

The Catoctin Mountain highlands give birth to many clear, cold mountain streams. Born from hidden springs way up on the tableland, they cascade down the mountain amongst tunnels of hardwoods, hemlocks and mountain laurel in a seemingly endless series of beautiful waterfalls, plunge pools, riffles and runs, finally arriving on the flatland below. The undisputed crown jewel of these streams is Big Hunting Creek.

THE HISTORY

Storied in angling history, Big Hunting Creek gave birth to the Brotherhood of the Jungle Cock, a national organization dedicated to helping young people understand and appreciate the art of angling and the resources upon which it depends. The creek was the first in the state to be designated as a “Fly Fishing Only” stream and it later became Maryland’s first “Catch and Release” trout stream. It was the home waters of such legendary anglers as Joe Brooks, Frank Smoot, and Frank Bentz. Presidents and prime ministers have fished its waters, being located a stone’s throw from Camp David, the presidential retreat. Dwight Eisenhower and Jimmy Carter loved to test their skills against the native trout and there is still a pool called the “President’s Pool”. There has been a concerted effort over the last 40 years to preserve and improve the stream, led by groups such as The Friends of Big Hunting Creek, Maryland Fly Anglers, Free State Fly Fishers, Antietam Fly Fishers, Potomac Valley Fly Fishers, and the Northern Virginia and Rapidan chapters of Trout Unlimited. Today, largely due to their efforts, Big Hunting Creek is known as a first-class trout stream that will test the abilities of even the most skillful angler.

THE STREAM

From high up on the northern part of Catoctin Mountain, Big Hunting Creek flows down its eastern slope, spills over Cunningham Falls, Maryland’s highest cascading waterfall, and enters the 42-acre Hunting Creek Lake. Leaving the lake, it flows through Cunningham Falls State Park and Catoctin Mountain National Park, past the Joe Brooks Memorial and the national park visitor center, under Rt. 77

and into Frank Bentz Pond (scheduled for removal). It then flows through the town of Thurmont before joining the Monocacy River. Along scenic Rt. 77, fly fisherman will find numerous parking areas and pull-offs, including the Joe Brooks Memorial parking lot just downstream from the Catoctin National Park Visitor’s Center. The “Fly Fishing Only” section is the 2.5 miles of water below the lake.

It is technically considered a tailwater fishery since the water in the “Fly Fishing Only” section below the lake comes from water released from the dam at the lake. The cold-water releases do allow the stream to have a consistent flow through the summer months and enable the trout to survive. However, it is best fished as a freestone creek since the water rapidly warms up during the hot months. The creek is usually 20-30 feet wide, its banks strewn with many rocks and large boulders and its bed covered with rocks and gravel. Anglers usually think of it in two parts separated by the Camp Peniel bridge at the national park headquarters, the lower and very rugged canyon section, and the upper section that contains more flat water. Both sections contain beautiful pools, riffles and runs, and a lot of productive pocket water. The bridge is also the jurisdictional dividing line between the state park land upstream and the national park land downstream.

THE TROUT

The true prize of Big Hunting Creek is its wild brown trout, known for their exceptional beauty and their reluctance to take a fly. They average 8-10 inches in length but there are larger fish present in some of the deeper pools. They tend to have large red spots with a blue background halo. In times past there was a population of brook trout in the upper headwaters above the lake, which may still exist in some hidden corners of the stream. You may also catch a stocked rainbow trout but the brown trout are what draw anglers and test their skill. Overall, the creek has a fairly high density of trout for its size, but as they are easily spooked and the water is very clear, a high degree of stealth is required if any success is to be had.

THE REGULATIONS

The fishing season is open all year. Anglers on Big Hunting Creek are governed by the following state regulations:

- All anglers 16 or older must have a valid Maryland fishing license and trout stamp;

- All fishing is catch and release. No fish of any kind may be in the angler’s possession;
- Only recognized fly-fishing tackle may be used. Spinning and casting rods and reels are prohibited;
- Artificial flies (including streamers) constructed in a way that materials are affixed to a single hook using wound thread are the only lures allowed. Specifically prohibited are molded replicas of insects, earthworms, fish eggs, fish or invertebrates or vertebrates, as well as lures commonly described as spinners, spoons, and plugs made of metal, plastic, wood, rubber or similar substances;
- Only barbless hooks may be used, including barbed hooks with the barb pinched down;
- All types of bait, including both manufactured scented products and natural live bait, as well as any device enhanced with a scent capable of catching fish are prohibited.

TIPS FOR THE FISHERMAN

Big Hunting Creek is a valuable natural resource for the area. To protect it and ensure that it is available for future generations, please observe the following:

- Leave the stream as clean or cleaner than when you arrived;
- Do not wade in the stream unless necessary;
- Land trout as quickly as possible so that they do not become exhausted and use a rubberized landing net if possible;
- When releasing trout, avoid handling them. If it is necessary to handle them, wet your hands first, keep them in the water, and avoid squeezing them or touching their gills;
- If the water temperature is over 68 degrees, do not fish it as trout caught in high temperatures can be killed due to thermal stress;
- Use only barbless hooks and remove them gently by using forceps;
- Keep a reasonable distance between yourself and your fellow anglers and observe the usual streamside etiquette.

