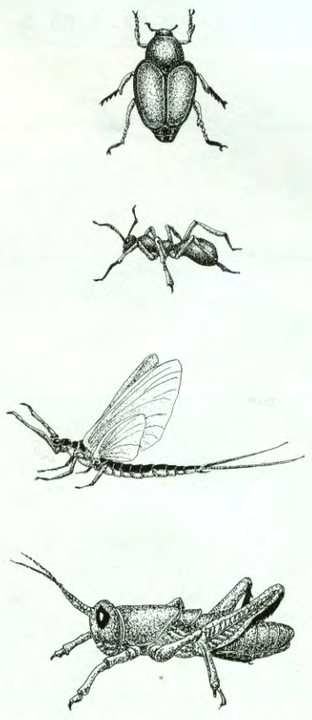
BEATING *summer* DOLDRUMS

TOM ROSENBAUER

How to catch New England's wild trout on hot summer days



ROD WALINCHUS ILLUSTRATIONS

In April and May, New England trout streams are a cacophony of currents running in many directions at once. By July, however, they turn into uncomplicated melodies that run in obvious directions at a predictable pace. This change in the currents brings both good news and bad.

The bad news is that during the low flows of late summer and early fall, the trout are more cautious when they feed and often do so at night to avoid high water temperatures, threats from predators, and the disturbance of canoes and innertubes. The good news is that if you find a stream with water temperatures below 70 degrees (F) and not much boat traffic, you'll find easy fishing to trout that feed all day on a variety of foods in predictable currents. Unlike in streams during higher spring flows, the main current flows mostly in one direction without the whirls and eddies that grab a leader and make the fly drag.

Temperature Sets the Stage

When fishermen complain about summer fishing doldrums, the culprit is usually high water temperature. If you fish enough in the summer, you can learn to smell it, feel it on your face. It's not an unpleasant or rank smell, but you know instantly the fish will be punky and hard to catch.

In most streams, if the water stays cool and remains well-oxygenated during the summer doldrums, the fish will eat throughout the day. Rich, lowland rivers always have some good junk in the water to eat—beetles, ants, grasshoppers, tiny mayflies, caddis, leafhoppers, and midges—so even at high noon in August, the water can be alive with edibles. Less-fertile streams don't have as much food, so the fish don't become picky; they'll take just about any reasonable trout fly.

Fortunately for us fly fishers, many New England streams remain cool during the summer doldrums. In May, New England fly fishers seldom catch large brown trout during evening spinner falls until the area gets 90-degree weather. New England was heavily logged in the last half of the 19th century until it was about 80 percent cleared, but now it's 80 percent forested, although the cutting continues in some locations. The soil holds cool water throughout the summer, and it's only where larger rivers bake in wide open streambeds that high summer water temperatures become a concern. The area doesn't have irrigation withdrawals to complicate flows.

[*Although this article focuses on New England, the information provided can be applied to many mountain streams throughout the Appalachians, especially in higher elevations.* The Editors.]

Find the cool water. Cold water tumbled in riffles holds more oxygen than warm, still water, and in streams where water temperatures climb into the 70s by late afternoon, you can often find trout in the fastest, most oxygenated water.

Also, look for springs entering the river. You can often hear them tinkling along the edge of a rocky bank, or you can feel them if you wade wet; a thermometer can help you locate underwater springs. Steep ledge-rock banks covered with moss are a clue to nearby springs; and don't rule out springs and small tributaries that go dry at the surface—often the cold water runs just under the ground and flows into the main stream or river.

This point was driven home to me in a conversation I had with Dr. Bob Bachman, the director of Maryland's fisheries programs. He said biologists doing stream research were amazed to find healthy brook trout under *dry* headwater streambeds. Apparently the fish they found got enough cool, oxygenated water over their gills from the portion of the stream that ran underground. When rainfall brought a visible flow back into the tiny streams, the trout rose phoenixlike from the gravel.

Where the Trout Go

One hot July day, I decided to spend my lunch hour fishing a small trout stream a few miles from my office.

BARRY & CATHY BECK PHOTO

TOM ROSENBAUER PHOTOS

During the low flows of late summer and early fall, streams with water temperatures below 70 degrees offer easy fishing to trout that feed all day on a variety of foods and in predictable currents.

