

# NORTHWEST PENNSYLVANIA FISHING REPORT

Published by Blackwolfe Communications LLC

Issue: December 15, 2023

The NW PA Fishing Report is brought to you by:



**Pennsylvania's Great Lakes Region**  
crawford • erie • mercer • venango



Fishing with Darl Black

Information Service



## THE LANDING NET by Darl Black

We are only about 10 days until Christmas, and except for an occasional cold day, the weather continues to be fairly mild. Mild enough for boat fishing, and certainly nice enough to be wading or fishing from shore. Walleyes are biting well on inland waters such as Pymatuning Lake, Shenango River and Allegheny River. Muskies are popping up here and there. Steelhead are packed in the Erie tributaries and scattered throughout the system of each creek – but low, clear water is making it tough to catch them. No ice cover in near future, so you may want to check the piece on area Winter Open Water Hotspots in this issue.



The NW PA Fishing Report provides timely angling information for Crawford, Erie, Mercer and Venango counties. Fishing comments and photos are offered by regional tackle shops and area anglers. The NWPAFR is based on experiences, observations and opinions of individual contributors; information is considered reliable but comments are not independently verified. In providing information or pictures, you are agreeing to your comments being edited for clarity and brevity, and posted to websites and distributed electronically.

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### COUNTY BY COUNTY REPORTS

#### CRAWFORD COUNTY

##### Pymatuning Lake

**Bean @ Richter's Bait & Tackle;** filed 12/12: Walleye fishing is better than it's been all fall. This is the water temperature when walleyes like to put on the feedbag, and the mild weather has boat anglers fishing the lake in good numbers, and reaching the fish-holding locations. The South End is particularly hot. Guys are coming in with limits. Blade baits are the number one lure. Guys fishing the Jamestown docks are catching nice crappies and bluegills also.



**Laurie @ Duck-N-Drake;** filed 12/10: Although the shop is closed for winter, Laurie posted a double limit of walleyes taken by Mark Dietrich and Jason Heinbaugh. Nice catch! (Photo left)

**Patty @ Poff's Place;** filed 12/12: With the reasonably mild weather, there are more anglers out in boats than usual for this time of year. For those who know what they are doing, they are catching walleyes. Seems that perch and crappies are hitting off and on.

However, anglers are telling me they are catching a lot of white bass.

## ERIE COUNTY

### Lake Erie Tributaries

**Robert Packey @ Solitudesteelheadguide**; filed 12/10: Last week, we finally received the much needed “blowout” that steelhead fishermen have been asking for since the fall run began. This cleaned out most of the leaves and summer silt from the tributaries. In addition, quite a few fresh fish entered the creeks and existing fish moved throughout the system. At this point, you can expect to find fish all the way through the tributaries. As of right now, the tributaries are back to the familiar low and clear conditions that have been synonymous with the year’s run. You will need to downsize your presentations to have success with these finicky fish. It looks like the extended weather forecast does not call for much precipitation, but we are expected to have a mild winter with air temperatures which will keep the streams ice and slush free for the near future. Good luck out there! (See photos below)



**Rob @ FishUSA**; filed 12/11: October and November anglers faced low and clear conditions for this time of year on the steelhead streams. But fishing was still good on the lower sections of the tributaries. Most anglers reported the bite was on egg patterns, beads and egg sacs; some anglers also reported they caught fish on streamers and soft plastic bodied jigs. With the high-water event the first week of December, fish have spread throughout the whole Erie tributary system. This will somewhat lighten the angling pressure on the lower sections of the streams. Anglers are also reporting perch being caught on the City and Presque Isle sides of the Bay; baits being used are jigs and plastics under a float and minnow off the bottom. When the lake is calm enough, anglers have been getting lake trout in 25 feet of water on jigging baits. (See photo right)



**Kirk @ East End Angler**; filed 12/12: On both the East and West side, there are lots of steelhead spread out in all the creeks. The rain and snow helped move the fish upstream. We need additional rain or snow melt to maintain a decent flow; this week the East side stream flows are okay, but we will need more water shortly.

