

Crosscurrents Notebook
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Small Streams – Headwaters of the Fly Fishing Experience

“Time in a mountain stream is not time wasted, but rather time fully used, felt, experienced completely.” Harry Middleton in “On the Spine of Time”

My mother sent me an old photograph of myself, sitting with toy sailboat beside tiny stream in the last pool before it emptied into Intermediate Lake in northern Michigan. The picture triggered a shower of memories. I remembered that in the brook behind me was a familiar collection of tiny brook trout. I would sit in the grass at the edge of the pool for hours and watch their furtive movements, how they maintained their assigned positions in the pool, and how they launched themselves to the surface to take the hapless crickets and ants I would flip into the water. After a while, I would walk the little brook upstream, stopping to watch similar villages of brookies. From the fence that bordered the resort, the little stream groped across a field into the wooded Michigan hills. I wanted to follow it, beyond my boundaries, to know every pool and bend up to the source of the cold water that floated my sailboat and suspended the imaginings of a chubby little kid.

That’s what little streams do to you. They make you want to know them.

I never got to know that little brook. It didn’t take much arm-twisting from my grandfather to turn my attention back to the glitter of the lake, with its silver walleyes and bronze smallmouths. But I always regret not following out that little stream. Maybe it’s that nameless brook I have been trying to rediscover in all the small streams I’ve fished since that faded photo was taken.

Small streams are where many of us learned to fish. They were all we had. In our own small world, these streams were big to us, and they now loom large in our memories because they wove their way into our hearts. We got to know them as friends. We learned their quirks and how to appreciate each one of them as individuals. We learned to approach each stream deliberately, to go out and meet it, to fish and to watch and to experience all it had to offer on each day. We didn’t just brisk through like a tourist and sample only the highlights. We got to know it. It became part of us.

You carry small streams around in our mind. They have a portable spirit that whisks you away from boredom and urban confusion. They were home waters before you knew what that meant, and thinking back to them is like going home.

Small streams taught you that fishing is about establishing a relationship with the water and what lives in it, that you could approach the stream as an equal, learn how it behaves under different conditions, and revisit it often to reinforce the relationship. All the moving parts and mysteries of the aquatic system were in front of you, despite the interstate, subdivision, or a shopping mall that hovered just beyond the stream buffer. You didn't have to pay homage or stand in awe, just learn from the experiences that the stream offered.

Big rivers intimidate me. They shouldn't, but they do, unless I mentally break them up into stream-sized sections and fish them as such. To my insecure perceptions, rivers seem to offer infinite possibilities of being wrong. I prefer small streams for the same reasons I would rather shop in small "Mom and Pop" markets and hardware stores. I get lost in the complexity of the big superstores --- too many options, too many distractions, too impersonal. I can get my arms around a small stream. I can deal with its moods. They seem short-lived; I don't have long to wait for the high water to fall and clear up.

On small streams, I can at least elude myself that I really know what flies work on a given day and time of the year. Small streams are the stuff of confidence, even if misplaced. The fish seem less discerning in small streams, less in lockstep with a hatch schedule. They are lean, hungry opportunists.

And fishing a small stream always carries with it a sense of closure. By contrast, out in a drift boat, the big river carries you along, and everything occurs in an instant. You have one shot at each target before the boat moves on. You have to let targets go as the boat bounces swiftly through each run. It is a grand, exciting experience, but you don't feel complete. You never know what was there; you never get a chance to really try, under your own power. You could never experience it all. On small streams, you can wring out all the lies, and paw your fly box until the hinges give way. You can hit each pool and tiny run, hop every rock. You are on your own. You can exhaust your options and yourself. You are your own guide.

But small streams present their own challenges. You have to take it slow or you'll send all the fish in the pool zipping for cover. You go slowly, walk softly, and crouch a little more for the next pool. You have to crunch down and be insignificant. Everything is so delicately arranged and balanced in the small environment, and you want to be within that balance. When you do, you notice things that you wouldn't even notice out on the big water. Like how the bubbles trace fine little curves at the eddy, or how the branches of the sweeper log create slots of shade and how the fish melt back into their shadows.

Charles Meck in "Fishing Small Streams with a Fly Rod" describes the experience as one moment the feeling of total frustration and another instant total satisfaction. Small stream fly-fishing "reflects the total process of searching for, finding, and fishing these small streams, and catching, then promptly releasing those worth, wily fish."

