

MAINE'S

Unknown

Limestone Waters

KEN ALLEN



BARRY BECK PHOTO

Productive waters hidden in Maine's potato-growing country

IMAGINE A LIMESTONE STREAM with native brook trout and an occasional Atlantic salmon, flowing through a rich bottomland of alders, cedar, and hardwood. Except for a subtle hint of chalkiness, the water is crystal clear as it slides over gravel pools with occasional boulders and rocks. Like the famed limestone streams of Pennsylvania and the West, rich beds of grass sway gently in the current, a haven for mayfly nymphs and uncased caddis worms that cover the underside of these grasses. Unlike limestone streams in other states, however, this water is not famous—even with the locals. In fact, a nurse in the area who came from a fishing family questioned my sanity for driving four hours to fish Prestile Stream, one of Maine's unknown limestone streams.

I first fished this stream on a muggy, glaring August afternoon. The water was low, very low. Since the air temperature was in the 80s, neither Harry Vanderweide, a fishing companion, nor myself had expected action. It was difficult to become serious about fishing, but just from habit, I placed my stream thermometer

into the water, expecting a tepid reading. But much to my surprise, it was 64 degrees. Harry couldn't believe it was that cool, and, thinking I was kidding him, he looked over my shoulder at the thermometer.

Near the far bank, a fish rose tightly against the trunk of a small fallen tree. The rise ring was barely perceptible, making me suspect it was a tiny fish, four or five inches long. Blue-winged Olives, a size 18, littered the stream's surface, so I tied on a #18 no-hackle dry fly to match it. My first cast was on target, and the small imitation disappeared in a dimple rise. When the line tightened, the size of the fish surprised me. A short while later, a fat 11-inch brook trout flopped in my net. All brookies are beautiful, but from Prestile Stream they are particularly colorful. The vermiculations on the back are distinct, even in the smaller fish, and the red spots surrounded by the blue haloes are large and clear. A short while later, a twin to the first fish delicately sipped my fly. My afternoon continued to pass like this. None of the fish were large, but it was August.

Later that evening, however, Prestile Stream im-

All the brookies (top right) are colorful from Prestile Stream, Maine's unique limestone spring creek in Maine's Aroostook potato farming region, but the surroundings alone are worth the trip.

AUTHOR'S PHOTO

Maine's Limestones . . .

pressed me forever. The moon came up early, well before dark, and as it rose into a balmy summer evening, brook trout and Atlantic salmon parr began to rise all over a gravel glide. It seemed every square yard of water contained a fish. Several species of mayflies and caddisflies were hatching, but a size 14 dun with a mahogany body and dun wings and tails interested them the most. It was an odd species in the *Ephemerella* genus. I was unable to identify it, but a Red Quill Compara-dun tied for spring afternoons worked fine. In an hour, more than a dozen brook trout, some respectable fish, and salmon parr took my fly, but the real memory was a big brook trout that got away. It took my fly and made several hard, fast runs, wallowing loudly on the surface between each one. After coming close to my net twice, it came off the hook. I conservatively estimated it at three pounds—a good brook trout in the continental United States these days.

Why does such a magnificent water attract so little attention, particularly when limestone streams across the country have become a mecca for fly fishermen? The answer is simple, yet complicated. For starters, most Maine fishermen are unaware their own state has limestone streams. Prestile Stream and other limestone waters (Meduxnekeag River, Presque Isle Stream, and part of the Aroostook River as well as myriad feeder brooks) are in Aroostook County, a land known for potato farming. Maine's more well-known cold-water fisheries are a considerable distance to the west of these limestone waters nestled on the New Brunswick border. In fact, even though tourism is a major industry in Maine, it is practically nonexistent in Aroostook's potato country. Motels are hard to find near Prestile Stream, and campgrounds are even rarer. The area simply does not cater to tourists or fishermen because there is little to attract them.

A Sample Stream

THE LOCALS DO NOT FISH Prestile Stream hard, which doesn't surprise me. Like most limestone waters, rich insect life produces ultra-selective trout. Anglers must

do everything right or spend most days fishless. Proper presentation is crucial, and most of the time, matching the hatch is equally important. Sophisticated fish call for sophisticated fishing methods, and eastern Aroostook County is a land with little tradition in fly fishing, particularly the type that produces consistent success with finicky trout. A few days on this stream would discourage any worm dunker.