**Junior @ Poor Richards**; filed 12/11: The streams are in the best condition they have been all fall with flow and color and guys are



Chad Prihode

catching fish – but there isn't any rain in the forecast. They will be dropping to too low and too clear if we don't get rain. (See photo right)  
**Chad Prihode**; filed 12/11: Elk Creek is absolutely loaded with steelhead. Over the weekend, White Crystal Meth seems to be the best fly to offer them. (See photo left)



Wyatt's first steelheads

### Lake Erie and PIB

**Cory @ XTR Charters**; filed 12/11: The Lake Trout have grossly concluded their spawning activities near shore. Large numbers are still gathered about the rocky shorelines as they actively feed in preparations of the winter season. It's not uncommon to find fish dropping eggs or milting, however, know that the masses have concluded for the 2023 spawn. Water temperatures are in the lower 40's and lower. Any day now the masses of the lake trout will head out into the deep, only to return to the shallow water around the time the ice melts (seeking potential fry). If you plan on fishing within the next week; I'd recommend bright color bucktails, blade baits and swimbaits. You'll find your best success will be local to large bolder fields that contain smaller rock near drops. They dwell near areas of significant structure where the females have dropped their eggs. Fasting during the spawn they are now on a feeding binge prior to their mass exit. You'll find they are in areas where bait is not abundant making them target nearly anything that moves. Stay safe. Make a float plan and let others know your plans as coldwater risks are increasing. God Bless, Cory Elder (See photo right)



**Kirk @ East End Angler**; filed 12/12: We have lake trout in the 20 to 25-foot depths from the Cribs off East Avenue all the way to Northeast Marina. Some anglers are catching from the marina wall at the entrance to the lake as well from the rocky rip on the outside of the marina wall. But the trout will be leaving soon – perhaps within 10 days. The

perch and crappie bite in PIB is very good. Not sure where they are catching crappies, but they are getting perch all over the Bay on both sides. Hearing a few walleyes have been coming from the Bay as well.

**Joe Vercillo**; filed 12/10: We have been having exciting lake trout fishing trolling recently out in front of the East Side tributaries. Our setup includes Gamma Line – 20 lb. Gamma Polyflex main line with 16 lb. Gamma 100% Fluorocarbon leaders. (See photo left)



Vercillo photo of Noah' LT

## MERCER COUNTY

**Lake Wilhelm** (Dubbed the Musky Lake for this issue!)

**Brad at @ibeefishin**; filed 12/2: I was live scoping docks at Lake Wilhelm marina for crappie. I noticed fish were congregating around the dock pillars. In an attempt to drop down right next to a pillar, I had to go through the mount that holds the dock to the pillar. There was a triangular hole that I figured I could just pull a crappie or perch right through. Go figure - this musky bit my 1/16-oz jig with BC Baits Stinger on the fall. I had to lay on the dock and put my rod through the hole, into the water all the way to the reel and reach under the bracket to get my rod out of that hole. All while fighting the musky. I then headed to the edge of a dock to steer the fish away from the pillars, and landed it about 30min later, after Bo had arrived to assist. It was perfect timing that a musky fisherman just so happened to be bringing his boat in and let us use his nice big musky net! The musky was 40 inches long, and released after this picture. This is what I love about fishing, another experience and story I'll never forget.



**Al @ Buttermilk Hill**; filed 11/15: I was told this story by Dan Baker, an angler who caught a big musky at Wilhelm with the help of his buddy, Donnie Cussins. Both are from Lucinda, Pa. At 11:30 am on November 3<sup>rd</sup> while casting a weighted #3 hook tipped with a watermelon red Brush Hawg, Dan hooked up with a 37", 22-pound beast. Although he did not see it hit, he knew right away it was a big fish by the way it smashed his lure. With only a small net on board the 12-foot boat, Donnie somehow managed to get the muskie into the boat. The reel and rod combo Dan used was a Johnny Morris series reel and BPS Tourney 6'6" rod, spooled with 12 lb. Trilene XL line. Fish released .



Thanks for sharing...PTL from Angler Al.

