

# South on the Rise

## Homemade Brookies

By Rob Fightmaster

These are hardly the idealized fly fishing journeys that most anglers conjure in their minds in those last few moments before sleep takes hold. It's not the casual, early morning stroll through a dewy meadow to the spacious pool in a lazily meandering river where 20-inch trout routinely clock in for their daily shift of methodically sipping delicate mayflies. In fact, unless you are one of a few passionate, dedicated, and perhaps slightly mentally unbalanced backcountry anglers, you might consider these journeys way too much like work.

This kind of trip involves laborious long miles up steep, narrow, rocky, root-infused trails with the necessities for the day transported on your back. The destination sometimes has a name but just as often is simply a mysterious, blue squiggly line on a map. And once the destination has been reached, the journey has really only begun. Since such small, rhododendron choked Appalachian streams may only yield a few trout per pool or pocket, to catch fish here you need to cover water. You need to keep moving up the stream. But this isn't the large watershed two thousand feet below where a well maintained trail shadows every bend. It will be another mile and a half before the trail meets this stretch of stream again. From here, travelling the streambed is the only option, fishing as you go and being diligent with your pace to ensure you reach the takeout point before dark. With vertical banks coated in impenetrable tangles of undergrowth, exiting the stream beforehand is not a possibility.

Navigating up the bed presents its own set of challenges as the stream forces its way down a staircase of ancient boulders, persistently attempting to carve away at the earth's multi-billion-year-old foundation. Through its course over, under, between, and around these timeless obstacles, countless small pockets, seams, and pools are formed. These are the places where water hesitates, as if taking a much needed rest from its perpetual quest to reach and become the sea. And in every hesitation of water, native brook trout exist and thrive, surviving in the stream's periodic moments of weakness.

With full intent to exploit these weaknesses, you enter the stream and prepare to fish the first run, a little shoot that slices between two desk size boulders. Canopy is heavy above and to the right so you cast off your left shoulder, placing the fly perfectly on the upper left edge of the current. The fly casually drifts for mere seconds before vanishing in a sucking gulp, not the showy splash to which you've become accustomed on this type of water. This is a good fish, you think to yourself, as you watch the bent rod pulse with every desperate evasive maneuver attempted by the trout. Quickly tiring the fish, you raise your rod and grasp the line, now getting a close up confirmation that this is indeed a nice trout.

First wetting your hand, you reach out and gently cup the trout, admiring the vivid array of colors exploding from its body. An intense burnt orange consumes the trout's belly and continues over its fins

only to stop abruptly against vibrant white tips. Its back and sides are a deep, rich, olive, randomly dotted with spots of yellow and orange, the orange spots encircled by angelic blue halos. Temporarily mesmerized by nature's perfection, you carefully remove the hook and place the trout back in the stream, transfixed as he instantly seems to transform to rock, moss, and water. Measuring out at 11-inches, this Southern Appalachian brook trout may be small by many anglers' standards but is a trophy in a small, backcountry Smoky Mountain stream, where a 6-inch fish is the standard.

At one time, you didn't have to go to quite so much effort to catch the native brook trout of this region, since most all of the streams in the Appalachian Mountains were heavily populated with "specks," as the locals call them. But years of irresponsible logging practices in the earlier part of the 20th century destroyed much of the brook trout's habitat. Additionally, the introduction of non-native species of trout that created too much competition for too little food reduced the brook trout's range even more. Even in places like Great Smoky Mountains National Park, where non-native species like rainbows and browns haven't been stocked since the 1970's, problems persisted. The park service assumed that by discontinuing stocking efforts, the foreign trout would simply die out, allowing the natives to gradually reclaim their original homes. But the rainbows and browns began reproducing and have flourished ever since, pushing and confining brookies to the uppermost elevations. As far as problems go, this is a pretty good one to have.... Unless, of course, you happen to be a brook trout.

In an attempt to restore the brook trout's range in the Smokies, the park service closed most of these streams to fishing more than 30 years ago. But after years of research, they determined angling pressure has little to no effect on these high-country brook trout populations and consequently, most of these streams were re-opened in recent years. There are still a few sections of streams closed with others expected to follow in coming years as they try to re-extend the brook trout's range, but these closings will only be temporary as they execute a method of removal and replacement that has proven to be very successful.

The first step in the process is defining a natural barrier, like a tall waterfall, that will prevent upstream migrations by non-native fish. Above the waterfall, existing fish are then removed by using a chemical called antimycin. This EPA approved chemical kills all fish and most aquatic insects from a stream while posing no threat to plants, amphibians, or humans. Only small areas of the stream are treated at a time and the chemical is neutralized below the waterfalls with potassium permanganate to render it harmless. After treatment, crews augment the brook trout population with native species from other areas in the park with expectations of a full return of aquatic insects, a reestablishment of brook trout, and no more rainbows, all within three years.

Though controversial at first, this method has been highly effective and successful, and now serves as a model for similar projects. However, despite the wishes and best efforts of the park service, rainbows and browns will never be fully eradicated from the entire watershed. These trout have a solid foothold on the lower elevation stretches of rivers and very likely always will. Unless a more effective method of eradication and replacement is devised, brook trout seeking anglers will continue to be relegated to long, steep hikes into remote places to find their prize.

Why do some fly fishermen go to so much effort to pursue a fish that averages about four or five inches in length? Throughout the region are relatively flat, fifty-yard-wide tailwaters where a fisherman can stroll five minutes from the car and find seemingly infinite numbers of rainbows and browns that are

rarely *smaller* than eleven inches! To a dying breed of relatively few high-country enthusiasts, size doesn't matter. These anglers pursue trout in the Appalachian backcountry because the fish they catch are born there, not in the cramped, narrow concrete runs of a hatchery. And while many of the rainbows and browns inhabiting lower elevations in these watersheds are wild, only the brookies that swim in the high streams of these mountains are truly *native*.

Quite simply, native trout have a certain indefinable appeal to the self-aware angler. Perhaps it's just that we as humans seem to be wired to yearn for a connection to something bigger. Whether through genealogy, science, religion, or fly fishing, there is an innate desire to link to the world that was here before us; if for no other reason than to better understand ourselves. For fly fishermen in the eastern United States, the opportunity to pursue, connect with, and maybe even understand the uncompromising brook trout that have existed and persisted for centuries before us provides that all too vital link.