

Tailwater Tactics

Like them or not, dams have created some of our finest trout fisheries. Here are the ways to enjoy tailwater trout.

DAVE WHITLOCK

TO FISH A TYPICAL TAILWATER trout river, first find a rock that protrudes a few inches above the water, upstream of your intended wading position. Place a \$50 bill on it. Fish until your \$50 comes floating by, stop fishing, grab the money and head for the shore *fast!* That is the golden rule of most experienced tailwater river fishers who wade for long and happy lives.

Most tailwater trout rivers, particularly those in cool and warm areas offer you a wide choice of stream types and conditions—large and small, high and low water—almost any day during the year.

Tailwater trout rivers are man-made streams distinct from natural spring and freestone streams. But like natural streams, tailwater rivers exhibit individuality and almost unlimited challenges if you learn a set of tactics necessary to fish them successfully. My first experiences with them some 30 years ago caused me so much frustration I actually disliked fishing them! But that is no longer the case. After much hard-earned experience I understand the streams and how trout adapt to the unnatural tailwater environment. A tailwater trout river often resembles three or four different rivers over a 24-hour or week-long period because of regulated flows from their dams.

After learning how rich, productive, variable and challenging these rivers are I chose to live on two of them instead of a freestone or spring river. Our home overlooks the junction of the White and Norfolk tailwaters on Arkansas. These two rivers, like most tailwaters, have very rich fisheries with long fishing seasons. And more often than not the fishing is better or prime in the late fall, winter and early spring when other natural trout streams are frozen over or too cold, high and turbid for good fly fishing.

This reversal of prime-water seasons is caused by the dams and their lakes that provide a vertical column of standing water commonly 150 to 400 feet deep. A septic filter effect enriches the water with dissolved minerals and organic material while blocking silt and sediment. The lake water stratifies into distinct and stable temperature zones. Most tailwater releases are through sluice tubes or turbines that draw well below the surface from the oxygen-enriched thermocline, thus pouring forth cold water in warm weather and warm water in cold weather. The enriched water provides nearly year-around growth for trout! Three-quarters to 1¼-inch-per-month growth rates are common.

DAVE WHITLOCK, author, artist and angling instructor, most recently published the *L.L. Bean Fly Fishing Handbook* and *Dave Whitlock's Guide to Aquatic Trout Foods*.

Types of Tailwaters

THERE ARE TWO TYPES of tailwaters: a cold-lake tailwater and a cool- or warm-lake tailwater. Cold-lake tailwaters usually are found at northern latitudes or high altitudes. Cool- or warm-lake tailwaters are usually formed by damming cool or warm rivers more common in lower central, southwestern and southeastern states. Cold-lake tailwaters are commonly built for water storage purposes and though very rich they are not as dramatically different as the cool- and warm-water tailwater streams that experience extreme water level changes daily as power demands fluctuate.

The water level in my rivers may vary from an average of 18 inches deep at minimum flow to two, six or 12 feet daily. Below many dams a water-rise warning horn or siren is sounded to warn anglers but it cannot be heard more than a mile downstream. That is why we use the \$50 dollar bill as a warning system! In one hour's time either river can rise three to six feet.

