

South on the Rise

Choosing Favorites

By Rob Fightmaster

A man should keep for himself a little back shop, all his own, quite unadulterated, in which he establishes his true freedom and chief place of seclusion and solitude.

- Michel de Montaigne

“So, what’s your favorite place to fish?” As a professional guide who gets to regularly interact with anglers of varying skill levels and backgrounds, probably the only question I hear more often is, “So, is that really your last name?” I have a few pre-recorded, witty responses to the second question, but the first question always prompts more of a production. Looking off in the distance, I pause and scratch my chin, deliberating carefully as I seem to reflect on the numerous destinations I’ve had the pleasure to fish over the years. I’m not sure if the hesitation is for their benefit or my own, since I’m usually only thinking about places I haven’t yet fished.

“Here,” I inevitably answer. The response is partly existential in that I’ve always believed that the best place you can be fishing is the place you’re fishing right now. But largely it’s because I am in love with the Smoky Mountains and it is, without a doubt, my favorite place to fish. If it wasn’t, I probably wouldn’t be here.

After all, it’s not as if I was born here. I’m not the guy who is stuck in a job he hates and living in a small town he could never figure out how to leave. When I finished school in Kentucky and decided that I’d rather be a fly fishing guide than make gobs of money, I had no wife, no kids, and no real obligations other than a German Shepherd who seemed ready to go anywhere. I chose this place. Or maybe it chose me.

It was more than twenty years ago at a fly shop in Lexington, KY where I received a simple bit of advice that, at the time, I had no way of knowing would ultimately set the course for the rest of my life. I’d wandered in there as usual, dressed as a fisherman and wearing my best poker face in an attempt to convince whomever might be working that they were being graced by the presence of a veteran angler. In actuality, I was as green as they come and would have been hard pressed to distinguish the difference between a Royal Coachman and a yellow popping bug.

My teeth had been cut on the smallmouth waters of Elkhorn and Stoner Creeks, but recently, I’d begun catching trout with some regularity at the Dix River tailwater, which, in my mind, was validation of my legitimacy as a fly fisherman. So on this particular visit to the shop, the conversation quickly turned to

trout. If the shop guru saw through my façade of expertise, he didn't show it, and he asked if I'd ever fished in the Smoky Mountains. Still keeping my cards close, I pretended to be very aware of that area's fishing but admitted that I'd never had the chance to get down there. Twenty dollars later, I'd left the store with a few flies and a guide book on fishing the Smoky Mountains.

The truth is I was familiar with the Smoky Mountains. Just three hours from my childhood home in Lexington, we made several trips down there when I was a kid, but I'd only been to Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge, the gaudy tourist driven towns on the border of Great Smoky Mountains National Park that provide such diverse forms of entertainment as putt-putt golf, go-karts, and water slides. Complimented by an array of pancake houses, shops with air brushed t-shirts, wax museums, and haunted mystery mansions, the once quiet mountain towns attract millions of people from the region, and they have become such popular destinations that they are synonymous with the national park for many people. And before that fateful evening at the fly shop, I was one of them.

After looking at the Smokies through a different lens, I began to realize that there was an entirely different world just beyond the bright lights and lingering aroma of funnel cakes. To be exact, it was an 800 square mile world of pure wilderness spread across eastern Tennessee and western North Carolina. Tumbling within those boundaries were over seven hundred miles of fishable trout streams, and not the stocked, there-today-gone-tomorrow streams to which I'd become accustomed. These were wild trout - the big time. In fact, Great Smoky Mountains National Park, with its native brook trout and a large population of rainbows and browns that have been taking care of themselves since Nixon was in office, could be described as somewhat of a wild trout sanctuary in the put-and-take minded South. I also found that there were quiet mountain towns like Townsend where I could avoid the chaos of Gatlinburg and it wasn't long before the Smokies guide book was overflowing with scribbled Post-its and the car frequently overflowing with fishing and camping gear, heading south.

