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BROWN DESTINATIONS TROUT

The Clarion River Revive

by John C. Street | August 30th, 2015

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Photo: John C. Street

The Main Stem

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All-Tackle, Trophy-Trout Water. The 7 1/2 miles between Johnsonburg and Ridgway was given the designation “All Tackle Trophy Trout” water (bait, lures, and flies are permitted but there is a limit of two trout during the regular season) in 1995 and contains characteristics of both of the branches, as well as a tantalizing preview of the sinewy, rocky river it will become in another 20 miles or so.

If you're a slightly better caster than I am, you can probably throw a 5-weight line across this 60- to 80-foot-wide section of the river. Each bend has either a deep run or rock-studded pool, but the low flows of summer can make for long, shallow riffles in between.

Most of the hatches found on the branches are present in the first two miles below their confluence, but, perhaps because the cooling water of the East Branch dissipates within this distance, these hatches taper off by the time you reach the lower five miles of this specially regulated water.

Take note that two landowners with property contiguous to this specially regulated section have posted their ground against trespassing. The Clarion River, however, is considered navigable, so access may be gained by parking on either end of their signs and walking either upstream or down. As long as you stay inside the normal spring high-water mark on the bank, you are legal.

Either a brown-bodied, deer-hair caddis or a yellow- or green-bodied Stimulator in #14 and #16 will match the dominant caddis that comes off most evenings from May to September. I can usually keep myself busy with either an olive or dark-brown Hare's Ear (#14 or #16) fished as droppers below a heavily weighted Nutria Nymph. An old, low-head industrial dam just upstream from Ridgway punctuates the end of this picturesque riffle-and-pool—and special regulation—section of the river.



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An enormous population of hellgrammites dwells in this section of the river. I suspect this plug-ugly creature is why the trout are so wild about the Nutria Nymph and why it is so effectively fished right on bottom. If you have another pattern for this species that you have found productive, bring it along and try it. If it works better than the Nutria, be sure to let me know.

Ridgway to Clarington Bridge. While the 20-plus-mile stretch between Ridgway and the Clarington Bridge (accessed handily from Route 949) still looks more like a big stream than a river, this is where the river ceases being a trout fishery. Smallmouth bass become the primary, but not the only, species. This water, spectacularly dominated by large, rocky pools and deep, fishy runs, is postcard pretty, but classic mayfly water it's not.

You may want to leave your 5-weight outfit in the car for this section and break out that 9-footer with the 7-weight line. Around the mouths of the major tributaries, you'll still appreciate having your box of standard dry flies, specifically those previously mentioned. But from this point downstream, you won't be remiss carrying little more than a dozen (you'll lose some to the bottom if you fish them correctly) weighted #4 Nutria Nymphs and a selection of Woolly Buggers and conventional deer-hair caddis.

The tributaries in this portion of the river, especially the Millstone, offer some excellent fishing in their own right, but equally important, they are a source of cooler water in the summer when the river can warm up to 70 degrees or more. While your primary quarry will be smallmouth bass, the tendril of colder water coming out of these tribs, especially if there is good holding water in the river near the outlet, will often surprise you by producing nice trout.

And there's no need to switch flies if you've been flinging Woolly Buggers for bass. The only tactical change I make is treating the bugger like a nymph and dead-drifting it through the runs, because under the stress of warm water, the trout hanging in the cooler water aren't disposed to chase their meals. Naturally, because of the added stress of fighting a trout through that warmer water, you'll need to make certain they are fully recovered before releasing them. A quick fight—requiring the use of appropriately heavy tippet material—and careful release will prevent unnecessary mortality.

While I love it dearly and fish it regularly, the approximately 30-mile section from the Clarington Bridge to the backwaters of the Big Piney Dam is too busy during the prime summer months for my taste. Two state parks, Clear Creek and Cook Forest, with all the privately owned canoe rental operations and tourist attractions located in their immediate vicinity, tend to contribute to the theme-park atmosphere. Coincidentally, this is where the Clarion begins to feel more like a river to me, since two of my best double hauls will not span its 200-foot width. It's also where the most blizzardlike of all the hatches takes place.

Beginning in the last week of May, a little black caddis, *Chimarra atterima*, comes off the riffles in numbers that can make anglers believe they will suffocate. Forget matching this hatch, however, if you are interested in catching the really big ones, because the bigger fish are more interested in the chubs and shiners that are working the surface than they are in the bugs.