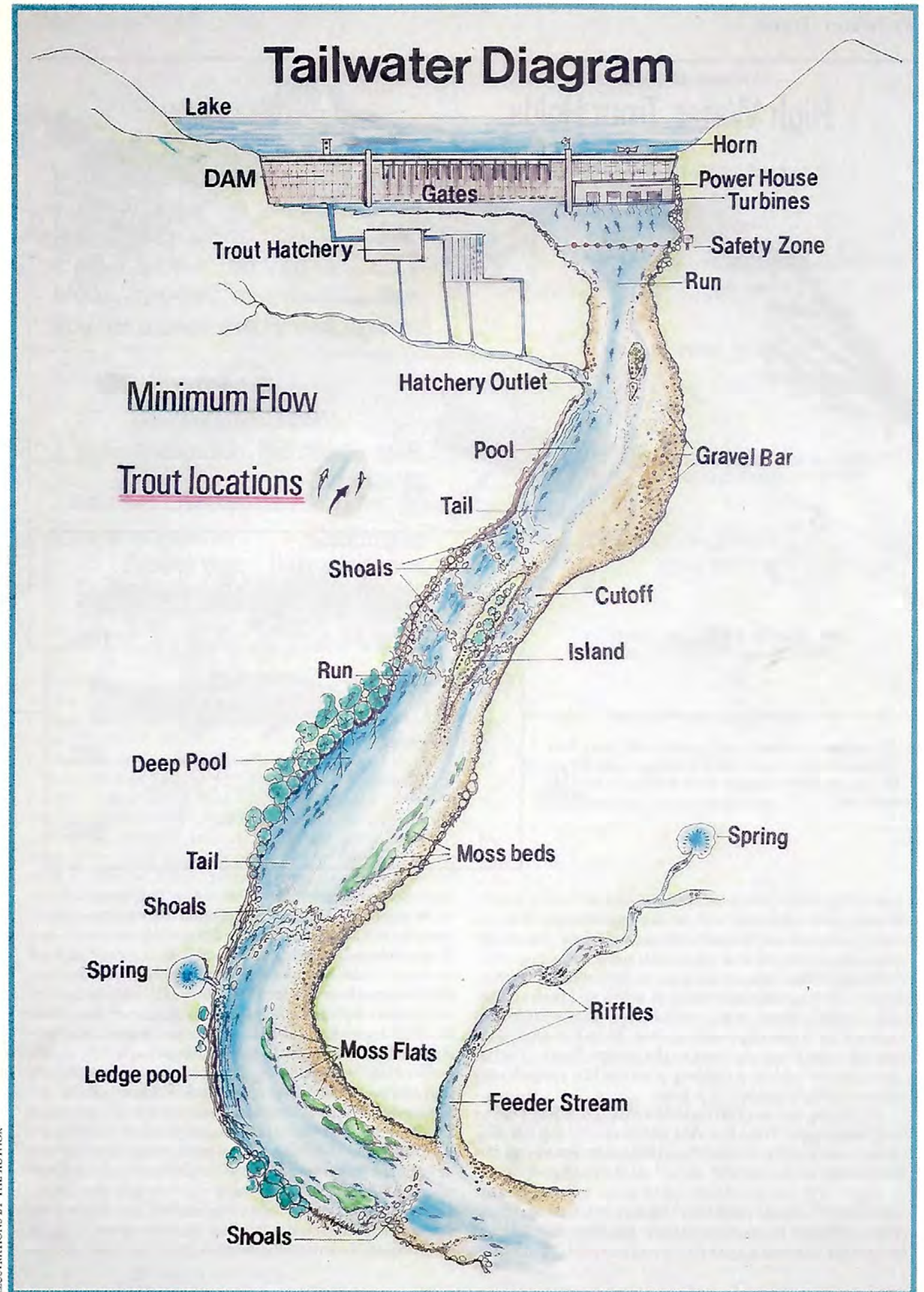
These "tides" may be seasonal, monthly, weekly or daily and trout quickly learn to live with and use them to their advantage, much as saltwater fish do with ocean tides. Such changes actually serve as feeding stimuli, for as the water changes it displaces and moves natural aquatic and terrestrial foods. Low tide concentrates fish and food; rising or falling water moves them back and forth. High water scatters and relocates them. There are predictable feeding locations on each phase of the tailwater tide, some of which may surprise even the most experienced freestone or spring-creek fishermen. Successful tailwater anglers master light and heavy tackle; dry, wet, nymph and streamer techniques, and wading and boating approaches.

