

Off the beaten path of most fishermen are those often-secret spots that hold exceptional fly-fishing

The Mini-Spring Creeks

TOM WENDELBURG

Sometimes narrower than a road, valley spring creeks meandering through pastoral, meadow countryside are often rich in trout. Some creeks traverse agricultural lands and edge crop fields and pastures. One such creek I fish has been found to sustain as many pounds of wild trout relative to area of habitat as any stream of its size in that state. A biologist told me it's among the most prolific of streams his department has studied over some decades. Many an idyllic, lightly regarded small water is actually a miniature version of the larger, more publicized spring creeks.

Among trout streams, the steadiness of a quality spring creek is unmatched. Trout feed extensively on insects and other foods that can be imitated with artificial flies. On almost any day of the open season—even if it's a year-round season—there's fishing for the fly caster who casts a light tippet and small flies.

The creeks rise from springs or from overflow of underground rivers at temperatures generally in the upper forties to mid-fifties and at a relatively constant flow. Highly productive creeks originate in alkaline substrata, and they may receive additional cool water and enrichment from adjoining springs.

One such spring upwells to form a bowl the size of a large room at the base of a sandstone outcropping. It lies hidden in the partial shade of a woods on one bank. Wild brown trout feed in the crystal waters. Smaller trout, including a three-pounder I once observed, leave the open and lurk in side pockets among the underwater jungle of crisp vegetation when the resident lunger begins circling the pool in a clockwise route. This hulk of a brown tips up now and then to an infinitesimal caddis, a midge or a little terrestrial. Once the brute delicately sipped my #20 Black Ant.

This spring pours in 2,700 gallons per minute of icy water a little way below the headwaters of the stream. Minerals leached from beneath the earth's surface and dissolved in the water are nutrients that fertilize the creek and burgeon the food chain.

In alkaline water, desirable mosses and weedbeds grow abundantly. Watercress, elodea, potamogetons, water buttercup and other in-stream plants sustain a

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Photo by Tom Wendelburg

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bountiful larder of insects. In addition to countless numbers of small nymphs and larvae, foods common to many creeks include freshwater shrimp, sow bugs and forage fish.

Cool water, stable conditions and plentiful and diverse foods all enhance steady growth of trout.

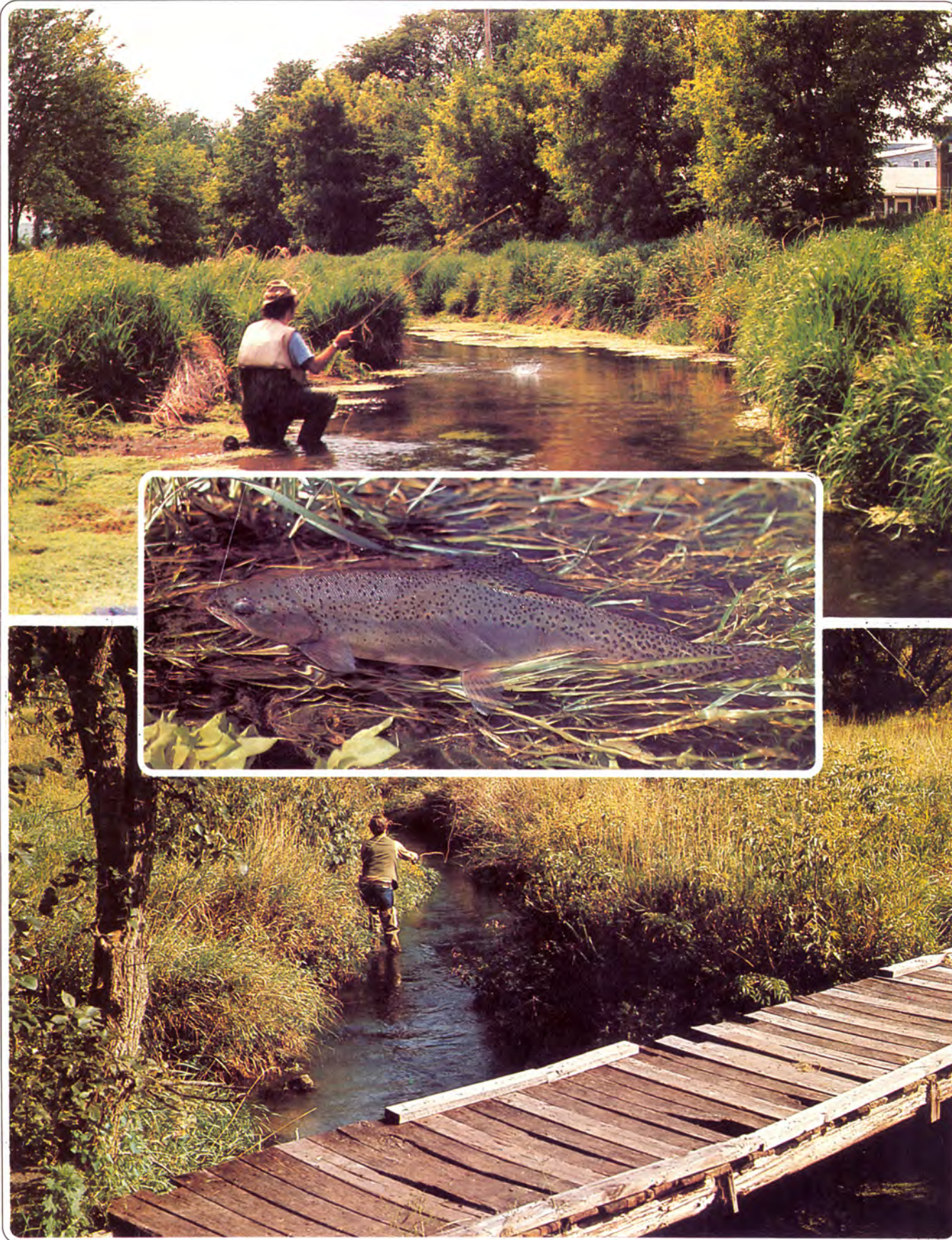
Numerous creeks are secluded and on private lands, and may be fished only after obtaining permission. On some creeks conservation departments and/or sportsman's organizations have obtained easements for public access and maintain management programs. On one classic spring creek, which is a major trout stream of the area although it seldom is wider than twenty feet, lands have been purchased along both banks. Nearly all of the creek is public fishing for perpetuity.