## Shenango Lake and Shenango River

**Randy @ Fish West PA**; filed 12/11: Cold water has sent fish deep in the lake, but we are still catching some nice white bass and crappie in the river channel. The walleye bite is still going on in the river, along with an occasional smallmouth bass or musky. (See photo right)



**Chris McVey**; filed 12/9: Proof that big baits catch big fish. I caught this nice river walleye. (See photo right)



**Captain Hook** (Hermitage); filed 12/9: Ready to wrap up the 2023 season, but had to squeeze in one final day of fishing in the Shenango River below the dam. Fish Commission says not to eat the fish due to contamination in this section of the river, but I just catch and release them. (See photo right)



## **VENANGO COUNTY**

### Allegheny River

**Angler Al @ Buttermilk Hill** 11/15/23(filed 12/10): Photos right.

- My brother-in-law Dr. Das and I enjoyed fishing the week of Thanksgiving. We primarily fished the Allegheny River. Doc is learning to jig fish. Drifting the river in a boat while jigging vertically produced several walleyes for him; he also caught a few fish while casting from the shoreline while reeling the jig near the bottom. He also scored a smallmouth bass and northern pike!
- On another trip, Brian Perry, Kevin Kunkel and I fished together from Brian's boat. We had fantastic results. We hooked up on many walleyes. Chartreuse or orange jighead with a white twister tail tipped with a 4 to 6-inch shiner or creek chub was the ticket for us, resulting in limit catches of 17 to 23- inch walleyes. On several spots we located schools of perch, so we anchored to catch walleyes feeding on perch! The bigger the bait, the better!
- Sugar Creek produced several rainbow trout and a couple brown trout for Doc and me. Average size was 13 inches. We dead drifted small minnows and red worms. All trout were successfully released.



**Pete @ Smallies on the Yough.com;** (filed 12/02): Photos right.

- 11/15/23: The river was low and clear with no leaves or eel grass. It was a sunny day and smallies were eating. We landed a bunch of nice size ones in the 15 to 20-inch range using slow presentation on the bottom. The main bait was a Keitech swimbait that you can purchase at Fishing Online.
- 11/16/23: Another great November day for smallies. The bite wasn't as good as the day before when bigger fish were eating. However, we landed a number of 14 to 16-inch smallmouth plus a few walleyes.
- 12/2/23: It was a chilly day today on the Allegheny. We fished a new spot today and it was a struggle to get one bite. A 13-inch smallmouth was all we caught. Winter time fishing is up and down, and I will be out trying to catch them all winter. I offer gift certificates for Christmas. For more info check out [smalliesontheyough.com](http://smalliesontheyough.com) or email me direct.



**Jeff @ Keystone Connection Guide Service;** filed 12/9: During the last two weeks of November, I ran my final river trips of the year directed toward smallmouth bass. With water temperatures in the 40-degree range, we continued to catch bass on finesse jigs and blade baits. However, with smallmouth season wrapped up, I am focusing on river walleyes as well as bass, crappies and walleyes in area lakes until they ice up. (See photos below)



## Guide Update

Here's what several NW PA Fishing Report contributing Guides and Charter Captains are offering right now, and for the 2024 Fishing Season.

**Robert @ Solitude Steelhead Guide Service** is going strong with his fly fishing for steelhead trips on the Erie tributaries, which will likely continue until April.

**Jeff @ Keystone Connection Guide Service** has completed his river smallmouth season, but is still guiding for river walleyes, as well as walleye, bass and crappies in area lakes until ice cover arrives.

**Bo @ Fishing with Bo** will be offering ice fishing trips pending safe ice. He will be offering bowfin trips starting in May.

**Pete @ smalliesontheyough.com** has completed smallmouth guide trips to the Allegheny and French Creek for the season. However, he will be guiding for big trout on the Yough through the winter.

**Cory @ XRT Charters** has completed his fall lake trout schedule, but will return again in the spring for shallow lake trout, summer walleye and late fall lake trout.

**Keith Eshbaugh** already has a full dance card for his spring salmon trips to Ontario, but is taking bookings for lake trout in May and walleye all summer long.