Water Level Tactics

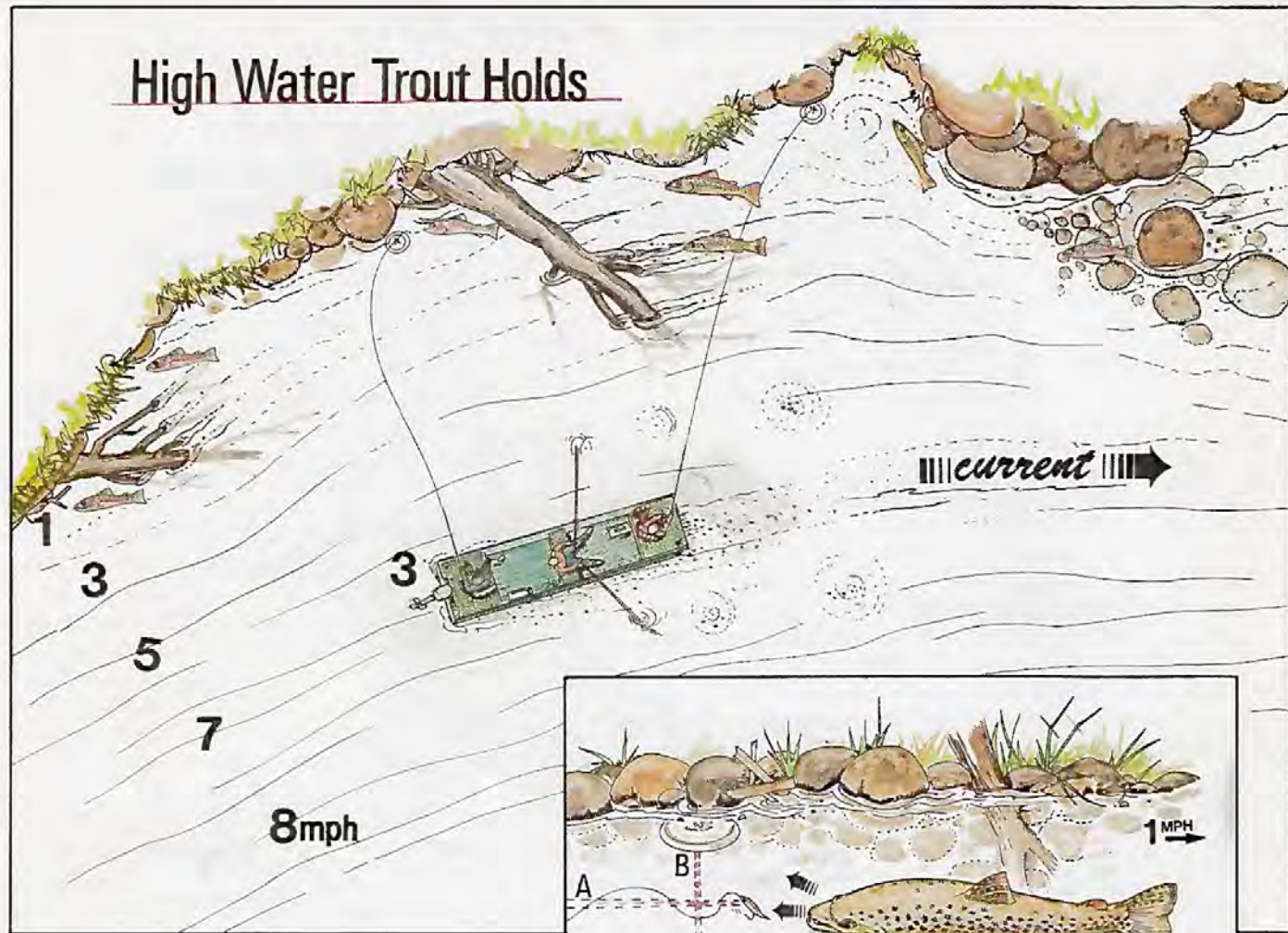
WATER LEVELS ARE GOVERNED by releases and usually follow a daily, weekly, monthly or seasonal schedule. Local dam authorities or tackle/guide services know these. NEVER begin fishing a tailwater without competent advice or a guide regardless of the river's safe appearance. Water fluctuations can drastically change, jeopardizing your safety, equipment, success and pleasure.

Low Tides: Most minimum dam releases are very low and slow. They usually occur on weekends, holidays and from late evening until around 8 A.M. on weekdays.

