

The Seasonable Angler

Illustration by John Pimlott

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Contributing Editor

Still Waters on the Brain

I USED TO FIND IT UNHINGING when Arnold Gingrich called me, before I'd had black coffee in the morning, to report on some horse of a trout he'd caught two hours earlier in one of the Joe Jefferson Club ponds. He enjoyed those ponds immensely. He took big fish from them. And he never showed the slightest desire or need to apologize that these were stocked fish from private ponds. Often he'd call in the off-season, when I was fishing not at all, when I'd perhaps been dreaming madly of quick waters and rising trout. Some people dream of Glenda Jackson; I dream of trout. I would protect myself from excessive envy by telling myself that Arnold could not really

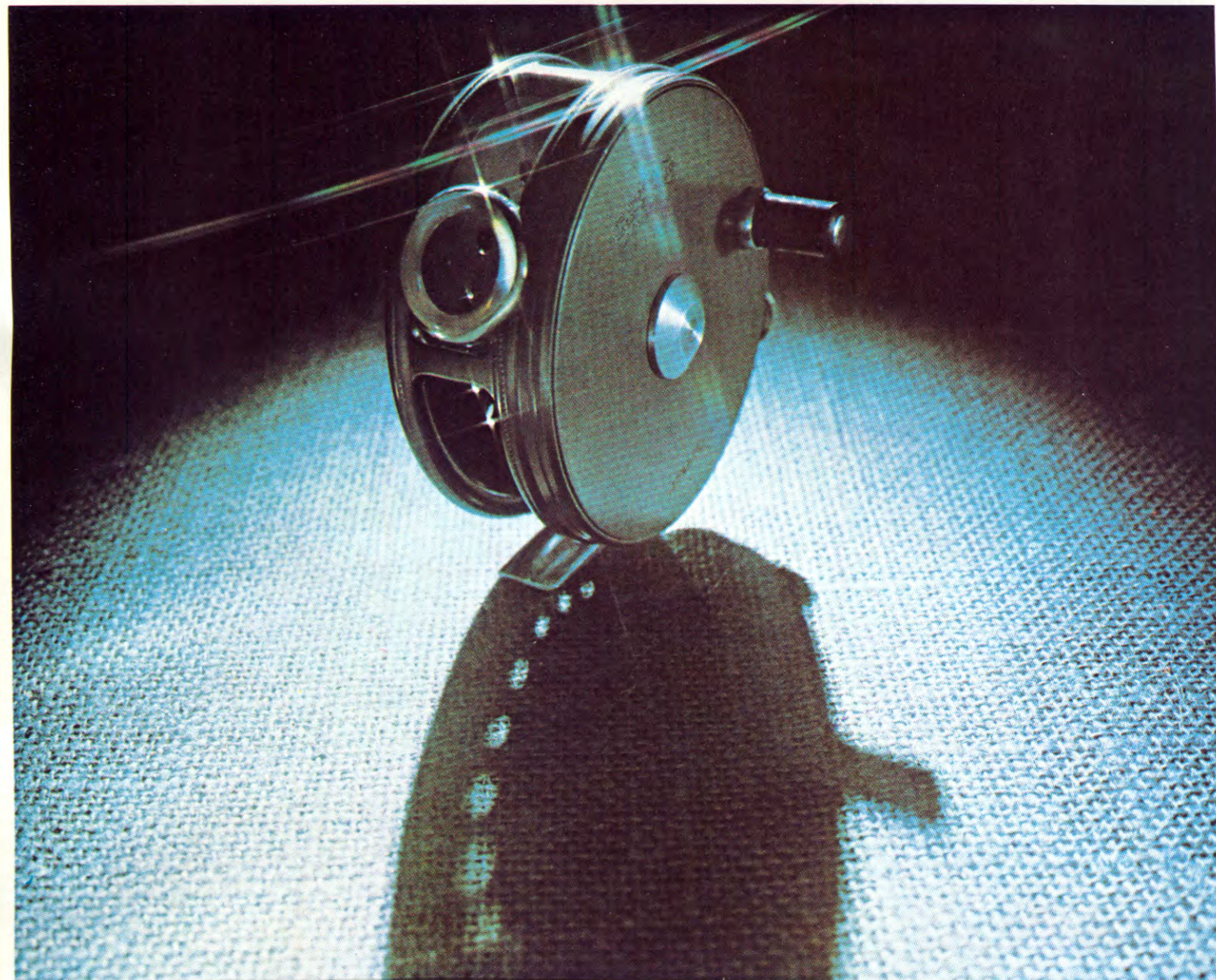
pounds; and a small spring pond, filled with spooky cutthroats, had once saved an expensive trip I had taken out West, when the rivers were all high and discolored with snow runoff. But the allure, I suspected, was not so much for lake fishing as for the big fish. The big-fish syndrome can be devastating, indeed. Moving water was chiefly what I loved. That was mostly why I fished anyway—drawn by the lure of bright rivers.

