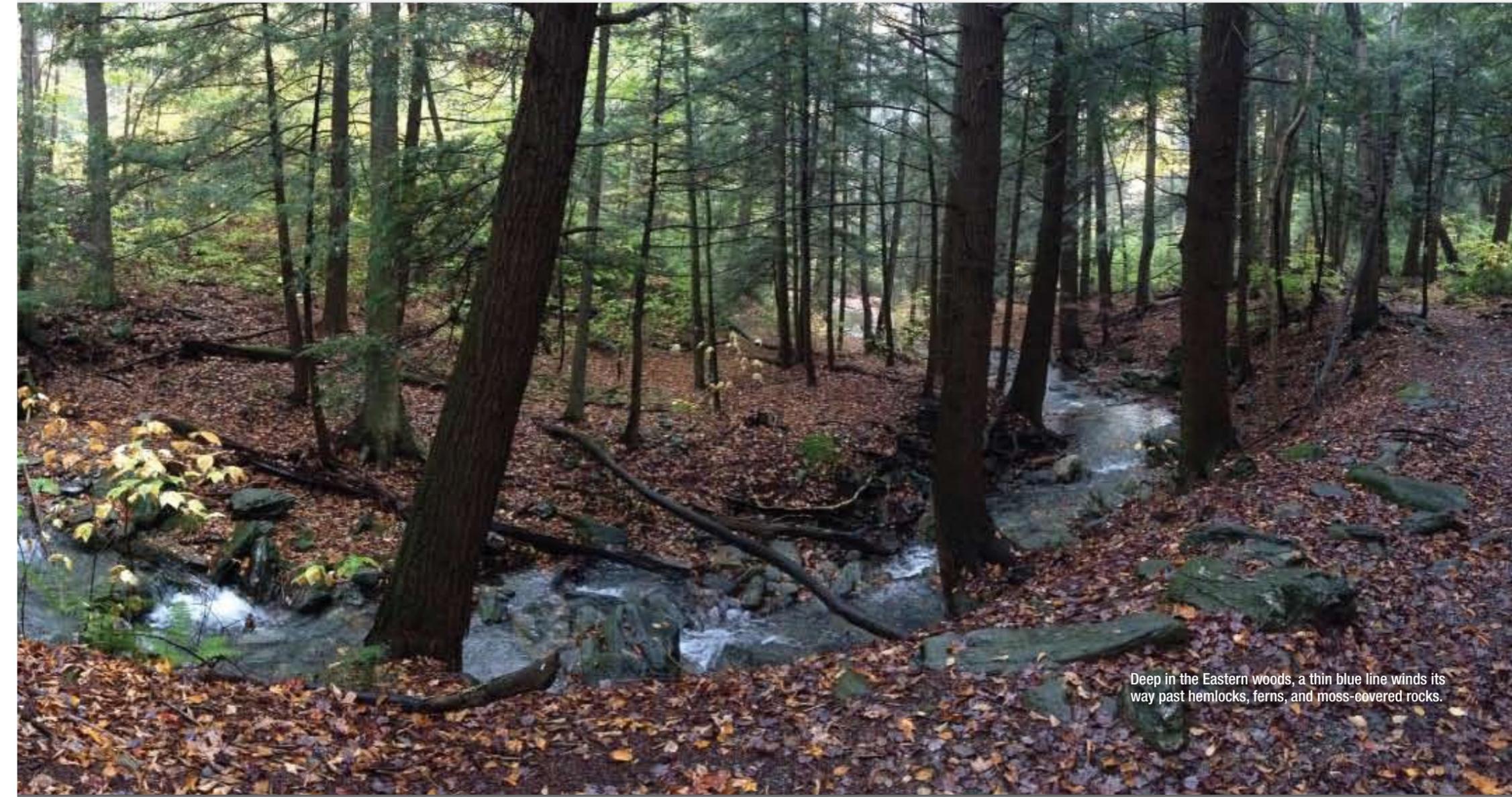


Upstream,

What's the best tactical approach on a high-gradient mountain stream? Let the brookies be your guide.

by Steve Culton

Downstream,



Deep in the Eastern woods, a thin blue line winds its way past hemlocks, ferns, and moss-covered rocks.