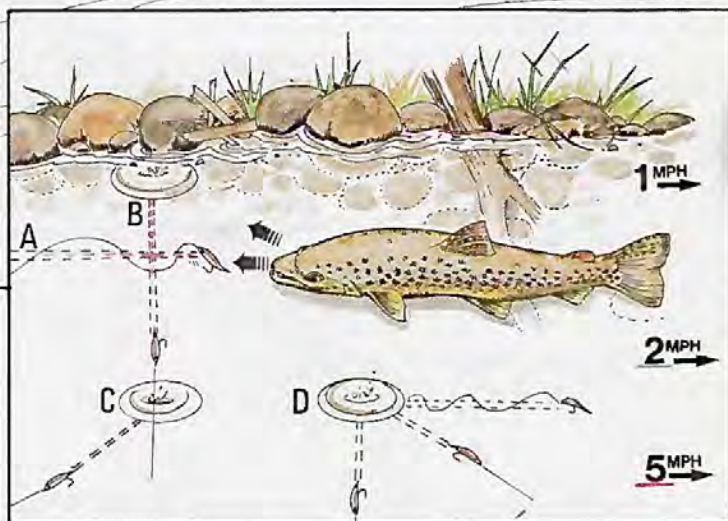
The stream resembles a freestone or spring river with riffles, runs, pools, and tails well defined. Wading or shallow boats are best. Trout will be concentrated in deep riffles, pockets, and runs, around moss beds and the deepest chan-



ILLUSTRATIONS BY THE AUTHOR



At high tide, tailwater trout move to lies away from the fast current. Casting must be precise—the fish are looking for food coming to them head-on or from the bank side.



AUTHOR'S ILLUSTRATIONS

nels of the pools. Small flies (#8 to #20) and 3- to 6-weight floating lines, generally will be most productive. Even on larger tailwaters, at low tide use the technique you would on spring creeks or small freestone streams.

Rising Tides: Trout sense a water rise before you see or feel it. They quickly become more active and feed on low-tide foods for about 30 minutes or until water really begins to flood their low-tide holding spots. Switch to large sinking flies or sinking-tip lines as the stream floods. Do not continue to hold your wading position but immediately retreat to high ground or a boat.

Fly fishing becomes very spotty as water continues to rise and trout scatter from low-tide lies to areas along flooding banks and flooding shoals. Increasing water speed and turbidity seems to temporarily curtail trout feeding.

High Tide—Stable Level: Once water releases become more or less constant and river channels reach stable levels, fishing begins to improve. Many dams release water in graduated steps for angler safety and to avoid channel ero-

sion. So stabilization can take one to four hours.

At high tide hold on the deepest channel bottoms or move to feed next to submerged shoreline structures, over flats or behind islands. Foods now will be crippled shad, minnows, and flooded terrestrial insects, worms, etc. Medium and heavy tackle, 6- to 10-weight sinking-tips and full sinkers are best to reach fish in the heavy flow. Drift float-fishing and casting to shorelines or across channels produce well. Wading usually is very dangerous or impossible!

Once high tide stabilizes for a couple of hours, floating and fishing to the banks and islands becomes productive. Streamers, Woolly Worms, and nymphs are effective if you put them right on the bank sides and get them down quick! Casting two or three feet off the bank misses about 90 percent of the larger and more willing trout. I use weighted snagless flies with a fast-sinking tip or a split-shot on the leader. I try to keep the boat floating half the river's speed for best coverage of the holding pockets under, in front, and behind the various bank structures—boulders, ledges,

***Low-Tide Flyfishing (24 hour period)**

| Time table: | Area |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|
| 12:00 PM - 7:00 AM | Dam.....downstream 10 miles |
| 7:00 AM - 11:00 AM | 12.....15 miles downstream |
| 11:00 AM - 4:00 PM | 20.....30 miles downstream |
| 4:00 PM - 8:00 PM | 30....40 miles downstream |
| 6:00 PM - 12:00 PM |Directly below Dam |

*Low-Tide is usually ideal for wade flyfishing

Tailwater Classification

A. Water storage for: Hydroelectric power & Flood control

Example Bullsheads on White River Ark.

