

AN ANGLER'S AUTUMN

JOHN MERWIN

Photographs by CHRISTINE FONG

I SAT ON THE PICNIC TABLE in front of the tent, drinking coffee in the warm October sunshine and watching the English setter from across the way make her exploratory rounds. It was woodcock and grouse time in northern New Hampshire, and my pile of fishing gear got only a casual sniff instead of the prolonged poking around she gave to the hunters' camps. She didn't even bother to look as I loaded vest and waders into the car — obviously I didn't belong.

I drove downstream and stopped where a logging road crossed the river, the piers of its bridge making deep pockets in the fast water. I walked through the alders to the tail of the pool below and flushed a pair of woodcock. Their crazily erratic flight gave evidence to some of the frustration that might have been following the shots I could hear occasionally from down the valley.

Unlike the softness of late spring or the heavier air of the humid summer past, the river today was sharply defined — clear, relatively low water as yet unaffected by the line storms of autumn that were due any day. As at no other time of year, the character of the water and the air seemed to approach each other in clarity and crispness. Golden leaves from the sugar maples on the ridges tumbled in the current and completely blanketed the smaller eddies along the shoreline.





The small caddis dry that I dropped next to the bridge disappeared in a flurry of bubbles; when I tightened, a rainbow leaped through a carpet of red and yellow leaves in the eddy and followed them into the mainstream. The sharpness of the air and water seemed to have been transmitted to the fish as well, and it ran downstream with a strength out of proportion to its fourteen inches. We got back together in a downstream eddy, and I released him to swim slowly from sight under a blanket of drifting leaves.

And so it went that fall morning — one of those perfect days that seem all too rare in an angling lifetime. I finally stopped in a riffle to overturn some rocks and retrieve a can of beer I'd cached the day before. I leaned against the stub of an old hemlock that had been rolled and polished by the high water of spring and peacefully watched leaves bouncing through the riffles.

There was probably a Blue-Winged Olive hatch going on this very minute along the Au Sable or Pigeon River in Michigan. I thought about a long flat I'd once fished above the bridge on the Pigeon and could almost see the riseforms wrinkling the reflections of the yellow October birches on the smoothly flowing water.

Once started, the mental excursion was hard to stop. On this very same fall day, salmon would be schooling close to shore in Lake Michigan, and on those days when the surf wasn't kicked up by a storm, a streamer fly might reach them. It will be fall steelhead time there soon, and the bright, powerful cousins of the fish I'd caught this morning would be restless and sometimes ready for a fly.

Steelhead — the name sounds like the fish themselves, bright, powerful, tough, big. There is perhaps no season that more closely matches that fish than fall with its erratic mixture of bright and moody days. I thought of stories I'd heard and read of steelhead on fabled British Columbia streams: the Kispiox, Babine and Dean. Today — this very October day — was their day, too, and I had visions of great silver fish among the Northwestern pines.

I didn't see any elk along my river of that morning. But I would have liked to have been