The Smoky Mountain trout have a reputation for being tough to catch, and on the first several trips there, this Kentucky boy, more accustomed to working the long, slow runs of area tailwaters and bass streams, did nothing to refute that myth. It wasn't that I was catching few fish or small fish; I was catching no fish and really not even getting strikes. Even as I progressed and improved significantly as an angler, and was regarded by many as a very good fly fisherman, three-day trips to the Smokies would yield little more than four or five fish. Yet there was something magical and mysterious about the place that just kept seducing me back, and when I'd daydream about fishing, which was often, my mind wasn't picturing the big browns of the Cumberland River, but the mist enveloped forests and roar of cascading water in the Smoky Mountains.

Certainly that goes against any instinct that an avid fly fisherman should have. Most want big fish and a lot of them, and for many, the lure of large trout, ample casting room, and relatively easy access offered by the large tailwaters is too much to resist. But I ceased to be motivated by such things long ago and yearned for quiet and solitude. Even now, when catching a dozen trout constitutes a fairly slow day for me in the Smokies, I don't find that I enjoy these mountains and streams any more or any less than when I'd have given anything for just a dozen strikes over a long weekend. Perhaps it's the ambiguity of this place that is the real appeal.

Or maybe it's the solitude. Even on the busiest holiday weekend in the Smoky Mountains, when traffic on park roads is cluttered to a stand-still and tourists seem to be multiplying right before your eyes, if you're willing to walk a few miles up a trail, you can always find countless miles of trout water without a soul in sight. The backcountry is my sanctuary. Far removed from any signs of civilization, it possesses a wildness that I need, that I crave. There's something poetic about cell phones losing signal as soon as you cross the park boundary, and whether we realize it or not, we should all probably spend more time in places like that. But wildness and remoteness isn't exclusive to the Smoky Mountains. What about Montana or Alaska?

That's the toughest one to explain. In fact, when deciding where to relocate those many years ago, I had it narrowed down to Missoula, Montana and Townsend, Tennessee. At the time, I justified the decision with carefully considered factors like a longer fishing season in Tennessee, but that wasn't the reason. Though I didn't understand it then, the Smoky Mountains had already become a part of me and I merely made a decision to go home. Just like I knew within two weeks of meeting Christi that I wanted to marry her, some things have a way of fitting or just making sense, and you don't have to know why.

So I answer the question as I always do, "Here. Here is my favorite place to fish."

The typical request for clarification follows, "So, you think the Smokies has the BEST fishing? Have you been out west!?"

There isn't a scoreboard in fly fishing, at least not an official one, so, while some places claim to have it, I'm not sure how we determine the best fishing destination. Is it the place with the most fish? Is it the place with the biggest fish? Can they be stocked and fed or do they need to be wild? Is scenery a factor? What about hatches? What if it's crowded? What if they don't eat dry flies? What if there are a lot of huge fish and great hatches but they're really hard to catch? What if the fish are too easy to catch?

One of the beautiful things about fly fishing is that it satisfies different needs for different people, and what draws one person to a particular destination or aspect of the sport may not appeal at all to another. Just bring up the subject of carp fishing in a room of fly fishers and you'll quickly see what I mean.

And even if we are able to determine what the best is, why should it even matter? Months after we had to put my fifteen year old German Shepherd down, we were finally ready for another dog. We went to the shelter with only three things on our list of criteria. We wanted a female. We didn't want a large dog, maybe more of a mid-size. And we didn't want a Lab. That evening we came home with Shadow: a peculiar, stubborn, mischievous, 90-pound, male black Lab who, we're convinced, used Jedi mind tricks to win us over. Shadow wasn't even close to being the best dog at Young-Williams Animal Center. But he was our favorite.

Rather than getting caught up in what is "the best," with fly fishing or anything in life, you have to figure out what brings you happiness and contentment. And sometimes, if you're lucky, that thing or that place finds you.