B. Water storage for: Crop irrigation

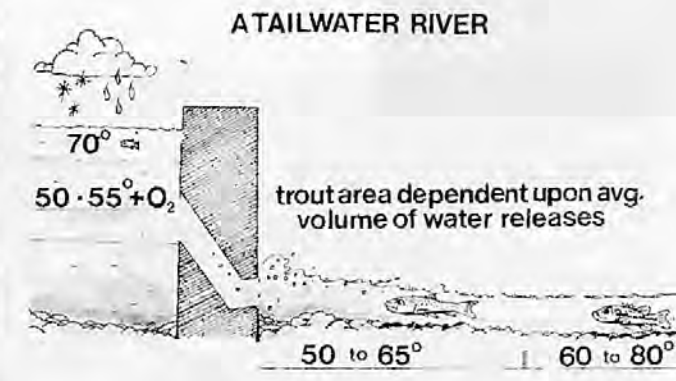
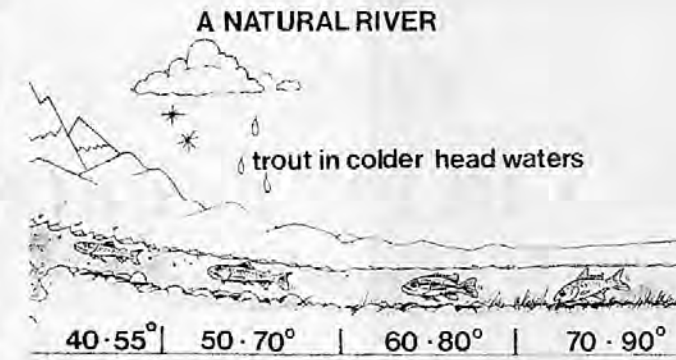
Drinking water, Hydroelectric power. Example Canyon Ferry on Beaverhead Mont.

pockets, tree roots, undercuts, and logs. If the trout does not see the fly with its bank-side eye first it will not eat the fly! Use snagless flies and tight-loop side-arm casts to consistently put the fly under the overhangs and against the banks. You will be well rewarded!

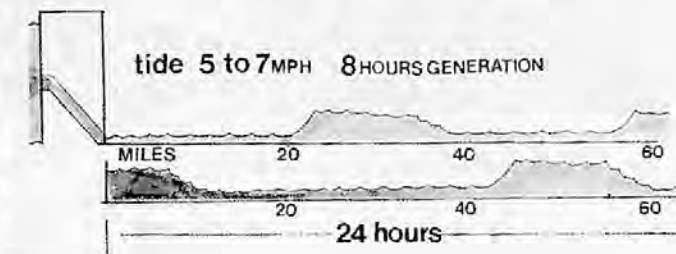
I use a 16-foot Jonboat with wide beam and shallow draft for this type tailwater float fishing. Mine has a stern and bow casting deck and middle seat for rowing. I use oars to control the boat and an outboard to run up or down the river. If we locate a good bank or move a big fish I motor back upstream. Some tailwaters have boating or motor restrictions so ask or check the book before you launch. Anchoring or chain dragging except on falling tides or low tide is *extremely dangerous*. If you have to hold your boat in place during high tide do so with an outboard motor or by tying the bow to an object above the water.

Dropping Tide From High to Low: As releases are reduced at the dam the water, begins to slow and fall. Initially trout stop feeding and begin to move away from banks, islands and shallow shoals or bars. As the water level falls the last 18 inches to dead low tide, trout that have returned to low-tide holding areas feed aggressively on naturals of all sizes. I drop fly sizes from #1/0 and #2 to #6 or #8 flies on a floating line as the water drops the final foot. Floating and wading, casting to the main channel, is by far the best method when possible on dropping low tide water.

Jumping the Low Tide: If you are like me and most other tailwater fly fishers, you prefer falling and low tides best. If you fish a specific area near the dam that may mean only two hours at daylight. But you *can* move downstream in



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your car or a fast boat and fish lows a much longer period. Most rising tides move downriver at two to six m.p.h., so by driving 10 miles or so downstream you can jump prime lows and early rising tides as far as the trout range downstream. It is an exciting method. In the case of the White River (about 60 miles of prime trout habitat) you can go from daylight to sunset on low tide by making three or four jumps downstream. On my other tailwater river, the Norfolk (four miles long), I can make only one jump after they turn on the water.