Tom Rosenbauer will be a special guest in the Virtual Flyshop Chat Room, **www.flyshop.com**, *on July 9, 1998 at 1 P.M. Visit the website for details.* The Editors.

PHILIP HAYCOX PHOTO

TOM ROSENBAUER PHOTO

Summer trout feed on a mixture of mayflies, stoneflies, and caddis, plus a smorgasbord of ants, beetles, leafhoppers, crickets, houseflies, caterpillars, and other terrestrial insects. Cast highly-visible patterns, such as Parachute Hare's-ears (above) and bright terrestrial patterns (below), with a 3-weight or lighter line.

TOM ROSENBAUER PHOTO

DOLDRUMS *flies & tackle*

Conventional wisdom would have said don't bother; the air temperature was almost 90 degrees, the sun was bright, and the water was as low as I had seen in years. But I needed the stress-reducing benefits of an hour onstream, even if I didn't expect to catch anything.

You can guess what happened next. In an hour of fishing with a Quick-Sight Beetle pattern, I landed 12 trout, including a 10-inch brook trout and a 12-inch brown—my best lunch-hour outing ever on this little stream.

Did those fish come up from the Battenkill, a half-mile away? I don't think so. The little tributary was no cooler than the main river, and it had so little water that in some places I could cross it without getting my ankles wet. I think the trout had been there since spring, but earlier in the season when the water was higher I probably didn't get their attention with a dry, or maybe I didn't fish my nymph deep enough so that even if they saw my fly, they didn't make the effort to dart up through the water column to take it. Maybe, in May, I had unseen drag from conflicting currents.

On that July day, however, the stream was low and the fish's effort to rise a few inches to the surface was no more than to take a nymph a few inches below the surface. There was no unseen drag, because there was just one very apparent main current.

I knew where all the fish would be lying, because there was only one place in the brook they could have been—directly under the bubble line that betrayed the only possible source of food. And these fish were not selective, because their food supply consisted of a goulash of ants, beetles, caddis, leafhoppers, and small nymphs. A fussy trout in July will starve.

As a stream shrinks in summer, the number of secure places for the fish to live diminishes, and the most aggressive fish occupy those choice places. In a normal year about one-half to three-quarters of the water that holds adult trout in May will have none by midsummer.

In streams that have cool water in summer, and there are many of them in New England, you can find trout in a small percentage of the habitat—the areas that provide food, oxygenated water, and cover. The line of bubbles that courses through a pool can betray trout most anglers never see. In an otherwise bland riffle, if you trace the line of bubbles and debris, you'll likely find a place where they glide over a slot where you can't see the pebbles on the bottom like you can in the rest of the riffle because it's marginally deeper. Fish there.

Although brown and brook trout move upstream into many tributaries and headwaters to spawn, the migration usually doesn't start until late August, so it isn't a factor in the doldrums period. However, those small spawning streams have resident trout, many of which are surprisingly large.

In most of those streams during the doldrums you can catch larger trout than you would in the main river, and you can catch them all day long. Because most of the food available to small-stream trout in summer is terrestrial and not aquatic in origin, the trout feed more heavily in the middle of the day than they do in the early morning or evening.

BARRY & CATHY BECK PHOTO

Cast upstream to fish to avoid being seen during low-water summer conditions. Keep a low profile and use the open space directly over the stream behind you to avoid hangups on streamside brush.

Choosing a Stream

A THERMOMETER CAN be the most important tackle you carry when you hunt for good summer streams. Try to find wild-trout streams, as opposed to stocked streams: Today's enlightened fishery managers lean toward putting hatchery trout in streams that warm too much during the summer—leaving the spring-fed streams to the wild trout.

Streams with wide flood plains and a wide expanse of gravel and rocks between the edge of the water and riparian vegetation will be warmer than streams with trees and shrubs growing right down to the water. Exposed rocks hold the heat of the day and then give it off during the night when the water should be cooling.

A topographical map can help you locate streams. Look for those with steep contours along their banks where springs might enter. A geological map can also help you find cooler streams in areas with limestone, dolomite, and marble bedrock, where the underlying rock is honeycombed with channels that keep springs recharged, even during hot summers and low-water conditions.