Another reason that Maine's limestone streams attract little attention revolves around a natural occurrence in the area. It is a mountainous state, and most flowing waters run off quickly in the spring, becoming trickles in the summer. The fish leave many of the rivers and streams in warmer months, and migrate to lakes and ponds. Most fishermen acquainted with Maine know this, and are still-water fishermen. Fly fishing in still water has become a high art form in the Pine Tree State. Unlike much of the country, flowing waters are much less of an attraction.

Prestile Stream may be fished all summer. For brook trout, equipment for this water is similar to any limestone water in the country, or Europe. Long rods that handle delicate lines are a good choice. They facilitate long, delicate casts, but also make it easier to mend line in tricky currents. Fish hide in the grass beds, but at feeding time lie in narrow channels between the trailing weeds. In this situation, long, drag-free floats are difficult without mending line. My favorite rod for this water is an Orvis 9'3" Spring Creek graphite model that handles a weight-forward, 5-weight floating line. This shallow stream seldom requires a sinking line. A sinking tip might be the most anyone would need. Whether I am using a dry fly or nymph, I use a 15-foot, hand-tied leader, usually with a 2-pound tippet, but sometimes a pound heavier, or lighter, depending on water conditions and fly size.

Because I sometimes encounter Atlantic salmon on Prestile, I take a 9-foot rod that handles an 8-weight line as a back-up. An average Maine Atlantic weighs eight to ten pounds, definitely requiring a heavier rod. A floating line with a 15-foot leader and 8-pound tip-

Continued on page 69



Prestile Stream is one of the few spots in Maine where one can find surface fishing all summer. It also has a giant mayfly (*Hexagenia*) hatch.

KEN ALLEN PHOTO

Maine's Limestones . . .

Continued from page 62
pet is good for Maine Atlantic salmon. I fish for them during August and the first two weeks of September; however, no one should come to this area solely for Atlantics. The fishing just is not that good compared to other Maine rivers. There are few good pools in this area for those who want to tangle with this regal fish. One is near the Maine-New Brunswick border. Atlantics are just a bonus to the superior brook trout fishery, and Bill Graves, a local ardent fly fisherman, says that 95 percent of the salmon are caught at random by folks out trout fishing.

Dry flies for Prestile Stream are generally small. Except for #14 Red Quills (hatch begins: May-June), #10 to #12 March Browns (hatch begins: June), and #8, 4XL Green Drakes and #6, 4XL Hexagenias (hatch begins: June), fly patterns should be in the #16 to #24 range. Since the fish are selective, Compara-dun and thorax styles seem to work better than traditional flies. During June, there are magnificent hatches of Sulphur duns, and in July and August, hatches of Blue-winged Olives in #16 through #24. Because of the northern climate, June is a cool month, and for fishing, definitely my favorite month. Anyone planning a trip to this area should have an array of dry-fly patterns in different colors. A full range of nymphs, particularly minute ones in both mayfly and caddis patterns, is important. This is fertile water.

Accommodations in the area are sparse. The closest motel is the Midtown, in Mars Hill, telephone (207) 425-6241. Houlton has more accommodations, but it is more than 20 miles from the river. I camp out, but it is on private land. No campgrounds exist in the area. You just have to ask permission, certainly a touch of times past.

Prestile Stream is easy to reach by automobile. Anyone driving to Maine should catch Interstate 95 in Kittery and stay on this four-lane highway straight into Houlton, a five- to six-hour drive. At Houlton, travel north on U.S. Route 1 to Bridgewater Corner. From Bridgewater Corner to Mars Hill, several different roads run parallel or perpendicular to the stream. The best place to fish this 16-mile section depends on whom you talk with. In short, it is all good, and it has a touch of what limestone waters in Pennsylvania must have been like a century ago.

For more information, contact the Director of Public Information, Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, 284 State Street, Augusta, Maine 04330.



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