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A Half Mile Farther On

ART LEE

THE FLOW OF THE big Beaverkill, the East's most popular trout stream, below its junction with the Willowemoc, is roughly in an east-to-west direction. At the height of the season, a lineup of anglers follows the bottom contours of a pool such as Cairns' Eddy out from the beach along the north shore, fans across the tail, and forms a rigid file on the rubble of the south bank below the abandoned Delaware & Hudson Railway right-of-way. A gut below the rapids at the head, the easternmost end of the pool, is open, only, it's certain, because even a jumbo angler would drown trying to fill it up.

The condition is no better in the pocket water east of Cairns' or along the first pool westward, called Wagon Track. On a May afternoon you can count 40 cars on the shoulders of Old Route 17 abreast of Cairns', which might be an enviable number for a fast-food restaurant's parking lot but not for any trout pool or short stretch of river. From the tail of Wagon Track, upstream nine-tenths of a mile to Hendrickson Pool, you can anticipate 100 fishermen if the peak of a good fly hatch falls on a weekend.

Because it is a no-kill stretch, where all trout must be released unharmed, there are always plenty of fish for the throng, although sloppy handling be-

fore release has left a lot of trout looking like pugs with too much time in the ring.

At first glance the boodle of anglers might seem surprisingly resigned, if not content, buzzing with comings and goings. On closer inspection, however, the anglers may seem always just one uncomfortable flicker away from chaos, like some family gatherings at holiday time. Punches aren't thrown, but there is evidence some fishermen suffer a sort of general-adaptation syndrome, the stress reaction manifested by any overcrowded species.

To onlookers who have experienced something better, the scene is depressing. Anglers are frozen to their places, as if afraid to leave them. The casting is jerky or mechanical, sometimes both. There is underlying tension, competition, too much looking around to see what the other guy is doing, too much one-upmanship. It's as if what a person leaves behind in the city for a weekend away greets him again on the river, that there is never a respite from it, and worst of all, that he develops a willingness to accept it.

Perhaps no man before or since understood the essence of angling as Izaak Walton did. Any fisherman who hasn't read *The Compleat Angler* should do so before wetting another line. To Walton the essence was contemplation, something much deeper and more profound than the mechanics of casting and catching fish. He wrote: "Here, give my weary spirits rest, / And raise my low-pitch'd

ART LEE lives in Roscoe, New York, with photographer wife Kris. They can often be seen slipping around the next bend to find some solitude astream for angling and photos.

thoughts above/Earth, or what poor mortals love:/Of princes' courts, I would rejoice . . ."

Bunching up on the Beaverkill, or anywhere else, is symptomatic of the sport—the art of angling—eroding, like a streambank with its alders torn away. Little by little science and technology supplant esthetics. Tackle—who made it and how much it costs—assumes greater importance than how well it's used or how much fun it is to use it. Image outweighs satisfaction. New fishermen encounter too many other fishermen, and the individual is consumed by the fraternity, the fraternity by its pecking order. The pressure can be terrible.

It is easy to meet someone to sermonize on "ruined fishing." You will be told overcrowding is the inevitable price for making angling available to everyone. Such preachers are often so-called old-timers, overly prone to

and below the Beaverkill's no-kill areas you can hook scores of healthy, unmarked fish without encountering other anglers for days. Similar privacy is available on the Willowemoc and other popular Eastern waters, including the Ausable in New York, the Letort, Delaware, Battenkill, Androscoggin, Connecticut and the Kennebec. While this is my home turf, I'll bet the same is true on well-known streams throughout the country. Even the famous Matane River in Québec can be fished for salmon in relative solitude if you are committed to having it no other way.