Check the guide page for contact information.



Jeff Knapp—crappies until ice cover

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Robert goes winter steelhead

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Pete guides inland trout all winter

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## Winter Open-Water Opportunities

By Darl Black

Not every angler is enamored with fishing through a small hole in the ice during the coldest months of the year. And if recent years are any indication, this winter may once again feature an abbreviated ice fishing season...or perhaps none at all – it's a wait & see situation. Furthermore, even though thin ice may cover area lakes, its thickness may not be safe enough to venture out on – especially for groups of anglers. And should safe ice be achieved, more than likely it will not be until well into January, and safe ice may not stick around for very long.

That in a nutshell is the jest of this recommendation: seek out winter's open water. For me, it's a lot more fun casting and retrieving a lure (while occasionally chipping ice from guides) than staring at blips down a 6-inch hole.

It takes some severe cold to freeze moving water (streams/ creeks/ rivers). Typically, it's edge ice, floating ice chunks and slush that impede the angler's ability to fish from shore or to wade fish moving water. During a several day warming spell, some or all of those impediments may disappear. Here are some places to consider.



- (1) Erie Steelhead Streams – Everyone knows about the steelhead run into the Erie tributaries, with decent numbers of fish wintering over until spring. Edge ice and thin sheet ice may be a problem at times, but winter warm-ups often clear out the ice to create more fishable water. Watch the weather forecast.
- (2) Allegheny River – If the river stays open, shore fishing for walleyes is a good option...but you need to know reliable wintering spots that hold 'eyes within casting distance of the bank. Of course, if the main river does not freeze and a ramp is cleared during a warm spell, jet boaters get a better shot at walleye, musky and even smallmouth throughout the river during the winter. For all species during the winter, concentrate on deeper/slower pools, holes, eddies and slack water off the hard, fast current.
- (3) French Creek is a hotspot for winter walleyes and muskies...if edge ice doesn't impede anglers' access. Again, you need to know the holes or slow-moving flows with viable current seams to target.
- (4) Several of the larger trout streams may provide trout fishing possibilities through the winter – again depending on the severity of the cold. Sugar Creek and Oil Creek are at the top of the list. Winter is the time for a trophy brown trout.

(5) Tailwaters below dams are pretty much open all winter long. The surge of water coming out of dam gates maintains open water for a couple hundred yards to perhaps a ½-mile downstream, although banks will likely be slippery with ice & mud. Species caught in the tailrace area during the winter may include walleyes, muskies, crappies, yellow perch, northern pike and trout – depending what species are native to the waterway or are stocked. Check out the tailraces below Union City Dam, Woodcock Creek Dam, Pymatuning Dam, and Shenango Dam. And don't forget Kinzua Dam on the Allegheny above Warren for outstanding brown trout opportunity.

(6) Don't overlook the regional sleeper – the Shenango River. Stretching between Pymatuning Dam and the backwaters of Shenango Lake, plus downstream of Shenango Dam, this often overlooked small river gives up perch, crappies, walleyes and muskies during the winter, plus trout around the New Hamburg area.



Shenango River musky

Always exercise extreme caution when fishing from shore or wading during the winter. The best advice is (1) never fish alone, and (2) wear a PFD.

### Lures for Winter Open Water

My winter lure selection is limited, but will appeal to all active gamefish (crappies to musky) in water temps from upper-40s to mid-30s. Lowest water temperature I've fish in and caught smallmouth in moving water was 36 degrees. Here is my short list:

