one of my favorite early season trout ponds. There isn't much room to wade so a canoe or other small boat is required. Stonehouse is a fly fishing only pond and no gas motors are allowed. This pond lends itself well to float tubes; however it takes a tough man or woman to use a float tube in the early spring. The good thing about the ponds in the southern part of the state is that it's a good bet that the stocking truck has paid a visit.

This past Sunday I made my annual pilgrimage to Winnepesaukee. There is still a lot of ice in the lake and it will be awhile before the Mt. Washington can make from Center Harbor to Alton. However, most of the bays are open and fishing quite well.

I stopped first in Wolfeboro where a small group of anglers were fishing from the dock. One fellow and his son had a nice brace of salmon. A few boats were trolling at the mouth of the river. I called of my friend Lee Pilkovsky the owner of Wolfeboro Bay Outfitters. Business was brisk so I kept the visit short. Lee told me that the fishing had just started to turn on the day before. He said that the fishing was probably a little better in Alton, but expected that thins

would only get better in Wolfeboro as the week went on.

I headed south to Alton. There were quite a few fishermen gathered at the bridge in town and the docks were lined as well. I parked the truck and got out to check out the action. I ran into an old friend who was just getting ready to fish. I ran back to my truck and grabbed my gear and joined him on the dock.

Most of the fly fishing fraternity were on the docks as they provide a little more room for a back cast. Several hardware chuckers were present as well. This is a place, despite the close quarters, that everyone gets along. Fishermen of all ages and gender gather to enjoy the first warm days of spring and perhaps have the added pleasure of hooking a salmon.

One young lady fly fisher was using a stripping basket. Stripping baskets are generally used in salt water fishing when fishing in the surf. As the name suggests the device looks like a basket that is worn on the waist. The line is stripped back into the basket when making the retrieve, which serves to keep it out of the water when the cast is made. Without a stripping basket the line is caught in the water and keeps the caster from making a clean cast. In this case the lady was keeping free from being tangled in the open boards of the dock. It may have looked out of place, but it was a slick idea.

After several fly changes I finally had a hook up. The salmon struck hard and hooked himself. After a few cartwheels I managed to get him up close to the dock. Without a net I was forced to kneel down and attempt to get my hand under him. Next time I will be smart enough to bring a long handled net. My friend got a quick snapshot and I quickly removed the hook from his mouth and released him back to the water.

It was nice to once again feel the weight of a fish on the line after a long winter. It was doubly nice to have christened a new rod as well. The first fish of the year is always a pleasant event in any fishermen's life.

See you on the river.