

# FLY FISHERMAN

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*"When the animals above saw this, they were afraid the whole world would be mountainous, so they called him back, but the Cherokee country remains full of mountains to this day"*

## TROUT FISHING IN THE SMOKIES

RANDY BROWN

*When all was water, the animals were above in Galunlati, beyond the arch; but it was very crowded, and they were wanting more room. They wondered what was below the water and at last, the Little Water Beetle offered to go and see if it could learn. It darted in every direction over the surface of the water but could find no place to rest. Then it dived to the bottom and came up with some soft mud, which began to grow and spread on every side until it became the island which we call the earth.*

*At first the earth was flat and very soft and wet. The animals were anxious to get down and sent out different birds to see if it was yet dry. And at last it seemed to be time, and they sent out the Great Buzzard and told him to go and make it ready for them. He flew all over the earth, low down near the ground, and it was still soft. When he reached the Cherokee country, he was very tired, and his wings began to flap and strike the ground, and wherever they struck the earth there was a valley, and where they turned up again there was a mountain. When the animals above saw this, they were afraid the whole world would be mountainous, so they called him back, but the Cherokee country remains full of mountains to this day.*

**S**O GOES THE CHEROKEE STORY of the birth of the Great Smoky Mountains. Although the imagery may seem remote from our modern culture, it suggests an almost mystical beauty that many still find in the southern Appalachians. This captivating wilderness is now the

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Great Smoky Mountains National Park, located in eastern Tennessee and western North Carolina.

Since its inception in the late 1920's, the park has protected most of its 780 square miles from man's intrusion—the virgin areas have remained untouched, and the areas once scarred by logging are almost healed. In many backcountry areas, the only indications of human activities are overgrown railway beds and rainbow trout.

Although it may come as a surprise to many who are aware of the park's heavy tourist traffic and its usually crowded campgrounds, the trout fishing in the park can be superb. Crowds and excellent fishing can coexist in the park largely because the two rarely meet. Although the popular Little Tennessee River, which forms part of the western border of the park, is a very good brown-trout stream, the best fishing in the park itself is not in the easily accessible roadside streams, but in the backcountry areas with little or no road access. Happily, this includes the vast majority of the park's area. You simply have to walk a little for the best fishing.

Productive backcountry streams may be as close as a 15-minute walk from a campsite or roadside, or they may be as far away as a day's hike. Some of these streams flow in and out of populated areas but have no road running along their course. Abram's Creek in Cades Cove, in the northwestern portion of the park, is one such stream. Other backcountry streams that require a hike into their watershed usually demand crossing one or more ridges. A walk in to Panther Creek, in the south end of the park, takes only 15 minutes; but it takes a day to reach the secluded upper Raven Fork. If you're up to it, overnight backpacking may be a good idea—not only are you able to reach more remote and



Secluded hollows and ravines, accessible only on foot, offer refuge and reward for the angler who's willing to walk. Photo by J. H. Fox

productive watersheds, but you can also be on the stream at dawn and dusk when you'd otherwise be hiking in or out.

Many of the park's streams change dramatically in character along their courses. Beginning near the ridge-line, approximately 5,000 to 6,000 feet, many streams drop from spruce-and-fir forest through cove hardwood to elevations as low as 1,000 feet. These streams are steep and boulder strewn at the higher elevations, but their gradient tends to lessen as they drop. Many may open up at low elevations and offer excellent dry-fly fishing on flat-water areas.

The rainbow trout is the dominant species in the park. Since its introduction by the Civilian Conservation Corps and by interested sportsmen, the rainbow has

fared well. Most backcountry streams have a healthy population of rainbows ranging in size from a usual 10-inch maximum length to an occasional 20-incher in the lower elevations. The streams in the park are no longer stocked; in an attempt to keep the area as natural as possible, the Park Service has stopped the introduction of nonnative life. Although the rainbows are technically nonnative, they have been reproducing for decades in many of the streams.

Brown trout are present in some of the streams, although they are not as common as the rainbows. Some of these browns grow to large size, and on one occasion I came across one of these "ghosts" in a stream I've fished for years and never knew it was home for his kind. It was the Fourth of July, and as I was planning

to fish a popular stream with easy access, I rose before first light and walked in to fish before anyone else joined me. My first stop was a long, flat pool with a slight riffle separating it from the pool above—I had seen several nice rainbows rising in the pool a week earlier. There was a small beech tree overhanging the riffle, and as I stepped down to the water, I saw a small rise beneath the tree. After working the lower reaches of the pool with no success, and while the morning light was still very dim, I eased onto a rock about 25 feet below the beech tree. I spotted another rise. I cast my brown caddis dry above the tree, and the current carried it right over the location of the rises. It was sucked under gently. When I picked my line up to set the hook, the fish made a large swirl in the shallow riffle and headed downstream toward me. Then he shot off to the right and cut back toward his station—and he kept right on going, breaking off my fly and taking it with him. Instead of the 10-inch rainbow I'd expected, he turned out to be a fine brown trout—possibly 20 inches long. I have seen him once since then, feeding in the same spot, at which time he looked my fly over carefully and politely refused it.