THEN RECENTLY, TIMOTHY BENN, the fine British publisher—and an avid fly fisher himself—sent me a copy of *Stillwater Trout Fisheries*, edited by H. F. Wallis. At first I thought: it is the end of a magnificent three-hundred-year tradition. Walton, that generous scoundrel, might not turn over, but Halford and Skues would surely cringe. And I knew a dozen American purists who would rather eat worms than fish in a pond.

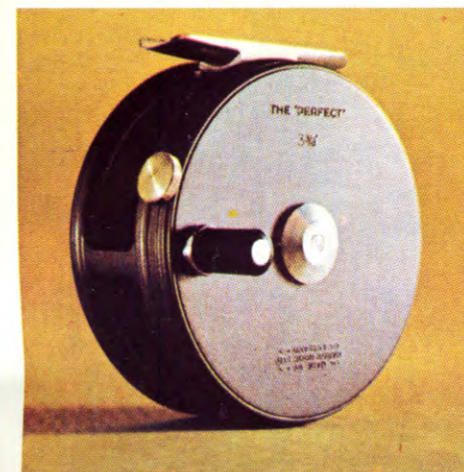
But as I read on, I began to get still waters on the brain. Though the book is chiefly a guide to reservoir and lake fishing in England and Wales, it has special chapters by the likes of Brian Clarke (on nymph fishing), Dick Walker (on big fish from small waters), Conrad Voss-Bark (on the dry fly), and Dermot Wilson (on tackle). Why would Wilson, I wondered, who controls prime water on the fabled Test and Itchen, even bother with still-water fishing? Why would *anyone* who could fish the chalkstreams of England—or fine rivers anywhere?

One reason, which I have no trouble understanding, is big fish. A fertile body of still water will produce more big fish—and quicker—than all but a few rivers like the Chimehuin in Argentina, which happens to be helped by little pressure and that remarkable crustacean, the pancora crab. There is hardly a river in the eastern United States—and increasingly few in other sections of the country—where three- and four-pound trout are not exceptional today. But many of the 300-odd lakes and reservoirs in England produce fish of this size regularly. Surely many of them come to big streamers, race-horsed through the water from mammoth fly rods; but many are

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be having as much fun as he claimed: how could he, fishing in ponds? But his voice, his enthusiasm, belied my doubts.

Not that I did not understand the lure of still water. Wasn't I ludicrously hooked on one Western lake, where every time you cast your big old ugly Leech there was the chance (though slimmer lately) of taking a trout over ten

also taken by highly sophisticated methods. Grafham Water produced more than 35,000 trout last year averaging over two pounds and including an eleven-pound brown and a nine-pound rainbow—on flies. Eye Brook Reservoir yielded more than 20,000 trout averaging better than a pound—and has produced ten-pound brown trout. Blagdon Lake has browns averaging nearly two pounds, and rainbows over two pounds. And so it goes. Even the names of such places sound trouty, as if they might someday become as hallowed as the legendary trout rivers.