Or as John Gierach says in “Fly Fishing Small Streams”, “Fly fishing for trout in small streams is no harder, or easier, than fishing for them in rivers and lakes, but I think it is noticeable different, maybe even to the point of being a separate discipline within the sport.” ... “ That the most fun fishing small streams is when I can get into that nice, contemplative state of mind where the difficulty of the approach, accuracy of the cast, trickiness of the drift, and so on are all an integral part of the single fish caught well.”

Fishing a small stream is work ... demanding, up close, and exacting. You spend a lot of time on your knees, or squatted or crouched on the bank, trying not to wade to avoid spooking the fish. It is tedious and frustrating trying to turn a leader over for slack presentation with only a couple feet of fly line out of the tip. You often have to cast from way back on the bank. You can leave the erect, anthropocentric pose of the wading fisherman at home on the calendar. Small stream work is a guerilla drill.

You never appreciate how profuse bank vegetation is, until you have to cast from it, over it, around or through it. A million little fingers with knobs, knuckles, and nails are everywhere to grab the unlucky back cast or block the trajectory to the fish’s lie. If you don’t know how to roll cast – from many angles – before you start fishing tiny streams, you will soon learn. Along with a few other tricks, some of which wouldn’t even be called casting. To be successful and keep your sanity, you must practice these casts in the back yard, poking and waving graphite from grotesque positions and behind obstacles. Until your spouse signs you up for yoga and denies your existence to the neighbors.

You have to put yourself into the right state of mind for fishing small streams. A meditation session before you start back into the brush is a good idea. Don’t count on small stream work being a relaxing experience unless you prepare for it. You must be patient with the stream, the fish, the equipment, and yourself. Study the prospect, plan the cast, and make every shot count. This is no place for Rambo casting. Try to rush a small stream session and you’ll end up blustery and profane. The margin of error is a hole in the bank brush smaller than your head. You have to have Zen-like concentration to reach through it successfully. Failure means getting up to fetch a snag, losing the fly, spooking the pool and relegating its prospects to an “ugh” in your fishing journal. Or you may choose to rest the pool and try again, which in itself requires patience. You cannot force your tempo on the brook; you have to accept what the brook offers you.

Hell, you even curse differently on small streams. Those barbarians of us who do occasionally utter a cross word in frustration or disappointment (and the rest of you who merely think about cursing) have a special opportunity when the fly gets hung up in the trees, the tippet’s having a bad hair day, or you slide down a mossy rock on your kiester for the third time. Not the big roaring John Wayne-type curses you would cut loose out on the river over the wind and the big current noise. They are more like passionate mumbles, rages under the breath, truncated by the reminder that you are in a special place, like when you banged your knee on the church pew. They are no less vile in intent, just muffled. I have my own dialect of profanity for small stream frustrations, designed to deliver maximum venting in a short period of time so I can return to fishing. I have developed several

composite curses, unique combinations of the standard words for which I had my mouth washed out about a half-century ago. They are designed to allow quiet venting, like letting the air out of a balloon rather than letting it pop. Putting the accent on different syllables, depending on how the day is going, can vary them. It is small stream cursing, not to be taken out in a boat or on big rivers.

Small streams are not everyone's cup of tea. It is at times frustrating and confusing. The fish are small; you could mount a trophy on a physicians' wooden tongue depressor. The rewards are in conquering the complex procession of challenges. There are times that the thoughts of brush busting and the pressure of treating the first cast as the only cast at every pool can create a kind of mental inertia. Is this really going to be fun? This is a temporary paralysis, cured instantly by the first sight of that familiar form lurking under the shade of the streamside rhododendrons.

But little streams can produce big surprises. Sometimes they harbor trout that seem grotesquely large for the diminutive environment. You peek over the bank, expecting to see at best a 10-inch silhouette and glimpse an eye or a fin of something much bigger back in the shadows. You stare to fill out the rest of his form, maybe 15 inches, looking out of place with the 3 or 4 smaller trout scattered out in the less preferred positions in the pool. How long had this old veteran dominated this pool? How many scrapes has he survived with minks, kingfishers, herons, and human fishers? How did he make it through the drought last year? Is his size because he is old, or did he just grow faster than the others of his cohort?