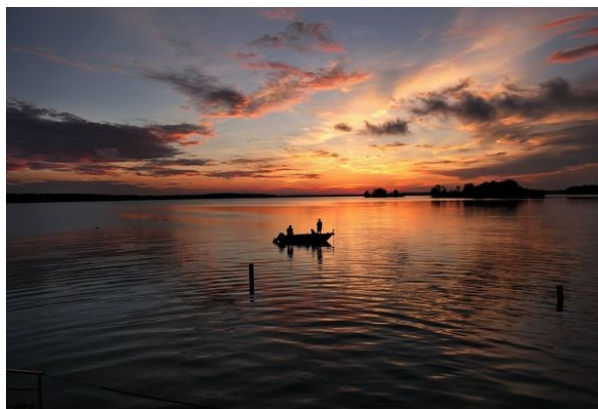
1. Hair jigs – sizes 1/16 to 1/4-oz. Assorted colors – white, bright combos, and natural hues. For all species, including trout.
2. Blade Baits in sizes 1/8, 3/16, 1/4, 3/8-oz. For all species.
3. Suspending or slow-sink long minnows in lengths from 3 inches to 5 inches. Assorted patterns but always have a “reflective gold side” and “perch” pattern. Great for walleyes, muskies, pike, large trout; sometimes may work for smallmouth bass.
4. Swimbaits with the “shad” or “boot” shaped tail in lengths of 3” to 4.5”, along with appropriate size leadheads in sizes 1/8 to 3/8 oz. Best for smallmouth bass, walleye, musky, and large trout.
5. Latest addition is the Ned Rig: light leadhead in red with 3” white flash or similar baitfish color. We have caught a variety of species (including musky) on this during winter in tailrace areas by fishing it more as an off-bottom swimmer than as a jig.

## From the Winter Bookshelf for the holiday season...

With very short daylight hours this time of year, many individuals opt to sit by the fireplace in the evening reading a good book.

Marilyn is currently reading *Smoke to See By*, a collection of essays and stories written by award-winning essayist and columnist Ben Moyer. “Ben Moyer’s essays reflect on insightful observations and experiences during decades afield in the woods, fields and waterways of Northern Appalachia,” comments Marilyn. “He notices and clearly describes the flora, fauna and people which shape the outdoors in western Pennsylvania.” *Smoke to See By* is published by Catamount Press, a division of Sunbury Press, Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania. Copies can be ordered directly from Sunbury Press at [www.sunburypress.com](http://www.sunburypress.com).

Darl’s recommendation is *River Boots – A Fish Warden’s Tales of Pennsylvania Fish and Game Law Enforcement* by Robert Lynn Steiner. Darl says, “I doubt there is a single angler in Pennsylvania who has not encountered a Waterways Conservation Officer – be it positive and helpful...or as a violator of the fish & game laws. Now you can imagine the types of short stories and snippets found in the book as Steiner covers 27 years with the PA Fish & Boat Commission. Hilarious, suspenseful and at times hard to believe adventures – if it wasn’t for numerous individuals mentioned in the book that I know personally.” *River Boots* in softcover and Kindle eBook are available at [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com).



James Scott photo of Pymatuning sunset

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## **Area Guide Services contribute to the NW PA Fishing Report**

Looking for a trip on a Crawford, Erie, Mercer and Venango county water?

**Dutch Fork Guide Service:** Lake Erie Walleye trolling, casting and jigging. Keith Eshbaugh; 724-884-3977; fishinkeef5132@gmail.com

**Keystone Connection Guide Service:** Allegheny River Smallmouth, Walleye and Musky plus Pymatuning Walleye. Jeff Knapp; 724-902-6082; keystone-connectionguideservice@gmail.com; www.facebook.com/keystoneconnectionguideservice.

**Smallies on the Yough LLC:** wading for Smallmouth Bass on the Yough River, Allegheny River and other streams. Pete Cartwright; 412-215-6254; pete@smalliesontheyough.com; www.facebook.com/smalliesontheyough/.

**Fishing with Bo Guide Service:** Specializing in panfish in area lakes and kayak swamp trips for bowfin. Bo Bartholomew at bcbaitshadley@gmail.com; 724-704-1723

**Solitude Steelhead Guide Service:** Fly-fishing the tributaries of Pennsylvania. Bob Packey; 724-972-8813; solitudesteelheadguide@yahoo.com; www.solitudesteelheadguideservice.com

# The Livewell

Brought to you by:  
Wiegel Brothers Marine  
704 1/2 Elk Street  
Franklin, PA 16323  
Phone 814-437-2077



Email: [Debbie@riverjetpro.com](mailto:Debbie@riverjetpro.com)



Pymie 'eye (Duck-n-Drake)



Allegheny River perch



Allegheny River SMB



Allegheny River walleye



Allegheny River northern pike



Black Knight Industries  
Oil City, PA 16301  
www.gammafishing.com

Gamma Line may be found locally at the following tackle shops:

- Consumer Direct Sports (CDS) near Grove City Outlet Mall
- Maurer’s Trading Post, Franklin, PA
- East End Angler, Harborcreek, PA; 814-898-3474

Last entries for Pick Three Gamma Line drawing. Drawing in January.