Although it is easily covered—off the River Road that runs on the north shore all the way from Cooksburg up to above Halton—by a wading angler with felt soles and there are plenty of fish (again, primarily—but not exclusively—smallmouth bass), it is not the stretch to fish if you like solitude in the summer. However, if you go early in April and May and then again late in October and November after the “leaf peepers” are gone, you will easily understand why the U.S. Forest Service gave it the coveted Wild and Scenic River designation.

I've caught more big trout in this stretch, specifically between Belltown and Portland Mills, than in all the others combined, primarily because it's closer to my home. I can fish it in off times like early morning and late evening, and of course in those glorious months before and after the aluminum hatch. Of course, if I were into honest subterfuge, I would also tell you that the biggest trout I have ever seen (as opposed to ever caught) in the Clarion are way back up at where your fingers join in Johnsonburg.

A Few Things Worth Remembering

Those big spawning browns I encountered in November 1999 were coming out of the “All Tackle Trophy Trout” section between Ridgway and Johnsonburg. They were congregated in the first pool of cold water in the East Branch at the bottom of a 1/2-mile-long stretch of “nursery water” where fishing is not permitted. That old low-head industrial dam, of which there has been talk of removal for years, just

above Ridgway prevents trout from moving upstream. Consequently, if you are interested in doing some real head-hunting later in the fall, those 7 1/2 miles would be the place to center your activity. Probing the mouths of Mason Run and Little Mill right above Ridgway with the largest Woolly Buggers you can throw could produce some outstanding fish.

As I learned one evening after wrestling a large bass and having it spit out a 6-inch-long creek chub as I was releasing it, there's much to be said for "coming big or staying home." The Clarion, although it is changing and improving every year as the tributaries restock more and more of the mayflies, currently has no "glamour" hatches, so the top predators are true generalists making their living on creek chubs, shiners, sculpins, crayfish, and hellgrammites.

The two patterns I use exclusively to imitate this smorgasbord are the Nutria Nymph and the Woolly Bugger, both tied on #4, 3X-long hooks with ample lead wrapped around the shank. Where the water is too big or brawling, which is typical of where the big trout are found, I use a miniature bullet head on the line at the nose of the fly. Not only does this help me get to the bottom, it also imparts a jigging action that is almost like twitching a string in front of a cat. Be careful about the mini-bullet heads you buy, however, as some of them are meant to be tied onto the shank of the hook like a bead head, and they have very sharp edges that will cut through your line quickly. A weight-forward, floating line makes mending, pickup, and strike detection with this much weight far easier than employing a sinking head.

I carry four colors of Woolly Buggers—chartreuse, yellow, black, and white—and, with the exception of the black model, use Barred Rock feathers for the hackle. In addition, I use a felt tip marker to make bars on the marabou tails. The visual effect of this fly in the water is remarkably close to the dominant food species, the sculpin, and the selection of colors is a great aid in matching the water conditions such as the low water of late summer or the discoloration the river can pick up from a heavy rain. A 7-weight outfit helps a great deal when you're throwing these things.

A Brighter Future

At an accelerating pace, as the effects of the cleanup take hold, the Clarion River will begin to sprout more and more mayfly hatches. Already there are unconfirmed reports of both Yellow (*Ephemera varia*) and Slate Drakes (*Isonychia* sp.) at some distance from the tributaries. And undoubtedly, between the stocking efforts of the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission and the Willamette Fish and Game Club, the natural reproduction in the entire watershed is starting to pick up momentum. I've seen clouds of trout fry drift past me while I was fishing. There is, however, one more thing that needs to be done.

In Charles Meck's 1989 book, *Pennsylvania Trout Streams and Their Hatches*, he concludes his section on this waterway by saying, "The Clarion would be an excellent river for a no-kill area." Today, both the East and the West Branches have "Fly Fishing" or "Delayed Harvest" sections, and the upper part of the river between Johnsonburg and Ridgway is "All Tackle Trophy Trout." But the prettiest and ultimately perhaps the most productive part, the section that is rightly described as "Wild and Scenic," has no protection. Perhaps, after fishing this remarkable watershed, you will help change that to read, "The Wild and Scenic and No-kill" Clarion River.

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