The Taconic Mountain range in southeastern Vermont, for instance, is mostly marble and dolomite bedrock, and the trout streams there—the Battenkill, Mettowee, Poultney, Castleton, and Walloomsac—fish well all summer. The other side of the state, which is dominated by the Green Mountain range, is composed of various types of gneiss and quartzite, which are impermeable and thus don't offer the ameliorating effect of many tiny springs. Rivers on that side of the state—the Black, Otter-queechee, Waits, and Williams—fish much better in May and June.

JOHN RANDOLPH PHOTO

I also stay away from streams with many bogs or beaver ponds in their headwaters. In areas with increased development and logging, the beaver dams that did so much to stabilize trout streams hundreds of years ago now act as heat sinks, and water held in them becomes warm and stagnant.

The exponential increase in canoe traffic in New England over the past decade almost rules out daytime fishing on any rivers near major tourist areas, particularly southern Vermont and New Hampshire. Even on rivers that maintain cold water temperatures during the day, the parade of canoes and innertubes has caused trout to change their summer feeding behavior and they feed only at night or at first light. This leaves us with small streams, headwaters, and tributaries of major rivers, which are the real

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SPORTSMANSHIP & STRESSED FISH

IT'S ONE THING TO FISH near springs when you suspect trout might be in the general area; it's another to fish to trout visibly gasping around the only source of cold water in miles of river.

Connecticut wisely restricts fishing near coldwater refuges on the Housatonic River, and I have seen proposals for other states to follow suit. Trout under these conditions seem to lose their fear of predators and are surprisingly easy to catch. If you *see* trout congregated near springs, milling around and in obvious stress, fish somewhere else. It's unsportsmanlike to catch fish under those conditions.

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key to finding trout during the summer doldrums, unless you want to fish at night or at first light.

Fortunately, the small tributaries can intimidate casual, unskilled anglers, who will spend more time caught in trees than with their flies in the water. My rule of thumb is to never fish a tributary within a half mile of a famous trout stream, because many anglers explore the tributaries a few pools upstream of their junction with the main river and then give up. You'll be much better off driving or hiking upstream at least a mile before you cast a fly.

Fun in the Trickles

ONCE YOU FIND A SMALL STREAM, remember two things: "dryfly or die," and "upstream or stay at home." If you try to fish downstream, you'll end up spooking most of the fish in a small stream. Besides, fishing downstream requires developing some kind of drift, a luxury you don't have when you only have a foot of drift before your fly runs out of productive water. When you fish upstream with a dry, your fly is effective as soon as it hits the water, so you can catch fish that feed within inches of a log or rock.

Fishing directly upstream also allows you to approach a trout in its blind spot—from directly behind it. As long as you keep your profile low and do not crash around on the bank, you can approach most of the trout in a small stream. Wear drab clothing that blends in with the streamside brush, and don't be afraid to get down on your knees. A good small-stream angler will wear out the knees of his waders or hip boots before he wears out the felt soles. Also, in most small streams, the only way to make a good backcast is to use the open space directly over the stream behind you, otherwise you will end up in streamside brush on every cast.

Don't worry about choosing the right fly patterns. The fish do not see enough of any one insect to develop selectivity. Their food is a mixture of the occasional mayflies, stoneflies, and caddis, plus a smorgasbord of ants, beetles, leafhoppers, crickets, houseflies, caterpillars, and other terrestrial insects. In summer's low and clear water, trout can see a dry fly easily, and if they are at all interested in feeding, they will grab it.

A #16 Adams will interest most trout, and if the water is too rippled to see a standard dry fly, try a Humpy, Wulff, or Parachute Hare's Ear. Flies with grizzly hackle on them seem to work best; the barring on the hackle suggests move-

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ment to the trout.

Hackled flies seem to be more effective than no-hackle patterns like Compara-duns, and the hackled flies land more softly on the water. I like #14 and #16 flies best, and on small streams I never fish a dry smaller than a #18. Low floating, realistic terrestrials might be effective, but they are tough to see and I don't feel a need to get that fancy. Save your tiny beetles and ants for flat pools on bigger rivers.