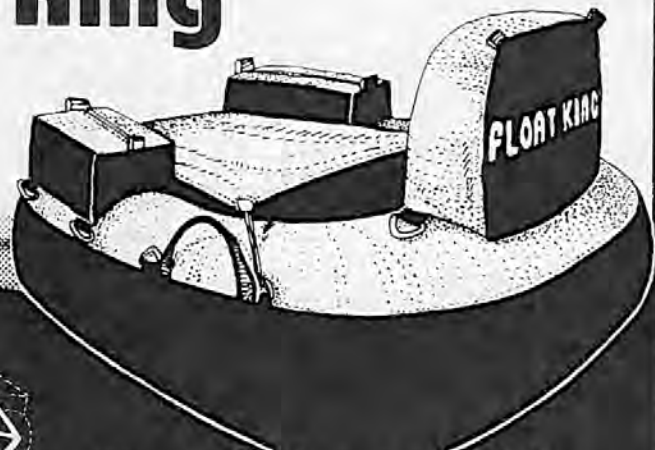
Tailwater Foods and Flies

TAILWATER TROUT FOODS vary little from most important freestone and spring rivers, but because of unnatural and varying water levels and more constant temperatures, the trout's reaction to them is different.

Forage Fish: Dace, shiners, sculpins, chubs, stocked trout, sticklebacks, trout fry, shad, alewife, smelt and yellow perch

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Tailwater Trout . . .

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are the most common tailwater forage fish for trout. Sculpin, darter and dace imitations are my most consistent streamer patterns. The Whitlock Matuka Sculpin in olive, golden brown, and dark olive brown; Matuka Black-nosed Dace and Chub, and white Marabou Muddler in #1/0 and #2 work beautifully. High and falling tides make the best streamer fishing. Use larger sizes for higher waters.

Many warm- and cool-lake tailwaters receive incredible amounts of crippled shad, smelt and alewife in the winter and spring when large amounts of water are released, sucking these fish through dam generators and sluices. Then such streamer flies as the Threadfin Shad, white or grey Marabou Muddlers, Prismatic Shad, Silver Spruce, Black and Grey Ghosts are deadly. Fish them with slow, erratic drifting twitches to simulate distress.

Crustacea: Crustacea are equally important and abundant in one or more forms in every fine tailwater I have ever fished. Scuds, sowbugs and crayfish are the big three crustaceans in tailwaters. Fish their imitations on all water stages but keep them on *bottom* drifting downstream or very slowly twitched down and across. Fish a weighted softshell crayfish imitation on a sinkrip at all tide conditions during late spring, summer, and early fall. Big trout, 15 inches and over, like crayfish as much or more than sculpins.

Cast weighted scuds or sowbugs up and across stream on a floating line and long leader, just as you would fish a nymph on a falling low or low tide. At low falling or low tides, scuds and sowbugs are most concentrated just off the banks. Trout work hard on them daily at the edges of riffles and runs or in the moss beds along the sides of pools. You can often see trout "tailing" the beds for scuds and sowbugs, especially during long low tide periods. Bone-fishing-flat techniques work well with a slow, sinking snagless scud or Gold-Ribbed Hare's Ear. Put the scud well ahead of the tailing trout and move it as the trout comes near it. Seeing a fine tailer tip his nose and take your scud then race wildly for deep water is a fantastic experience.

Aquatic Insects: Aquatic insects that flourish in most high-fluctuation tailwaters seem to be small and mobile. Size #16 to #22 caddis, midges and mayflies are the most consistently available. Dobson flies, stoneflies, crane flies, dragonflies, damselflies, and water beetles are more occasional than important forage. I fish few tailwaters expecting great hatches. There are some, even on the less typical tailwaters such as Henry's Fork, Delaware and Missouri rivers but these tailwaters do not experience great fluctuations daily or weekly. I have never perfected the knack of predicting hatches on the White River and Norfolk River as they never seem to fit a water-level pattern.

Low-tide periods are generally best for matching the average small (#14 to #18) aquatic insects. I have had more consistent

luck finding good fall and winter hatches but water fluctuation and temperatures have a lot to do with this. On my tailwater rivers we have decent fall micro-caddis, midge and *Baetis* hatches. The flies are #18 to #22.

Curiously, I catch the majority of large tailwater trout on weighted nymphs such as Grey Nymphs #4 to #16, Dark Stone nymphs #2 to #6, and Tellicos #10 to #14. All these may suggest insects and crustacea. Woolly Worms, and Woolly Buggers on high and falling tides are fine flies.

Terrestrial Insects: In warm weather, and when the water rises, tailwaters have the hordes of terrestrial insects any normal river would. Ants, beetles, spiders, earthworms, caterpillars, bees, slugs, crickets, and hoppers that daily occupy flood plains are sure trout fare.

