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# The Clarion River Revive

by John C. Street | August 30th, 2015

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Photo: John C. Street

For several minutes I searched the little pool and riffle below me. A cold, late-fall rain created a choppy sheen on the surface and blocked my view of the streambed. Then a commotion in the riffles caught my attention, and I put on my polarized glasses. I had been tracking down a rumor of “brown trout up to 31 inches” and on that November day in 1999, my search ended. For ten minutes, I watched goggle-eyed as a procession of spawning browns struggled up through that shallow run. Half of them confirmed the rumor; the other half were just run-of-the-mill big trout.

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Defining much of the eastern and southern boundaries of the 513,000-acre Allegheny National Forest in mountainous northwestern Pennsylvania, the Clarion River may very well be the least known big-trout water in the eastern United States. The Clarion is an accessible river that requires neither professional guides nor special tackle, and is completely fishable without a boat. Furthermore, the lack of consistent, heavy hatches means that those big browns are generalists that survive on baitfish, hellgrammites, and crayfish that can be copied and fished with terminal tackle stout enough to give decent odds for landing them. And, incredibly, with all these pluses, very few people outside the immediate area have heard of this river.

Perhaps that is because as recently as the early 1990s, when new owners took over an aging paper plant at the confluence of its two branches, the residue and thermal discharge from that mill, plus numerous acid mine seeps and poorly designed sewage treatment facilities throughout the watershed, rendered it nearly lifeless. But that, with a great deal of work by individuals, agencies, organizations, and businesses, has changed.

Nowhere is the evidence of this cleanup more apparent than in the aquatic samplings taken as a part of the environmental permits conducted by Willamette Industries after they purchased and upgraded the paper mill. The electroshocking portion of their environmental samplings turned up those leviathans—origin of the rumor I tracked down—and there can be no greater testimonial to all the work that has been done than the Wild and Scenic designation bestowed on this river by the U.S. Forest Service in 1997.

## **Branching Out**

If you hold your arm out in front of you and make the “V” for victory sign with your fingers, you will have an accurate picture of this watershed. Your fingers represent the West and East Branches where they come together in the small town of Johnsonburg. Although these branches would be immediately recognizable to any small-stream specialist, they’re about as different as two small streams can be.

The East Branch. Spilling from a bottom-discharge dam some 6 miles from its confluence with the West Branch, the East Branch is paralleled for most of its length by the Glenn Hazel Road. Water temperatures on the East Branch stay in the mid 50s throughout the summer, and you’ll find a limited selection of the

standard hatches of Blue-winged Olives, Sulphurs, March Browns, Cahills, and tan and green caddis on this water. Hatches start about a week later than similar hatches on surrounding streams and last a tad longer than the hatch charts tell you. If you want to fish cold water in August, this is the next best thing to a legitimate spring creek.

A #18 or #20 olive-bodied parachute-style dry will cover most of the Blue-winged Olive hatches on this water. I'll frequently tie an olive and dun emerger as a dropper behind a Cahill or a Stimulator when the light is poor—as it frequently is on the overcast days when this little mayfly prefers to hatch—and do much better.

From about the second week in May up to the same date in June, trout readily accept standard Cahill imitations (#14) with a cream-colored body most late afternoons. Mating flights of Sulphurs over the riffles become pronounced by the second week of May. These insects are on the large side (#16) for the species and have an orange cast to their bodies. A lightly weighted emerger fished at the tail of the riffles late in the day—7 to 9 P.M.—will outproduce a dry fly almost every time.

At Bendigo State Park, halfway between Johnsonburg and the East Branch Dam, there's a small impoundment that was originally used as a swimming area. The Willamette Fish and Game Club stocks heavily above this park, and the pools are big enough to support some very nice holdovers. I really like fishing this branch when either the spring melt or heavy showers make the main stem too ugly to fish. Try the new "Delayed Harvest" (artificial lures only) stretch that covers 11/2 miles of stream below the East Branch Dam. Some days, and why I haven't a clue, this water is chock-full of native brook trout in the 5- to 8-inch range. In July and August—again for reasons I can't understand—I generally have this entire section to myself, especially on weekdays.

The West Branch is a quintessential eastern freestoner running through a wide valley from the hamlet of Wilcox down to Johnsonburg and covers that entire 6-mile stretch alongside Route 219. It fishes well early in the year but warms quickly. The hatches here lean heavily to caddis, but there is a decent selection of Cahills (#12 and #14) and March Browns (#14) as well as a hatch of small stoneflies in May and June known as the Little Green Sally, *Alloperla imbecilla*, that is copied very nicely by a lime-bodied stimulator with a natural deer-hair wing on an #18 hook.

March Browns emerge as early as April 1 and as late as mid-June on both branches, although, as you would expect, hatches are spotty on the extreme ends of the calendar. Standard, full-hackle patterns will work for searching the water, but I prefer fishing a #14, 3X-long, weighted Hare's Ear to imitate the stocky nymphs.

This no-wading, catch-and-release, fly-fishing-only section just below a little cluster of houses at Tambine, while not big water, can be difficult to fish because of the wading restrictions. It is some of the prettiest water on this branch, however, and worth the casting problems its heavily vegetated banks can create.

The big attraction on the West Branch is the Green Drake, which starts around June 1. It's hard to be too rah-rah about this big mayfly because good hatches are weather dependent, and some years it just doesn't seem to come off at all. Most of the regulars who follow this drake fish the spinner fall just after dark with extended body Coffin Flies (the female spinner) on a light-wire, #10, 2X-long hook. When I know the time is right, around June 1, I'll probe the runs and pools with a shaggy, weighted, tan nymph tied on a #10, 2X hook, and will often pick up some of the nicer fish in this branch.

Five-weight outfits in the 8- or 9-foot range, although slightly more stick than you might think you need when you first look at these two streams, will be welcome for the longish casts required in the few large pools. And both branches are classic nymphing water so you'll appreciate both the length and the backbone to throw a little lead.

Both branches receive stockings of nearly 12,000 brooks, browns, and rainbows each year from the Willamette Fish and Game Club and many of these are holding over, especially in the East Branch. The results of this "jump start"—which has been going on for nearly ten years—in rebuilding the fishery is remarkable.

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