July Hatches

YOU MAY SEE BUGS hatching in New England in July, but you'll be better off concentrating on *where* and *how* you fish rather than on what you are matching. Caddis may come off at first light and at dusk—usually #18 cream ones in the morning and #18 or #20 dark gray ones in the evening. If you're lucky, you might find trout feeding on #16-#18 Blue-winged Olives around midmorning. Don't fish in the bigger waters in evening without Rusty Spinners of some persuasion in #18 through #24.

Many anglers believe it is best to fish in the evening. Nonsense. Since the sun will be on the water for long periods and the water holds its heat well, the water temperature will be at its daily maximum at about 5 P.M. How cool is the water going to be at 8 P.M.?

The best time to fish the bigger New England rivers in July and August is at first light. This time of day gives you the perfect combination of the lowest water temperatures, insects drifting in the current (from nocturnal drift migrations), enough light for the trout to see the insects, and hopefully a respite from the onslaught of canoes. Fish nymphs dead-drift and ignore any hatches that occur. If you can't catch a trout on a #18 Olive Pheasant Tail, a #16 LaFontaine Olive Deep Pupa, or a #16 Bead-head Hare's Ear, pack your gear and head for a tributary.

Regardless of where you fish, avoid drag; it ruins your presentation. In the early morning, the nymphs are drifting, not hatching, so your best spots to fish are the riffles and runs from two to four feet deep, and closer to the head of the riffle than the tail. I don't think there are any more fish in the head of a riffle than anywhere else at this time of year, but I do think it is easier to make a realistic presentation in the upper half of a riffle.

When you fish nymphs in the head of a riffle, your fly should tick or snag bottom on about one in four casts. If it doesn't, your fly is not getting down to the lazy trout that are just grazing, feeding on nymphs in the drift. To get the fly deeper, add split-shot to your tippet about 18 inches above the fly, lengthen your tippet, or make a tuck cast by flicking your wrist below the horizontal as you complete the forward cast. Any one or a combination of these can get your nymph deeper.

Streamers can be fun at first light, too. If you like to fish streamers for trout, use any #8-#10 pattern you like, as long as it's weighted. If it's not, slide a split-shot or tungsten bead on the tippet just above the fly.

Fish streamers fast—faster than you think you should, almost bluefish speed. The tails of pools and riffles seem to be more productive than the heads, but the best early-morning streamer water is against the deep banks lined with big rocks or sweepers. As long as the water is shaded, you can draw strikes, and because of the good water temperatures, trout often move three or four feet for the fly and slam it hard.

Doldrums Equipment

IF YOU USE A 3-WEIGHT or lighter-line rod, you can deliver the fly delicately, because wind is usually not a problem on smaller streams, and you won't need to make long casts.

Contrary to the hotshots' opinions on rods, I prefer a rod with a full flex for this type of fishing, and I use an "old-fashioned" 7-foot, 9-inch rod for a 2-weight line. Tight loops and hero casts are only good for showing off. Any reel will do fine; very seldom will you need drag for this fishing.

Leaders: Use 12- to 15-foot leaders with 6X tippets for the bigger rivers, 7 1/2-foot, 5X or even 4X leaders for the tributaries and headwaters. Short, heavy leaders in small streams drive the fly into tight spots better and make it easier to rip your fly out of trees without spooking the fish.

Where to Fish

THIS IS NOT MEANT to be a kiss-and-tell article. If you live in New England, you know where to go. If you're planning a trip, a call to a local fly shop is going to be a lot more reliable than anything you read here. That said, here are a few hints to get you started.

Vermont: Any small stream in the Taconic range. Try less-famous waters like the upper Poultney or Castleton rivers, and tributaries of the White River in central Vermont.

Massachusetts: The southern continuation of the Taconics from Vermont has some real sleeper streams, most of them small and lightly fished. Try the Green River outside of Williamstown.

New Hampshire: Any high-elevation streams in the White Mountains are worth a shot.

Maine: Northwestern Maine contains some of the best northeastern tailwater fishing for brook trout and landlocked salmon. The fishing reaches its peak in July. Don't fish streamers and drys like the locals; instead, concentrate on small weighted nymphs, especially in the morning. Try the Kennebec River between Moosehead Lake and Shawmut Dam, the West Branch of the Penobscott River from Ripogenous Dam to Nesourdanehunk Falls, Rangely Stream, Rapid River, and the Kennebago River.