Insects may be on this stream at any season. In the cool waters that seldom vary many degrees during a day, a slight change in water temperature and weather can trigger aquatic-insect hatches. Mayflies are notably sensitive to this. On a spring day, while fishing to trout rising for small caddis, Hendricksons suddenly began to emerge, and larger trout started feeding, taking only emergers near the surface. A sunken imitation caught trout, although the mayflies only hatched for a brief half hour. It was the time of the season for Hendricksons to hatch; however, unexpected hatches have resulted in angling to remember. Such a hatch of small mayflies occurred on a creek where they usually appear in spring and again in the cooling weather of approaching autumn, almost always on overcast days. On this particular summery day as the dry air warmed to seventy-five degrees, sparse numbers of mayflies emerged from vegetation in swift, well-oxygenated shallows along a section of meadow creek.

Duns as large as #16, others as small as #24, free-floated while drying their wings onto placid waters where browns took them. Although the average



Photo by Dale Spartas



trout in the creek is ten inches, auburn-flanked wild fish of a pound and more were rising to feed.

My partner that day, Roy Swanson, a highly skilled nymph fisherman, even changed to a No-Hackle dry fly and caught beautifully colored, plump trout. Toward the end of the hatches a two-pounder syphoned under my floating emerger pattern without even ringing the surface, and I played the trout to hand on a 6X tippet.

The insects and visibly feeding trout keep spring-creek angling a continually interesting challenge.

During a late-summer morning, when the air temperature was in the nineties, I was fishing with long, hair-light tippets and midge pupae I had tied for trout dimpling bright, slow flat water. Afterward I broke for a cold drink from the cooler in the car along this roadside reach of a limestone.

My companion, Mark Arnst, was not to be seen in the meadow although he fished just upstream of the pool I had covered. I heard his call from somewhere along those narrows below the creek's main springs. I took a beer to him, but as I approached this long neck of the creek I saw a trout that looked like a large football swimming between banks fifteen feet apart. Then I noticed the glint of a taut tippet and Mark's fly-rod tip. He was hunkered down behind tall grasses, and when he lowered the small net and lifted, the trout filled the bag. A #16 beetle imitation was firmly hooked in its jaw.

In hot months terrestrial insects are abundant in the meadows, and a smorgasbord of these insects tumble or are wind-blown onto the water. Yet a perennial, such as an ant, may please the taste of a fastidious trout any time of year.

While many streams are lightly fished, and while on popular waters you may see but one other angler from

midsummer on, the traditional off-season months provide some of my favorite hours on creeks open to angling.

On mild days in late winter buddies and I have fished for trout rising to mayflies. The gist of post-angling talk usually goes something like this:

Partner: "I had never seen winter-hatching mayflies before the creeks were open in the cold months. We should keep these hatches secret!"

Me: "I've fished hatches of small mayflies in other regions, and they were unknown sometimes. We've fished the same hatches for some years in a row now on spring creeks, and they are as consistent as the weather."

During one late-winter thaw many streams were high, or muddied with cold, snowmelt waters, so I headed for a miniature limestone tributary. The sliver of clear water about as wide as the shoulder of a highway flows steadily, ankle- to occasionally thigh-deep.

My boots crunched along the snowy bank near the creek's mouth at the mainstream, and I waited a short time. Forty feet upstream a trout swam from beneath one of the logs lining the banks. Its fins rippled, I thought, as it spied a floating midge and tilted up to take the fly. A while later it sipped my #28 midge on a 7X tippet, and the feisty nine-incher tugging against the light rod broke my cabin fever.

As midges emerged more trout fed on top. I took a couple of hours to fish up the entire 800-foot length of this tiny feeder creek in the quietude of a valley white with snow. At its source, water in the upper forties tumbled from a fissure in an outcropping.

Spring creek trout, like the inveterate fly fisher, know no season.



Photo at top by Roy Swanson; inset photo of brown trout and photo at bottom by Tom Wendelburg.

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