You can have many lesser-known streams all to yourself. That a stream isn't famous doesn't mean the fishing is bad. It probably means only that the stream has received little publicity. The Saranac River, for example, in New York's Adirondack Mountains can be better at times than the

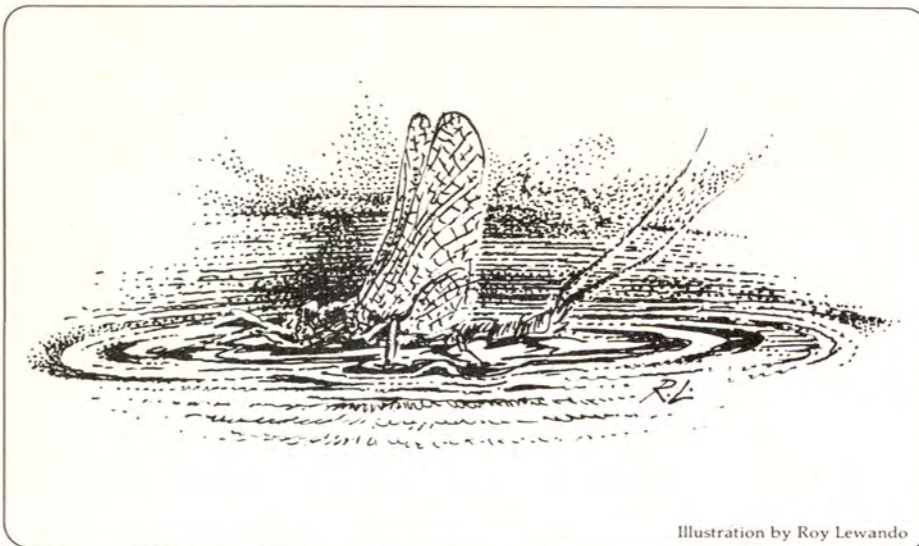


Illustration by Roy Lewando

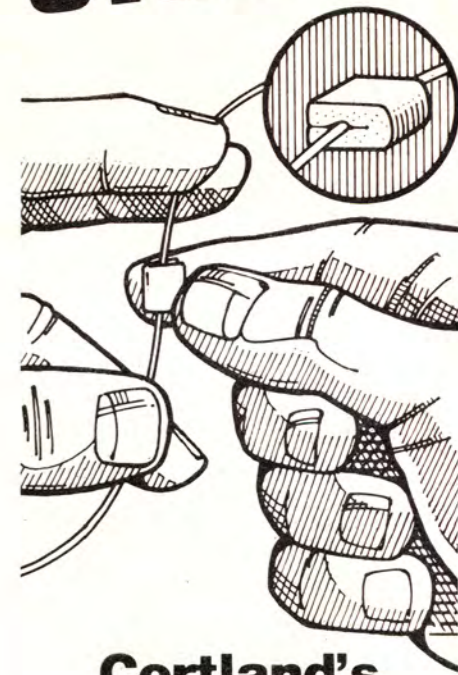
reflection. (One I know remembers the Depression as a grand adventure.) While retreat may have been easier 40 years ago, peace can still be found by taking time to look around. Overcrowding may be born of lethargy instead of necessity.

New York State, for instance, has about 15,000 miles of trout streams, most of which are public. Fisheries officials, however, report that 90 percent of the anglers fish 10 percent of the water, particularly if a stream carries some special-regulations handle. Percentages in the West are probably even higher. Few anglers bothered with New York's Beaverkill near Horton until a couple of years ago when it was designated no-kill. Then suddenly it attracted thousands. Above

more popular Ausable, and in the Catskills, the Mongaup may be the East's biggest "sleeper." And also, by expanding angling interests beyond trout, there's no end to the potential stock of tranquillity.

Forty years ago, the finest fishing may have been an easy cast from the car's running board. But then, as now, better fishing probably existed around the second bend, or the third, just another half-mile farther on. Now, however, even adequate angling isn't so easy to find. It might be better for sportsmen to spend more nights poring over maps than over tackle catalogs if they want better things to contemplate than highway bridges, cars and trucks, telephone wires, people and more people.

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