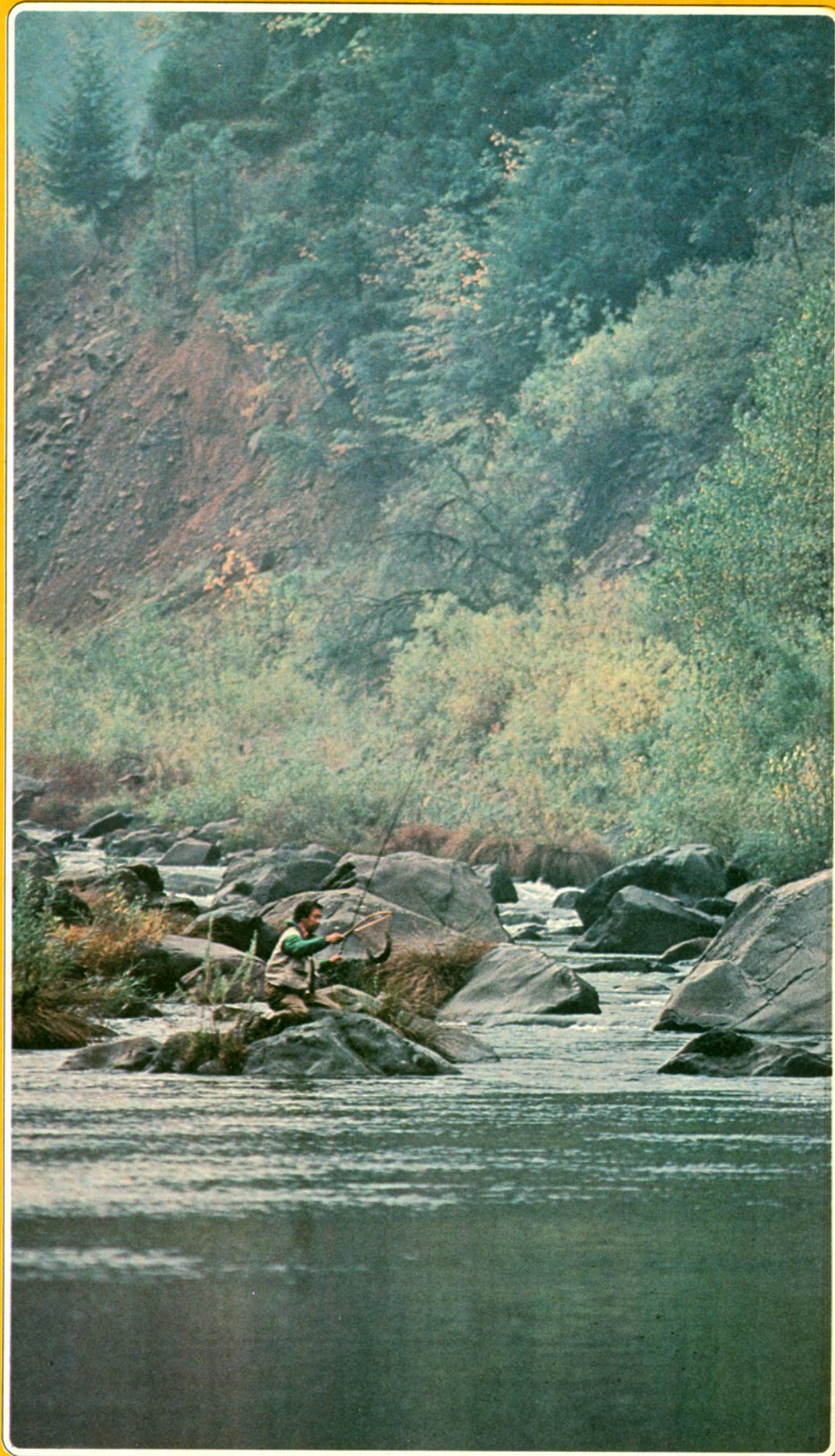
fishing Wyoming's Firehole that morning, too. There the elk are grazing, and I could almost see them as I had seen them before — looking curiously at me from across the steaming river and then walking away slowly across the Firehole's meadow basin. That river would be over its summer doldrums by today, and its brown trout would be moving, restless, and making their way upstream through the geyser basins to their spawning areas.

Moving. Yes, the fish there would be moving, and elsewhere they would be, too. It was Roderick Haig-Brown who called the angler's fall a time of movement. In the fall the world seems to rearrange itself, busily attending to those things left undone through the lassitudes of summer. Spawning, feeding, southward migrations — the change from summer to winter is a time of intense activity everywhere — from the smallest brook-trout flowage in a Michigan swamp to the pounding surf off Hatteras in North Carolina. The brookies are in spawning trim — brilliant orange flanks glowing in the alder shadows. Migrating schools of bluefish rain unbelievable fury on schools of baitfish in the surf as they swim south away from the growing cold of the northern Atlantic.

A FLICKER OF MOVEMENT nearby brought me abruptly back to New Hampshire and my hemlock snag. A wind had come up and gray clouds were starting to obscure the Canadian hills a few miles distant. But what had caught my eye was a riseform in the current, now repeated as a small olive mayfly drifted in a slick between two boulders. I tucked the empty can in my vest and searched my fly boxes. There was a small olive parachute, and I added a length of 6X tippet before tying it on.

The fish's dorsal and back came out of the water when it rose again; it was one of the bigger browns from the lower river, drawn upstream by the changing weather and an urge to spawn. I cast while still seated, not wishing to move and possibly scare the fish. The fly landed amid curls of tippet at the head of the slick, and I tensed as it drifted toward the fish. The fish rolled, and I tightened gently. At first the current made my stationary line hum as the fish held motionless on the bottom. Then he began to sideslip in the current; slowly at first, then faster and faster





downstream as the rod bowed more deeply. The tiny fly and leader came flying back in the air; the hook gap partly opened by the strong sudden pull. I sat still, looking at my errant line tangled in the debris along the shore at my feet. I couldn't quite believe it.

It was raining now, and the wind was blowing cold. The water was rising perceptibly and carrying increasing numbers of leaves and sticks. Mud sucked at my boots along the path under the hemlocks back to the car, and I wiped them on the dead grasses at the roadside. I took them off under the shelter of the uplifted tailgate and rummaged around for a Hershey bar in the pack behind the seat. I chewed and watched the river.

I wondered if it was raining now on the Madison or the big Missouri. It might start the fish moving, put the great gravel-knocking browns on the feed. This rain might also start the stripers feeding along the Martha's Vineyard shoreline. I could almost see a group of big cow bass swirling amid schools of sand eels that scattered over the surface like so many raindrops as they tried to escape.