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TOM ROSEBAUER PHOTO

In July and August, fish New England rivers at first light when water temperatures are low and insects drift in the current

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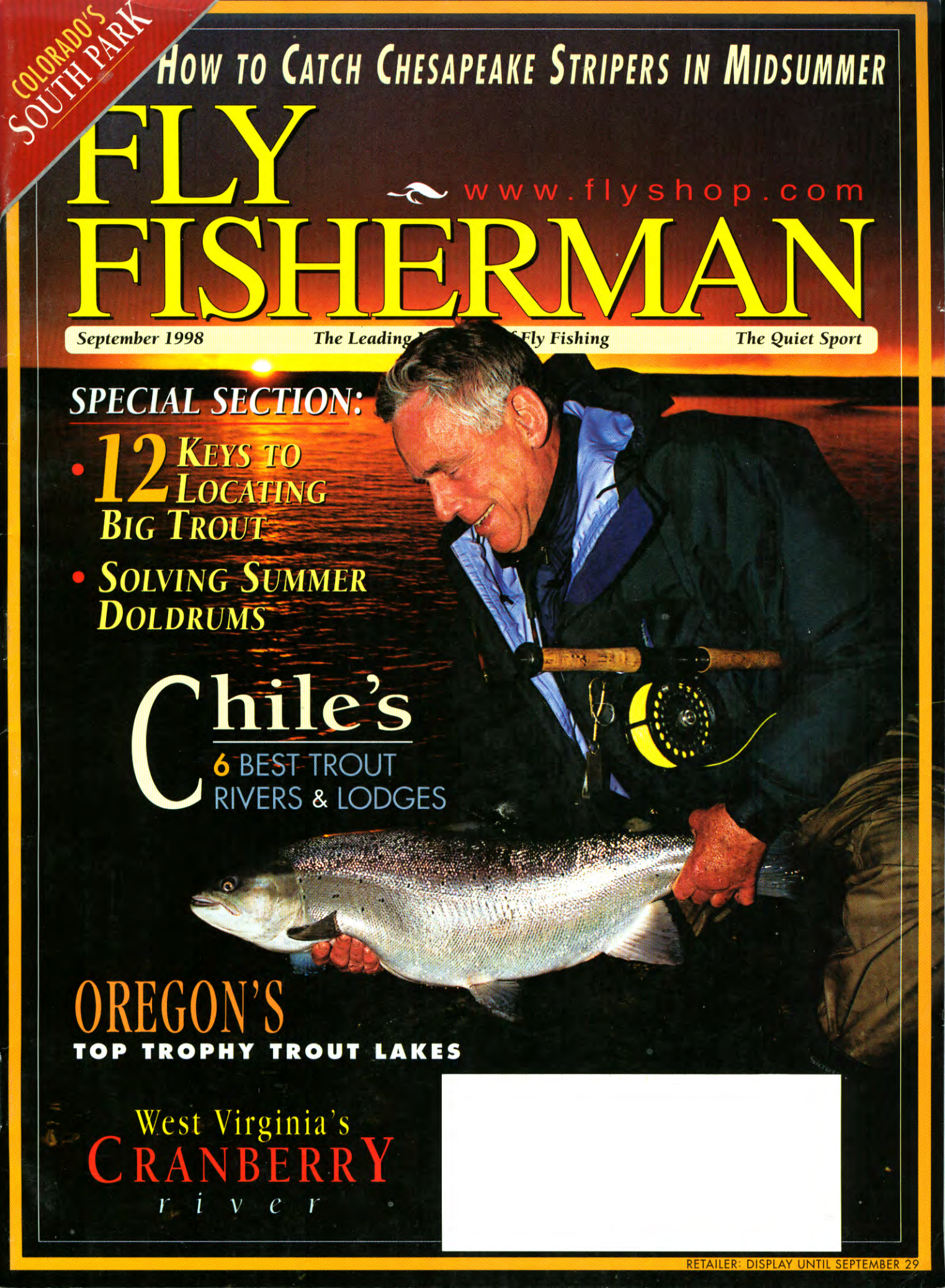

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- SOLVING SUMMER DOLDRUMS

Chile's 6 BEST TROUT RIVERS & LODGES

OREGON'S TOP TROPHY TROUT LAKES

West Virginia's CRANBERRY river