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Eastern Fly Fishing

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The Saint Mary's River: Brook Trout with a Troubled Past

Cascading down through one of the Blue Ridge Mountains' most breathtaking gorges in a sequence of plunge pools and riffles, the voluminous body of the Saint Mary's River gushes lucid and blue, fueled by a heavy late spring rain. The warm afternoon sun initiates a caddisfly hatch, coaxing to the surface the darting forms of southern Appalachian brook trout—the crown jewels of the mountain flowages. It's a Garden of Eden nestled in the Virginia mountains—or so it seems. As I string up my long rod, I am reminded of the clerical river's delicate situation. Acid rain has plagued the intricate ecosystem at hand, and the river's ongoing vitality is dependent entirely upon the cooperation of state and federal agencies. The brook trout before me are on borrowed time.

Rising high on the west slope of the Blue Ridge Mountains in southeastern Augusta County, the headwaters of the Saint Mary's River navigate a steep, boulder-strewn gorge, skirting the northernmost boundary of the James River watershed, and flowing southwest with the terrain towards America's founding river.

As it's known locally as a heralded native brook trout fishery, the Saint Mary's is a unique mountain stream within the Blue Ridge. First, it's quite large compared to other brook trout streams in the region, often taking the form of long, deep pools, dynamic pockets, and large riffles. Several waterfalls mark the river's course, including Saint Mary's Falls—a cascade of more than 15 feet.

Increasing the allure of the Saint Mary's drainage is the 10,090-acre Saint Mary's Wilderness Area that surrounds it. With elevations ranging from 1,700 to 3,600 feet, this is rugged country dominated by the river and the gorge that guides it. Thick rhododendron and mountain laurel envelope the craggy mountainside and lush floodplain, and highbush blueberries create prime forage for wildlife. Together with the strikingly blue, oxygenated water of the river, the forested landscape fabricates a strong allusion to pristine wilderness.

The wilderness area boasts more than five miles of the Saint Mary's River, designated as a special regulations area downstream to the boundary of the National Forest, where only single-hook artificial lures can be used.

Special regulation fishing for native brook trout in a wilderness setting does plenty to attract anglers. The 17 miles of trail traversing the wilderness area, and numerous plunge pools furthermore act as magnets for hikers and "swimmin'-holers." In fact, in the warmer months, the "wilderness" can be packed throughout the week.

Getting In

Anglers are granted access to the river via three trailheads.

The Saint Mary's Falls Trail, which provides the easiest and quickest access to the lower river and Saint Mary's Falls, runs northeast from the lower parking lot on the eastern boundary of the wilderness area, accessible via Forest Service Road 41, just south and west of Stuarts Draft. To reach the Falls, keep left along the river at the intersection with the Saint Mary's Trail just downstream of the confluence of Sugartree Branch. The trail fords the river before dead-ending at the cascade.

The Mine Bank Trail stems from the Blue Ridge Parkway near the Fork Mountain Overlook at milepost 23. From here, anglers can enjoy a picturesque hike into the gorge following Mine Bank Creek, one of the river's larger tributaries, to its confluence with the Saint Mary's. The trail intersects the Saint Mary's Trail roughly one river-mile upstream of the Falls, placing one outside the major foot-traffic zone.

The third trailhead, the furthest upstream of the trio, announces the beginning of the Saint Mary's Trail. Forest Service Road 162 branches north from the Blue Ridge Parkway at the Bald Mountain Overlook at milepost 22.2 towards Green Pond—an intermittent, peat moss bog. Follow the road for almost four miles to Green Pond, where the Saint Mary's Trail descends into the canyon. This trailhead provides access to the upper river.

Despite the wilderness designation, the popularity of this location is evidenced on the forest floor. Numerous side-trails have been rutted by detouring day-hikers that may land the first-time visitor in a dangerous position, like a mountainside gravel pit or precipitous bluff. Speaking from experience, if the going gets tough along the "trail," retrace your steps and look for a more obvious route.

Backpacking and camping are popular methods for anglers to experience the Saint Mary's; but primitive lodgers should pay attention to the restrictions on campsite locations maintained by the Forest Service.

Richard Christy, owner and operator of Rock-n-Creek Cabin, located due south of the Saint Mary's River gorge, knows well the attraction that the wilderness has on travelers and locals alike. "People who know the area know that it is a treasure trove of things to do," he said. "The Blue Ridge Parkway is only 1.5 miles away from the cabin, and the Saint Mary's Wilderness Area is accessible just a few miles up the Parkway."