You know your chances of even getting a cast to him in daylight are slim. You could come back at dusk and slide a streamer down into this pool from way above, but you probably won't. You have obligations back home. And it is enough to know that fish like this one exist in these small places. It means that the stream is capable of holding fish this size and that any eddy, root mass, or undercut bank could produce that flash of muscle that brings your heart up into your throat. It is the stuff of small stream mythology that pulls you from pool to pool and stokes that little inner fire as you are hunched over the fly tying bench. You know that your average fish on a bigger river could be bigger than your lifetime best on the small streams, but size is relative. You will remember a fish like this one, because he's rare, he won't come easy, and you experience him up close.

You keep small streams secret. There's just not enough room for the fly shop crowd. And some of them probably wouldn't appreciate it anyway. The communication networks among fly fishers are so closely coupled, and so charged with enthusiasm and commercialism that the news of any fresh fishing opportunity spreads like wildfire. Tell two other people about your favorite stream and two weeks later, you've got leprechauns with graphite sticks in hip boots hopping over every rock you cherish. The horror of horrors would be to find the name of your little treasure posted on the chalk board in the fly shop, complete with its own list of patterns and a superlative or two designed to send fishers forth.

The relationship you build with a small stream is hard won. You have to earn a small stream with sore knees and aching backs, scrapes and scratches from pushing brush aside or scrambling back to pick errant back casts out of the trees. If you have spent a hundred days memorizing the moods of each

twist and plunge pool, it really honks you off to have someone else irreverently tromp through without the proper apprenticeship. You take only your most trusted and intimate fishing companion to your treasure stream. Any person so entrusted who brings another to the stream without informing you has broken a code.

You get downright snotty about your favorite small streams. You develop a sort of property right in certain streams, conferred to you by frequent visitation and intimacy. In some ways, I still feel I “own” special stretches of the many little streams I have fished in last 40 years. Of course I do not actually own them, fee simple, but I do own the experiences I have had with them. And that paternal feeling can erupt into anger if someone, even the rightful owner, treats the stream or its fish poorly.

As soon as a small stream gets publicized, it’s no longer a small stream in my mind. It has been entered into the market, and shares of it can belong to anybody and everybody. I may still fish the stream, but I adjust my fishing schedule to minimize the chances of meeting any other “shareholders”. Or I may lose interest altogether ... for a while. After the hordes move on to new conquests, I return and renew my relationship. After all, if I carried this ownership thing too far, I would soon have no place to left to fish.

The relationship with the small stream needs to be nurtured. And that sometimes means purposely resting her. There seems to be a balance between familiarity and footprints, between keeping in touch and leaving the stream with its residual mysteries. Should you know everything about a stream? She deserves her time alone. You enrich the relationship by artfully spacing your absences. Then each visit is a new one that won’t allow you to take the stream completely for granted.

Small streams are great teachers. They taught most of us how to dab a worm. Their lessons continue as you age and revisit them. Their big lesson is how to approach streams strategically and how to diagnose every prospect, but they can also teach how to purposely stop thinking, sit down and appreciate the complex beauty of where you are and how you fit.

Every small stream I have ever fished has taught me something about the stream and about myself. Oregon’s cutthroats on the Little Luckiamute taught me that presentation was more important than pattern, the North Fork of the Santiam the value of check and pile casts and of a few more inches of drag-free drift. Southern California’s Bear Creek taught me the value of using my own energy, down and back up the thousand-foot canyon to reach places others had never even considered. Montana’s Poindexter Slough taught me how to crawl and use the sidearm cast to approach cagey brown trout. Maryland’s Big Hunting Creek has taught me the value of the roll cast and its many variations, how to drop a beetle from an overhanging branch, and the necessity of stalking back off the bank from fish who see and sense a steady procession of human forms. Nearby Fishing Creek taught me how to cast (?) in a tunnel of brush and use downstream techniques to put the fly before the line. Roaring Fork Creek in Tennessee taught me the value of boulders to hide behind and the curve cast to place flies around them. And in White Oak Canyon in Shenandoah National Park, I relearned just how beautiful a brook trout could be, held sparkling against a backdrop of autumn foliage.

As you grow as a fly fisher, you learn to appreciate a variety of waters. You yearn to take on new challenges and fish in new ways and in exotic destinations. But can you ever abandon the small streams in our minds? To me, these little brooks are headwaters of the fishing experience; they flow down out of the past and merge to define the essence of fly-fishing. And it helps me to follow several of them back upstream each year, just to rediscover what it is about and where it all came from.

End