High-tide water which discourages surface feeding also quickly sinks most of these semi-buoyant foods, so little surface feeding occurs on floating terrestrials. I have had my best terrestrial fishing on wet versions of ants, hoppers and on Woolly Worms on moderate high tides. Low tides can offer superb summer and fall surface film fishing with ants, beetles, hoppers, bee or hornet floaters for very large fish. In most high-fluctuation tailwaters I think trout see more of these bugs than hatching aquatic insects thus explaining their more consistent effectiveness.

Many warm- and cool-lake tailwaters and a lot of cold-lake tailwaters are heavily stocked with trout, especially rainbow, sometimes browns, and more rarely cutthroat and brookies. These "man-made" fish are bred like frying chickens to eat a lot and grow quickly in the hatcheries' concrete raceways, so most tailwater trout are gullible gluttons, at least in their first months of freedom. Food-rich tailwaters serve them with every tide change. Their engineered genetics and hatchery environments often have them eating first and asking if it is good after swallowing.

Natural reproduction and Whitlock-Vibert Boxes provide more stream-wise fish but overall man-made tailwater trout rivers provide easy and productive fly fishing to anglers who take time to understand them.

Since I was old enough to know the difference between a stream and a lake I have opposed damming flowing water. I have watched with great sadness as most of Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Missouri rivers plus those of Montana, Wyoming, Colorado and Tennessee and North Carolina disappear above man-made dams. No states have escaped these steps of civilization, but I am still 100 percent against building one more dam across any free-flowing stream! But the lakes created do serve more of us than most of the doomed rivers. And many of their tailwaters have created some of the finest trout fisheries each of those states has—North and South. Cold-lake tailwaters such as Idaho's Snake and Henry's Fork; Montana's

Continued on page 72

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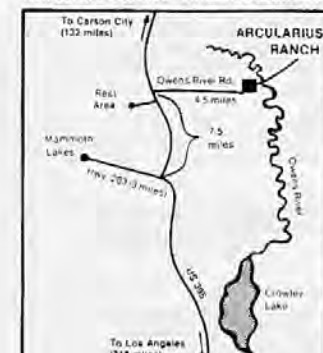
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Tailwater Trout . . .

Continued from page 65

Madison, Missouri, Beaverhead and Bighorn Rivers; Wyoming's Green River; Oregon's Deshutes River; New York and Pennsylvania's Delaware are outstanding examples. Warm- and cool-lake tailwaters of Tennessee and North Carolina's TVA lakes; Arkansas and Missouri's White River; Arizona's Colorado River and Oklahoma's Illinois River are the other fine examples of manmade trout rivers. Like it or not, they are here to stay. They do have a lot to offer the fly fisher who accepts them as a third major type of trout water. Why not give them a try?

Tailwater Guide

FOLLOWING is a partial list of tailwater trout fisheries below flood-control or hydroelectric dams. For more information about tailwaters in your vicinity, contact your state fisheries department or power company.

Tennessee: (in order of trout-fishing quality) Elk River below Tims Ford Dam, 35 miles of trout fishing; Hiwassee River below Appalachia Dam, 20 miles; Clinch River below Norris Dam, 12 miles; S. Fork Holston River below S. Holston Dam, 16 miles; Caney Fork River below Center Hill Dam, 25 miles; Obey River below Dale Hollow Dam, 6 miles; Watauga River below Wildbur Dam, 5 miles; Duck River below Normandy Dam, 5 miles, and S. Fork Holston below Ft. Patrick Henry Dam. Some of the dams are TVA and others are Corps of Engineers. However, the TVA action line usually has the generation schedules for all lakes. Fishermen need to call the day before their trip to get the most current water release schedules. Within Tennessee that number is 1-800-362-9250. From the states of Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina and Virginia call toll free 1-800-251-9242. From all other areas call TVA at 1-615-632-4100.

Virginia: Smith River below Philpott Reservoir (Virginia's best); The Pound River below Flanagan Reservoir (a limited fishery); Jackson River below Gaithright Dam (improving, could become Virginia's best).

Georgia: The Chattahoochee River (from Lake Lanier 50 miles to below Atlanta—Georgia's best).