The brook trout is native to the Smokies. This delicate fish requires a remote habitat and usually occurs in the park only at elevations above 3,000 feet. Because the Smokies brook-trout populations within the park have been declining, the park doesn't allow anglers to kill brookies—they must be returned to the stream. Some streams are completely closed to fishing to help insure unmolested recovery of the brook-trout populations. Be sure to check park regulations before fishing—if you think the mountains are steep, check out the park's poaching fines.

SUITABLE TACKLE FOR FISHING the backcountry streams of the park might include a rod of about 8 feet, although a shorter one is more versatile and easier to carry with

### First-Aid for Leaders

MANY FLY FISHERMEN carry numerous spools of leader material for mending leaders, replacing tippets and making other streamside repairs. Since the average angler never has enough room in his fishing vest, some space-savings is always appreciated. For years I've carried in my leader pouch a small card that contains enough leader material for all my needs. Best of all, the space required is little more than the thickness of the cardboard from which my leader carrier is made.

Measure the leader pocket in your vest, and cut a piece of stiff cardboard approximately one-quarter inch smaller in both dimensions than the size of your pocket. Slit opposing ends of the cardboard (the number of slits is determined by the size of the card and the amount of leader you wish to carry), and wrap a yard or so of different size leader material around the card at each slit, so the leader material is firmly embedded within the slits. Label the size of each wrapping with ink, and you'll never again fumble through one pocket after another in search of those elusive spools. ANDY ZACHAR

you. Leaders may be tapered to 5x (two-pound-test) tippets or smaller, and depending on water conditions, they may range from 5 to 9 feet in length. Fly patterns are a relatively simple matter: smaller than size 12 and "earthy-looking," drab-colored patterns are the general rule. Many standard patterns work well, including Light and Dark Cahills, Adams, Blue Dun, Brown Bivisible and Caddis imitations for dry flies. Productive wet flies and nymphs are Black Gnats, Black Ants, mayfly nymphs and caddis pupae. (Local caddis pupae usually vary in color from dingy white to yellow.) In subsurface fishing, the trout seem to be more selective to color than to pattern, so it's a good idea to pay attention to the color of the naturals you may find.

The best time of the year to fish the park streams is in spring and early summer. While the streams in the Northeast and West may still be experiencing winter conditions, the hatches are beginning in the Smokies. And the wildflower bloom is unbelievable. When the hatches are regular, the trout feed freely, but they are not pushovers. Although the fish are not generally selective to pattern, they may be selective to time—you should concentrate your efforts on the emergence of the hatches.

You must always remember that these fish, while they don't often check out the pedigree of each artificial, are extremely spooky—and this may cause newcomers to backcountry fishing some problems. Park streams, even the larger ones, are small enough so that the angler is almost always in close proximity to the fish. This makes a careful approach essential. Usually, if you're not seeing fish, you're not being sneaky enough.

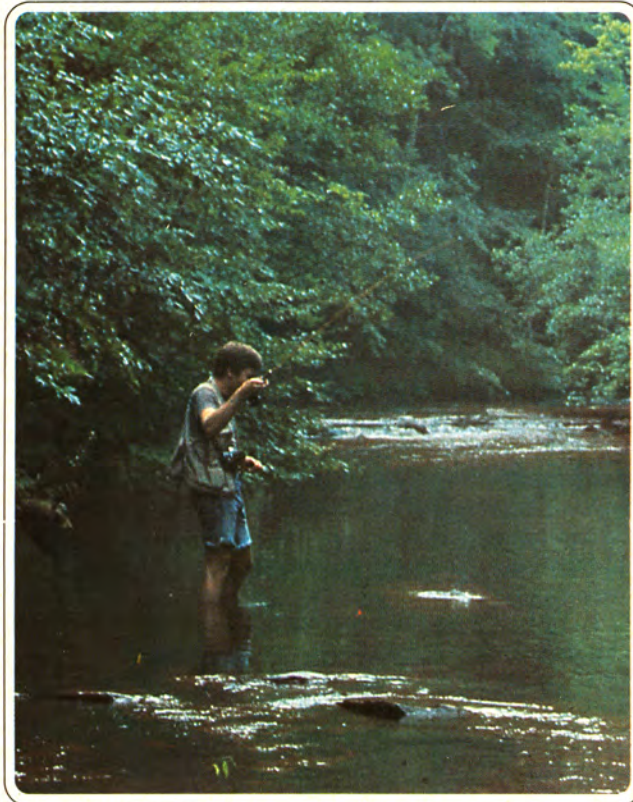
Fishing in the mid- and late-season periods becomes a little more difficult. Most of the hatches are over, and the water level is usually low. Terrestrial patterns, such as small grasshoppers, are effective, as are Black Gnat and Black Ant wet flies. In general, however, the fly fisherman must work harder and expect less. One very effective pattern—my late-season favorite—is the Muddler Minnow. The Muddlers that I use are tied on size 6, regular-shank hooks; the smaller-than-usual Muddler hook reduces injury to small fish, and it seems to incite more interest than the larger patterns.