Anyone who thinks still-water trout are necessarily easy to take on a fly need only read Brian Clarke on nymph fishing or Conrad Voss-Bark on the use of the dry fly in lakes. It is a subtle, demanding form of fly-fishing. If entomology is one of the chief fascinations of trout fishing—as I take it to be—still water certainly provides sufficient variety and challenge. Not only may a body of water contain mayflies, caddisflies, damselflies, and other aquatic insects, but also baitfish, snails, shrimp, crayfish, frogs, leeches, and landborn insects, which trout love, take selectively, and which provide challenge to the tier as well as the fisherman.

Clarke, in his own brilliant book, *The Pursuit of Stillwater Trout*, shows quite how sophisticated one must be—with midge pupae, hatching sedge pupae, olive dun imitations, and a careful, measured approach—to catch still-water trout consistently. Some fish take a fly so delicately

on the surface that Clarke's ghillie swears they are "drowning it by pulling it down by its legs." And Clarke told me recently that he must often use a thirty-foot leader, tapered to 5x.

Which is fishing fine.

THERE IS ANOTHER REASON why this fishing has grown in popularity in England and why I have begun to dream of such a fishery starting here: the amount of choice river water is shrinking drastically—you can create a lake but not a river—and can only shrink more. (Only a month ago, I got wind of a plan for a pumped-storage facility that would inundate the Schoharie and turn the Esopus into a drainage ditch! Will it ever end?) There are also far more people fly-fishing now and the rivers are more readily accessible than ever before. Trout that once had to be sought with the greatest effort and imagination are now more vulnerable because of better highways, more public campsites, and the proliferation of floating. The fish have less sanctuary, and all anglers have less of what most of us seek as much as trout: wilderness and solitude. And what trout there are, are smaller.

Two essential gestures to protect this shrinking fishery are the far better protection and husbanding of what flowing water there is, and, quite as important, the protection of the fish themselves by limiting the kill, particularly of large fish. Less stocking and a better plan for developing wild-trout fisheries are also needed.

Still-water fishing might be another solution.

IN ENGLAND, where there are four times as many fly fishermen today than there were in the 1930's, it is estimated



that still waters have provided sport for a quarter-of-a-million fishermen. The result is twofold: not only do many fishermen now have an opportunity to try a new brand of fly-fishing—one that is uniquely demanding and that often yields larger fish—but while they are doing so, they are performing the noble service of siphoning some of the pressure from rivers. Lakes, which are contained, can be protected and controlled more easily—and in England, within a half-hour's drive from many major cities, there are some fine ones; streams so close to large population centers cannot bear such pressure. I am not against an evening or two of fishing a half-hour from the city, are you?

Sparse Grey Hackle was once asked by a radio commentator how he would advise someone who wanted to start trout fishing. Rather slyly, I thought at the time, he said: "Tell them to fish for bass." Not that this was a lesser sport—for Sparse admires bass as much as I do—but the rivers can't bear much more pressure, and we all

know this. Trout lakes and ponds—some public, some (like those in England) for a fee (though *not* of the hatchery bathtub brand we now have)—might be a viable solution, or part of one. Even stocked trout have a better chance to survive, grow to trophy size, and provide excellent sport if put into lakes rather than streams, where wild-trout management is clearly superior.

Tim Benn took one look at the Ashokan Reservoir, two hours from New York City, and said: "Properly managed, that water could provide quality trout fishing for *everyone* who now fishes the Catskill rivers." Add the Pepacton and thousands of other lakes and reservoirs across the country—which are now only marginal fly-fishing waters for trout—and you have some sense of how much new water and fine fishing this would provide.

Frankly, I'd be one of the first to try them—especially since I'm not allergic to big and selective trout. Not one bit.

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