

Fishing High Water

The Smoky Mountains are known for receiving large amounts of rain in a season and when it comes in bunches, the result can be swollen, rough, intimidating, and dangerous streams and rivers. Good and bad things occur when the water rises in mountain streams. On the down side, the streams become much more dangerous and sometimes impossible to wade. The faster current also makes it more difficult to control your drift. On the up side, a lot of food gets churned up in the stream, and that factor, combined with a level of comfort and security in stained water, often results in more reckless feeding by some of the bigger trout on the block. There are brown trout exceeding 20" in many mountain streams that don't get caught often, but when they do, it's usually when the water is up and off color.

The stream is going to look completely different under these conditions and it will help if you have intimate familiarity with the stream under normal flows. Regardless of how well you know the water, always use extreme caution under these conditions and don't try any heroic stream crossings. One wrong step can quickly get you in big trouble! In fact, it's not a bad idea to wear a life vest when fishing under these conditions. Better safe than sorry!

Forget about finesse. You're not going to coax rainbows to #16 dry flies with delicate casts. Bring a long rod for a heavier line – maybe a 9' 6 weight – and plan on chucking large, heavy nymphs with a rosary of split shot and no strike indicator. Casting is going to simply involve one flip behind you, wait for the tug on the rod tip, and chuck it forward with an open loop. Long casts are not necessary and will be less effective.

Instead, wade the edges and look for slower seams on the edge of fast currents and eddies behind rocks. Position yourself as close to the feeding zone as you safely can and use the length of the rod to reach and hold your flies in position. Keep the rod tip up and try to keep as much of the fly line off the water as possible, allowing for a much slower, more controlled drift. Follow the flies with the rod tip as they drift through the feeding lane and keep an eye on the fly line between the rod tip and water. You may feel a strike since you're working with such a short line but most likely you'll determine the strike when you see the fly line pull down or hesitate. If anything suspicious like this occurs, set the hook! With practice you'll soon be able to differentiate between fish and rocks.

Don't expect to catch large quantities of fish under these circumstances. It will be tough fishing to say the least. But if you stick with it, the rewards can be enormous!