Sawyer Mavretish



Noah Hrelec



Ken used 4 lb. Panfish Line to land that toothy pike.

Above anglers used 20 lb. Polyflex & 16 lb. 100% Fluorocarbon leaders.



Angler Al was using 6 lb. Edge



Brad B was using 5 lb. Touch

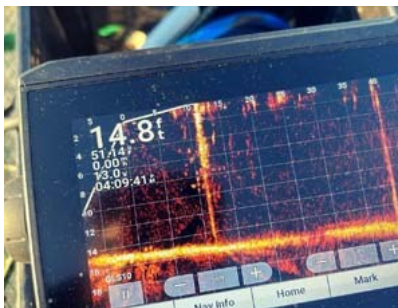
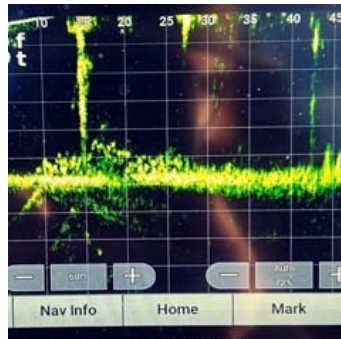
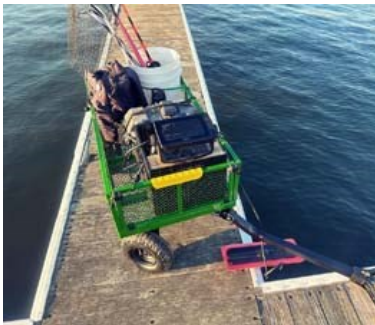
## GARMIN INFORMATION PAGE



- Real anglers share actual fishing experiences with Garmin units
- For professional local installation of Garmin units, contact G&G Marine Electronics at 724-290-9045

Are you ready for dock fishing and ice fishing this season?

Light tackle angler Brad Buchheit is a big LiveScope fan. He has a winter dock & ice fishing setup that includes Garmin LiveScope—all equipment loaded in a pull along wagon. While waiting on ice cover, Brad spends his fishing time on the docks at Wilhelm, Pymatuning and PIB Marinas. The first week of December while fishing off the Wilhelm docks, he connected with a 40 inch musky. Read the complete story in the Lake Wilhelm section of this Report.



## **DIRECTORY OF FISHING REPORT SUPPORT**

The following agencies and business may be found on Facebook pages.

**PENNSYLVANIA GREAT LAKES REGION** (Regional tourism association is prime sponsor of the NW PA Fishing Report)– County organization listing provides information on Activities, Shopping, Lodging, Restaurants and Special Events

Crawford County Convention & Visitors Bureau

VisitErie

Visit Mercer County PA

Oil Region Alliance

**AREA TACKLE SHOPS** – Regularly provide information to NW PA Fishing Report on status of the public waters fished by their customers. Support these shops.

Erie County

East End Angler

FishUSA

Poor Richards Bait & Tackle

Tudor Hook-N-Nook At Elk Creek Sports

Crawford County – Pymatuning

Duck-N-Drake

Poff's Place

Richter's Bait

Crawford County East

Timberland Bait

Mercer County

Consumer Direct Sports Supplies (CDS)

Venango County

Maurer's Trading Post

**LOCAL TACKLE MANUFACTURERS** – They supply the prizes for giveaways on the NW PA Fishing Report.

B.C. Baits Custom Tackle

French Creek Fishing Company

Galida's Grubz

Luckis4rabbits

Mike's Custom Tackle