And what, I wondered, is the rain like in Chile or New Zealand? It is early spring there now, and the rainbows are heavy-bellied with spawn. This rain would help give them enough water to move.

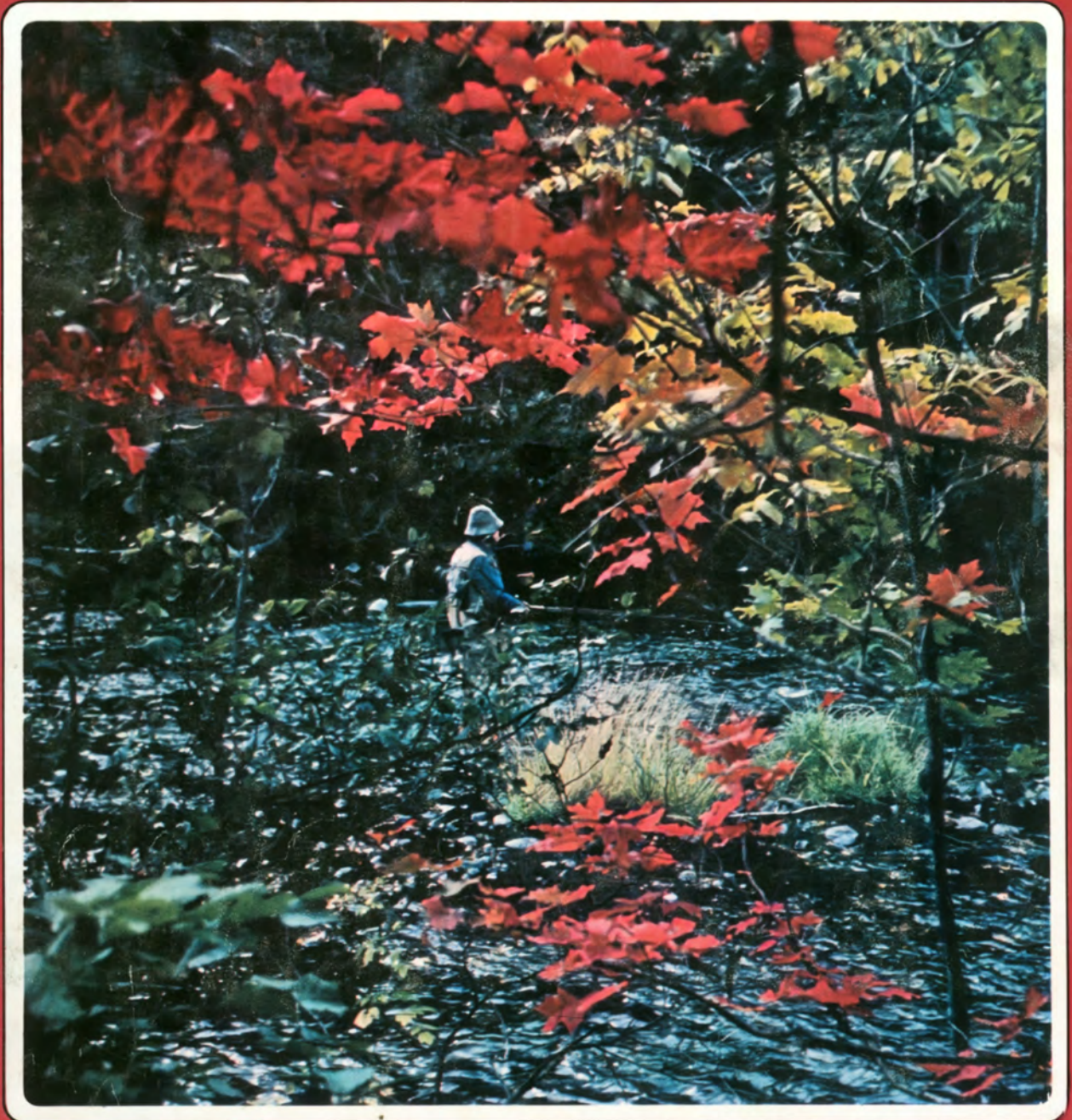
THERE WAS A LONG BACKWATER near the car, and as the rain stopped, mist started to fill the gap made by the stream in the surrounding spruces. Somehow the whole scene became suddenly monochromatic as the mist and surface of the water took on the color of the surrounding hills. I finally noticed another angler standing in the reeds at the water's edge some distance away. He was still casting, as if he could somehow forestall the changing season. I wondered if he had fished other places today as I had and if, perhaps, we had met at the current's edge of a far-off river on a fall morning. He stopped casting and went into the woods. Shortly, I heard a car start and pull away around the bend in the road.

It was getting dark now, and I shut the back of the car and opened the door in front. The report of a shotgun carried across from the ridge beyond the river. Someone was starting their season as I ended mine.



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