Christy, a Certified Executive Chef by trade who once cooked for President Gerald Ford and currently employs his creative talents cooking for guests of Rock-n-Creek Cabin, appreciates the rustic lifestyle and the experience that visitors attracted to the area are looking for, and does his best to accommodate those interests. "We already provide box lunches and picnics for our hikers as well as full meals prepared at the cabin, or meals dropped off," said Christy. A fly fishing package is in the mill for Rock-n-Creek.

Despite the array of recreational opportunities in the area, Christy recognizes what really draws visitors to the mountains. "All in all, what makes our area special and unique is the fact that most visitors want to be high on the mountain away from it all—back to nature, so to speak," he related. "The mountain offers simple pleasures of assured solitude, comfort, and a sense of

well-being, just by being at the top—something the [Shenandoah] Valley cannot provide. Time is at a standstill.”

A Troubling Past

The Saint Mary’s wilderness qualities do well to feign the appearance of pristine forestland. However, history paints a different picture.

The Saint Mary’s River drainage was mined intensively for manganese and iron ore throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Abandoned pit mines, old cables, and concrete slabs—infrastructure for the mining operation—are still visible along the river’s edge and surrounding country, left as allusions to an industrious time. A railroad spur, built by the Pulaski Iron Company at the height of the mineral enterprise, once extended upstream to the confluence with Chimney Branch to provide access to the working mines on the South Bank of the river. Today, nature has largely pulled a guise over these industrial relics.

The original timber that populated the land that today comprises the Saint Mary’s Wilderness was harvested in the last century for charcoal, lumber, and tanbark—a source of tannin for the leather industry. Road construction, mining, and the invasive chestnut blight accounted for the loss of what remained standing. The woody flora that covers the terrain today is second, third, and fourth growth timber stands, mainly composed of maple, hickory, and oak species.

World War I forced the abandonment of most of the mining operations; and the Saint Mary’s River experienced a period of gradual rejuvenation in the aftermath.

In 1936, Eugene Surber, a renowned fisheries biologist with the U. S. Fisheries Bureau, began extensive benthic monitoring of the river. At a time when fisheries biology as a whole was primarily concerned with the science of trout hatchery maintenance and production, Surber studied thoroughly the intricacies of the web of organisms that inhabit trout streams and provide for long-lived, naturally-reproducing populations of wild and native fish. Though his mission was to determine the value of different rivers as amenable ecosystems for state-sponsored trout stockings, Christopher Camuto notes in his masterpiece, *A Fly Fisherman’s Blue Ridge*, that Surber’s true passion was in understanding the web of organisms within a river.

Management of the Saint Mary’s River by VDGIF began in 1948, with Surber’s groundbreaking macroinvertebrate theses serving as baseline biological data. Rainbow and brook trout were stocked from 1948 through 1974, when a flood washed out the access road used by stocking trucks.

Steve Reeser, VDGIF Fisheries Biologist overseeing the Saint Mary’s River, states that “biologists noted a decline in the rainbow trout in the early 1980s. The decline of other fish, specifically the blacknose dace was also observed.” Chemical evaluation of the river’s water quality began in 1987, which proved that the river suffered from acid deposition, credited mainly to acid rain from surrounding industrial regions. As acid deposition intensified, the brook trout population also experienced a significant decline.

Facing the impending loss of the delicate ecosystem, VDGIF, James Madison University, The U.S. Forest Service, and other concerned groups began campaigning for the liming of the

river. “Stream liming had been successful in mitigating acidic conditions in streams in West Virginia and Virginia starting in the late 1980s,” Reeser recalled. “However, the main obstacle to doing this in the Saint Mary’s was that the entire watershed was designated wilderness.” Mechanical transportation is outlawed in federal wilderness areas.

The solution was discovered on March 20, 1999, when the Saint Mary’s River, along with five of its major tributaries, was dosed with a total of 140 tons of limestone sand, dropped via helicopter.

With the airdrop completed, the battle was still not won. “VDGIF, the U.S. Forest Service, and chemists at James Madison University rigorously monitored fish and macroinvertebrate populations and water quality parameters to document the effects of liming,” Reeser said. “Monitoring was also being conducted to determine the length of time the benefits of liming would last. There was a positive response in both the fish and macroinvertebrate community and also improvements to water quality after liming. As researchers documented a slow decline in fish, aquatic insects, and water quality, it was determined that the stream would need to be limed again.”

Based on biological evidence, it was discovered that this re-liming would need to happen every five to seven years to maintain the biotic community and the current level of water quality. In 2005, six years after the original implementation, 230 tons of lime was dispersed in the drainage. Another liming was implemented in 2011.