Maryland: The Savage River below Savage Reservoir Dam (Maryland's best, primarily brookie water); Hunting Creek below Hunting Creek Dam; Seneca Creek (Dam under construction; could be excellent in four to five years).

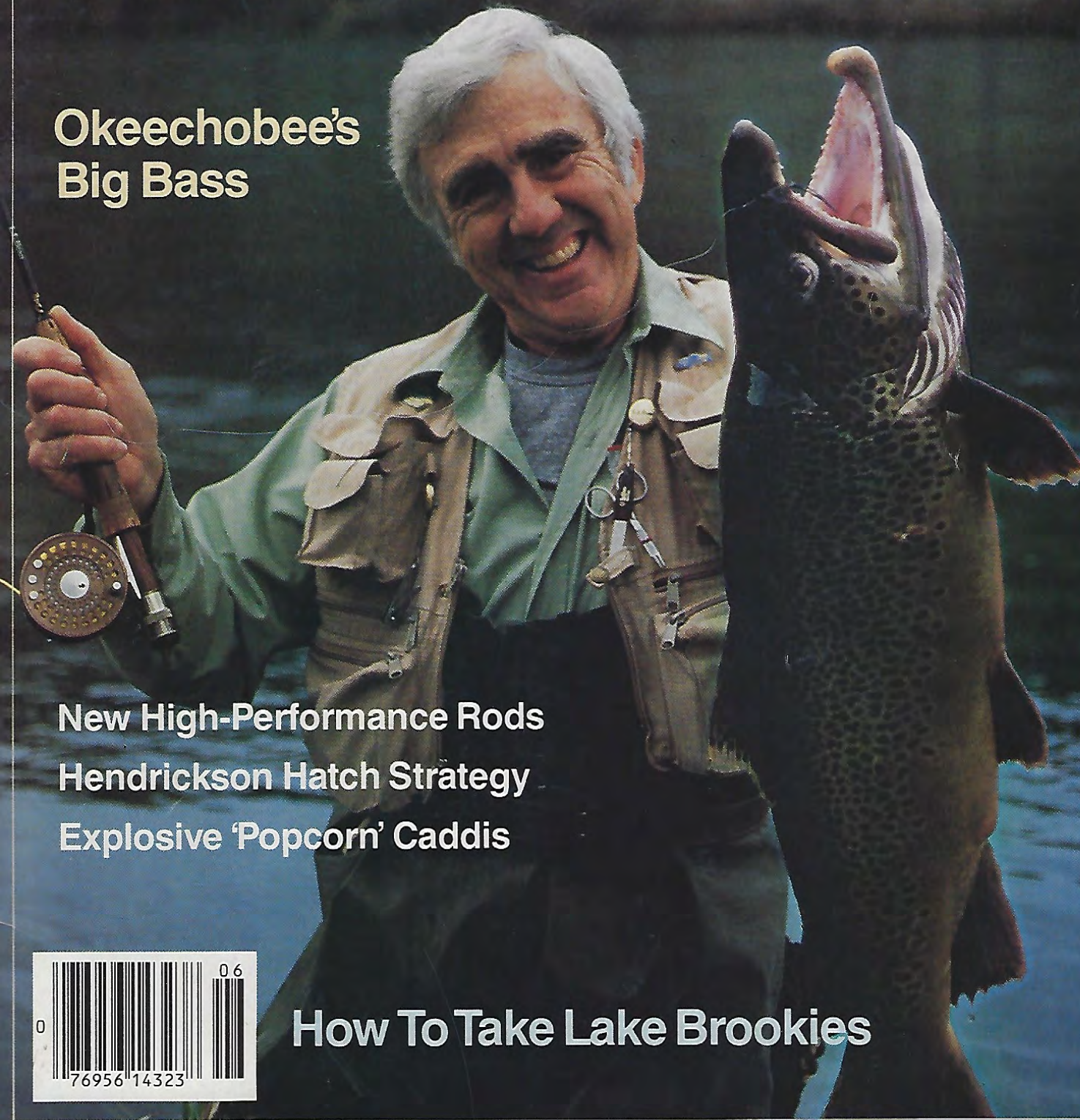
North Carolina: Cheoah Reservoir, below Fontana Dam, brookies and rainbow.

Tailwater Trout: Places and Tactics

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