One feature of the streams in this mountainous region that the fly fisherman should be aware of is that the higher the elevation, the more delayed the arrival of the seasonal change. On the mountain peaks the environment is similar to the Canadian spruce-fir forests a thousand miles to the north. The higher you go, the earlier the season—spring and summer seem to creep up the mountains at about the same rate as they move north. You can fish the lower reaches of a stream in mid-summer and find little insect activity and slow fishing, but move up to the higher elevations of the same stream and you may find spring fishing conditions with plenty of insect and fish activity. It's often reassuring to know that you can give up on wary late-season trout and move on to some that still think it's spring.

BACKCOUNTRY SMOKY MOUNTAIN STREAMS are beautiful and challenging. Access to the smaller streams usually gets harder the higher up you go. The creeks ordinarily



Angling in the backcountry of the Smokies is a personal, private experience, one that can't be measured in pounds of fish. Upper photo by Tupper Garden; lower photo by the author.



cut through rough rock formations that are often lined with thick laurel or heath slicks (also called "hells"). The trails, perched high on the ridges, are switchbacks, or zigzags, up the mountain. If you aren't familiar with the area, it's best to use the creek as a trail to help you return to your point of entry. Cross-country hiking is virtually impossible in this kind of terrain because of the ridges, and it's best to plan your route carefully. A topographic map is helpful, even when you're just fishing for the day. It's easy to put rough miles between you and your point of entry without realizing how hard the walk out will be. This is especially important if you walk *down* to a stream. In the summer I often wear hiking boots instead of waders, because there is usually more rough ground to cover than water to wade.

You'll need either a North Carolina or a Tennessee fishing license in order to fish the whole park. I'd feel terribly guilty if I gave you the names of the best streams that I fish—but there are 600 miles of streams in the park. The best thing is to get a topographic map, find a stream with little or no roadside access and give it a try. Also, park personnel are well informed and can help find a stream of the type you're looking for within the walking distance you prefer.

Whether you backpack in for a week or fish a relatively accessible stream for just one day, I don't think you'll be disappointed. It's hard to tramp around streams and woods as spectacular as these without feeling good simply because a place like this still exists. You may find yourself thankful for the efforts of the Little Water Beetle and the Great Buzzard of the Cherokee legend.

## Backpacking the Smokies

FOR THE ANGLER, a backpacking trip can be particularly rewarding. Just a short walk away from many trails puts the hiker in a primeval setting far away from the crowds and their sometimes strained environment. To be sure, the park trails are attracting more and more hikers, but usually they are a quiet, friendlier sort than the road-bound visitors. But the best thing about a backcountry trip is the scarcity of fishermen. More often than not, you may never see an angler other than your own companions. It can be a pleasant experience, even for anglers who are basically nonhikers. On the other hand, the hiker opens up some miserable possibilities as well. It's the planning of a trip that seems to make the difference.

Probably the most common mistake made by hikers who don't know the Smokies (and even many who do) is underestimating the terrain and the weather. It's easy to get the impression that the Smoky Mountains are rolling hills if you compare their highest point to other ranges, such as the Rockies. But they aren't. The Smokies are characterized by very steep mountains, trails and ridges that are extremely taxing. And that's what counts to the hiker. It's wise to pay close attention to elevation differences and distance between camps. If the entire day is spent puffing

from camp to camp, it does the fisherman little good—anglingwise anyway.

For the unprepared, the weather can be another problem. April can produce anything. Beautiful spring days, cold rain and snow are all part of its repertoire. But for most of the season, the main threat is rain. Thundershowers are almost a daily occurrence in summer, and they can chill the evening enough to cause concern, especially if you're wet. Necessities for Appalachian camping are good rain gear and shelter. Early- and late-season camping require a moderate-range sleeping bag (+20 Fahrenheit rating). Hypothermia can be a serious threat and the hiker should take every precaution to stay dry and have a warm place to retreat to if the need arises.

Anyone who ventures into the backcountry should be aware of any forms of wildlife that may pose a threat. In the park this kind of threat is largely limited to black bears and poisonous snakes. Black bears may be attracted by food and are usually scared off by a loud noise. Snakes are normally only aggressive when they have been come upon suddenly. But this is only rudimentary information, and if you plan to backpack the park, check with park personnel for complete information on these subjects.

To backpack the park, hikers must register at one of the visitor centers and obtain a permit. Park personnel are well informed and can help you plan a backcountry fishing trip to suit your needs and abilities. Park maps and campsite information may be obtained by writing the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Gatlinburg, Tenn. 37738 (tel. (615) 436-5615). RANDY BROWN