Fishing the Saint Mary’s River

Today the Saint Mary’s River has returned somewhat to its prior stature. “Our sampling in 2013 and 2014 indicated that the population is fairly robust,” Reeser said. Anglers sampling the river with lures and flies will agree, as 50-fish days are not uncommon under good conditions.

The Saint Mary’s by no means produces the largest brook trout in the Blue Ridge—those gems are to be discovered independently and secretly. However, trophies are a true possibility. “We do see some brook trout up to 12 inches in the Saint Mary’s, but they are rare,” Reeser warned. “You normally see higher numbers of trout in the 9- to 10-inch range when a strong year class reaches age three.” However, the size of fish in the watershed is not the main draw to the river.

In a conversation with Tommy Lawhorne and Kevin Little, co-owners of the South River Fly Shop in downtown Waynesboro, Little explained that, because the river is located in a wilderness area where commercial activity is strictly and mightily regulated, they do not run guide trips on the Saint Mary’s.

Still, Lawhorne, a Virginia native, noted that they do make a point of enjoying the wilderness stream on their own every year. “We usually try to hit it once or twice a year on personal fishing trips. It’s a different kind of drainage, with long deep pools, deep cuts, and ledges,” said Lawhorne. “No other stream in the area has the character of the Saint Mary’s.”

Those familiar with the Saint Mary’s know fishing is best at normal or high water levels. Large pools are mostly to blame for this, as they grant trout an ocular advantage over anglers

when the water is flat and just slightly low. “The Saint Mary’s River is one of the clearest streams in the Blue Ridge; and it is super hard to fish when the water gets low,” Lawhorne professed.

These conditions make the spring and early summer great times to fish the Saint Mary’s, if you can beat the crowd. If fishing is your mission during these months, arrive early, fish during the week, or use one of the trailheads with lesser traffic. The area surrounding the falls is reliably crawling with hikers and swimmers.

The height of the summer can be a difficult season throughout the Blue Ridge due to seasonally-low water levels. Large, deep pools make stealth a make-or-break factor when fishing the Saint Mary’s in summer. An increase in swimmers and hikers, together with the strain put on hot-weather-caught brookies, causes this writer to abandon the stream in the dog days.

Fall beckons fewer swimmers to the wilderness area, though hiking is very popular. Fishing can be phenomenal, though anglers should be cautioned against wading over redds, which will begin to appear in early October. Opinions vary on fishing for spawning trout, but the fact is that this ecosystem is already threatened. Take care.

Winter can be a productive season on the Saint Mary’s. Its east-west orientation allows the steep gorge to receive adequate sunlight to warm the water even a few degrees by late-afternoon. It’s often best to select days on the tail end of a warming trend this time of year, and fish deep and slow.

Hatches on the Saint Mary’s are consistent with the rest of the Blue Ridge streams, with the brown and green caddis species, and the blue quill, March brown, grey fox, light Cahill, and sulphur mayflies largely rounding out the entomological community. However, attractor dry flies will take numbers of brook trout throughout the spring and summer into October. Terrestrials are deadly throughout the summer and early fall.

Crayfish are notably abundant in the river, and are an obvious food source for brook trout. Mottled sculpins and blacknose dace are other important sources of protein for brook trout that fin the river, both of which have rebounded well since the stream’s serious acid threats prior to the first liming. “The Saint Mary’s is big enough that you can fish streamers, which is a rarity in brook trout streams around here,” Lawhorne noted. Fishing these patterns is a welcome change of pace for many Blue Ridge trout anglers

Heaven and High Water

It was an unseasonably cool day for early June in Central Virginia as I made a speed run home from fishing in Tidewater Virginia. Spring had brought with it relentless April showers—storms that kept the smallmouth rivers chocolate brown for weeks in some cases. But rather than mope about the bass fishing, my brother, Phillip, and I made other plans. The Saint Mary’s River was a destination we had not yet explored and, as a high-elevation trout stream, it promised clear, fishable water under the circumstances. I made it home by late morning, unpacked, repacked, and hit the road.

We found the lower parking lot just outside of Stuarts Draft half full, though most cars displayed evidence of transporting hikers, not anglers. We resolved to hike to the falls before

rigging up, to try to escape the bulk of the sightseers. One group, a father and his two sons, passed us coming downstream. They camped the night prior on the upper river, fished in the morning, and reported catching 40 fish. By the time we reached the renowned cascade, it was all we could do to keep the rods in the tubes.