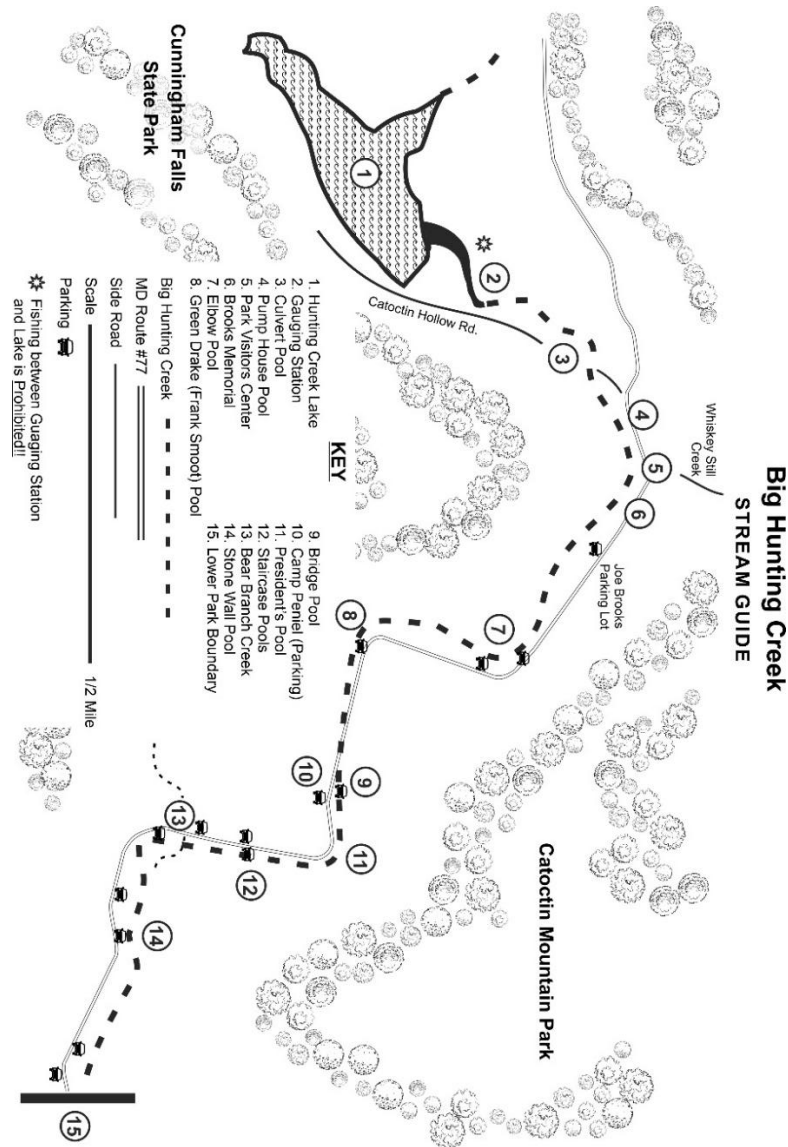
FLIES AND HATCHES

A wide variety of aquatic insects inhabit Big Hunting Creek including mayflies, caddisflies, and stoneflies. Little Black Stoneflies emerge from late fall to early spring. During late February and early March, Brown Stoneflies will appear. From mid-May through June, the Giant Black Stoneflies, Big Brown Stoneflies, and Yellow Sallies are to be seen.

The creek has good hatches of the following mayflies: Blue-winged Olives, Quill Gordons, March Browns, Light Cahills, and Green Drakes. Several kinds of case-building caddisflies (stone, stick, and leaf-case builders) and free-living caddis such as the green caddis or green rock worm are found here, hatching from April through September. Darker caddis are more prominent early in the year, with the lighter ones coming later. Terrestrials (ants, beetles, inchworms) are usually the ticket in summer and fall. Midges can catch fish the entire year.

BIG HUNTING CREEK FLY CHART

Fly	Type	Size	Month
Little Black Stonefly	Dry Fly	16 - 22	Oct. - Mar.
Adams	Dry Fly	14 - 18	Apr. - Oct.
March Brown	Dry Fly	12 - 14	May - June
Dark Elk Hair Caddis	Dry Fly	16 - 18	Apr. - June
Light Elk Hair Caddis	Dry Fly	16 - 18	May - Sept.
Brown Bivisible	Dry Fly	16 - 20	May - Oct.
Light Cahill	Dry Fly	14 - 16	May - June
Yellow Sally	Dry Fly	14 - 16	May - June
Ant	Dry Fly	16 - 20	June - Sept.
Beetle	Dry Fly	12 - 18	June - Sept.
Midges	Dry Fly	20 - 28	All year
Caddis larva - Olive or brown	Nymph	12 - 18	All year
Little Black Stonefly Nymph	Nymph	16 - 20	Oct. - Mar.
Gray Muskrat	Nymph	12 - 16	Mar. - May
Hare's Ear	Nymph	10 - 16	Mar. - May
Honeybug	Nymph	10 - 12	Nov. - May
Pheasant Tail	Nymph	14 - 16	Apr. - Sept.
Zebra midge	Nymph	16 - 20	All year
Woolly Buzzer	Streamer	8 - 12	All year



The map and cover art are by Bob ODonnell. This is an updated version of a brochure first published by the Friends of Big Hunting Creek.

Fly Fisherman's Guide to Big Hunting Creek