Above the falls, we rigged up and headed upstream, both armed with fine leaders and dry flies. I ushered Phillip towards the first pool we came to. New to fishing, he had not yet been graced by the presence of a mountain brook trout, and it was my mission to remedy that misfortune.

As he moved into position, I began surveying the pool to help guide him. It was unlike any I had ever seen in the Blue Ridge. The head bubbled blue and white with oxygen, the whitewater from the plunge sinking several feet down. A deep undercut bank on the left looked promising, as did the monumental quartzite boulder that split the tailout in half. The intricate seams and pillows surely held countless fish.

A yell redirected my attention as a quick trout set put Phillip in contact with his first native brook trout.

As we fished on, I was continually amazed at the water we discovered. Some runs were too deep to wade, requiring me to climb out of the river and proceed upstream on land. Others were shallow and swift, but stippled with chunky river rock, providing plenty of lies for our quarry.

We hooked and caught fish in every situation, as they appeared to be actively feeding. A beetle drifted through riffles just inches deep accounted for a dozen fish, many of which could be seen with a sharp eye, identified in the clear water by fiery fins spread about their dark figure like airplane wings.

Morning had turned to afternoon when I noticed a moderate hatch coming off the water. An Elk Hair Caddis cast side-armed under overhanging limbs and against a rock ledge brought several fish to the surface to investigate. The biggest of the lot was quickest on the draw, and engulfed the fly in a fluid motion. My modest three-weight bowed with the fish's weight, but soon brought to hand the shimmering form of a male brook trout of 10 inches.

Fly fishing the Blue Ridge in spring is heaven on earth; and the unique character of the Saint Mary's River is an added treat.

SAINT MARY'S RIVER

NOTEBOOK

When: Year-round, though the water gets low and the hikers and swimmers plentiful during the height of the summer, when it's best to let the natives rest.

Where: West-central Virginia, east of I-81, just south of Stuart's Draft.

Access: The lower river can be accessed from FS Road 41, which leads to the trailhead of the river trail. The upper river can be accessed by hiking down from the Blue Ridge Parkway on the

Mine Bank Creek Trail near the Fork Mountain Overlook, or from the Green Pond trailhead reached via FS Road 162. Both routes require a long hike through wilderness abounding with treacherous bluffs and rock gardens.

Headquarters: Stuart's Draft is the closest town. *Lodging:* Rock-n-Creek Cabin, (540) 377-9383, www.rockncreekcabin.com; Sugar Tree Inn, (540) 377-2197, www.sugartreeinn.com; primitive camping is permitted in the Wilderness Area. *Information:* Glenwood-Pedlar Ranger District, (540) 291-2188, www.fs.fed.us; Virginia Wilderness Committee, (540) 464-1661, www.vawilderness.org; Greater Augusta Regional Chamber of Commerce, (540) 324-1133, www.augustava.com.

Appropriate gear: 3- and 4-wt. rods, floating line.

Useful fly patterns: Foam beetle, Royal Wulff, Royal Humpy, Mr. Rapidan, Stimulator, Elk Hair Caddis, CK Nymph, Hare's Ear Nymph, Clawdad, Woolly Bugger.

Necessary accessories: Chest waders/boots, polarized sunglasses, headlamp, backpack, plenty of water, food, hiking boots, emergency supplies, map/GPS (with extra batteries), first aid kit (including snake and spider bite remedies as potent members of both inhabit the area), fine-meshed silicone landing net, dry fly floatant.

Nonresident license: \$8/1-day, \$21/5-day, and \$47/annual. *National Forest permit:* \$4. *Information/Purchase:* www.dgif.virginia.gov.

Fly shops/guides: *Waynesboro:* South River Fly Shop, (540) 942-5566, www.southernriverflyshop.com.

Books/maps: *Flyfisher's Guide to Virginia* by David Hart; *Fly Fishing Virginia* by Beau Beasley; *Virginia Atlas and Gazetteer* by DeLorme Mapping.

Featured Fly Dressings

CK Nymph (1)

Hook: Mustad R73, # 8-14

Thread: Black 6/0

Tail: Mallard flank barred, dyed wood duck

Weight: Lead wire

Body: Black yarn

Hackle: One webby grizzly hackle trimmed short

Note: The next-most-effective color in this pattern is yellow. Match thread to body color.

Adjust wire widths as you step up or down in hook size.

Mr. Rapidan (2)

Hook: Standard dry fly, # 12-18

Thread: Brown 8/0

Tail: Moose body or mane

Body: Fly-Rite quill Gordon/brown drake yellow dubbing or a similar blend of dry fly dubbing

Wing: Yellow calf tail

Hackle: Two cree hackles