Small Stream



BOTH BY TODD KUHRT

nnumerable streams from Maine to Georgia are home to wild brook trout. In fact, *Salvelinus fontinalis* is the only trout that is native to much of the eastern United States (though technically, the brook trout is a char). They love cold, clean water, and their presence is a benchmark for measuring healthy habitat. Despite the drastic overall reduction in the species' historic range, with sufficient food, canopy, and the proper pH, local populations still thrive.

The high-gradient mountain streams that Eastern brook trout prefer are unique, and because of their varied structure and size, they offer fly fishermen a rich diversity of water types and angling challenges. In some spots, the brook might be narrow enough to leap across. In others, there can be plunge pools that are too deep to wade. And some streams are less a stream than a series of connected waterfalls.

Common to all these habitats, however, are the highly opportunistic brook trout. Put yourself in their place. You live your entire life in this microcosm. If it's deep and isolated, you might never leave the pool you were born in. You have a diet of midges, caddis, stoneflies, and mayflies. When ants and beetles go for a swim, you eagerly pick them off. If you're really lucky, salamanders and slimy sculpins share the water with you. But the current is zipping along, and you usually have just one shot to eat what's coming at you. That's why wild brookies are the kamikaze of salmonids: They'll leap at your fly with reckless abandon, and most of the time are not very picky about what you throw at them or how it is presented.

So, what do you do when your favorite fly and presentation are not working? For years, I've experimented with different approaches and presentations on small, high-gradient Eastern streams. What I've learned has transformed the way I fish them. If one method isn't working, it doesn't necessarily mean there aren't brookies—or they're not in the mood to eat. It just means you might need to switch things up a little.

Upstream Dry Fly

The theory behind an upstream dry fly presentation is simple: Fish from where the trout can't see you. On a typical mountain stream, the head of a pool is a popular congregation point for brookies. They enjoy the cover of the white-water spillage from the pool above, and they get first dibs on anything that washes down. I'm amazed at the visual acuity of brook trout; their ability to pick a dry fly out of the maelstrom is astonishing. If I lose sight of my fly in the white water, I assume that it sank. Many times, though, a fish has pulled it under. The brookies you'll catch this way are the ones I call the eager beavers. They often rise to the first presentation. Sometimes they're not looking up, and it takes a few drifts to get their attention.

By positioning yourself at the tailout of a pool, you maintain a high level of stealth. On a terraced stream layout, you can stand in the run below the pool you're casting to. If there are large boulders in the tailout, you can use those to obscure your presence. Always be careful where you wade. If it's spawning season

(fall for brook trout), make sure you're not walking through a redd. Redds are fairly easy to spot; they look like a clean-swept area on the stream bottom.

Many high-gradient brooks lie deep within gorges, pools locked between stark rock walls, with waterfalls at their head. The only place to stand is in the tailout, so you have no choice but to fish upstream. While you can expect to catch a lot of brookies fishing dry flies upstream, there are drawbacks.

On some longer, more languid pools, your fly line might spook the fish the moment it hits the water. Even if you approach carefully, you can still startle brookies that are sitting in tailouts. You'd be surprised how often that happens. On one stream I fish, there's a pool with a long, shallow tailout that always holds brookies, even on sunny days. You simply can't get near them from behind. That's a perfect situation to switch dry fly tactics.

Downstream Dry Fly

The biggest advantage to the downstream dry is that the trout sees the fly before he sees anything else. In the situation just described, that's critical. You can cover the entire length of a pool this way, fly first, and get a natural drift in the bargain. When I'm fishing a downstream dry, I sometimes use what I call the drift cast. Say a pool is 30 feet long. I'll strip off about 25 feet of line (remember, you've got a leader and tippet to account for) and drop the fly in the current at my feet. As the fly begins to move downstream, I'll begin feeding line into the drift. By constantly keeping one hand on the line, I'm ready to set the hook the moment a strike happens.

If there are no takes, you have three choices at drift's end: retrieve the fly by picking the entire line up off the water; retrieve the fly by dragging it back upstream; or just let the fly sit in position and wake. If you get the sense that you're dealing with uber-spooky fish, the first option may be your best choice. A word of caution, though. Don't be too demonstrative with your rod motion, and make sure you have enough clearance behind you. Otherwise, your fly will end up in streamside forest cover.

Dragging a fly across the surface is anathema to purists, but take a page from Atlantic salmon and steelhead anglers who fish wading dries. Wild brookies are suckers for a moving fly. If you choose to retrieve by dragging the fly back, get ready for explosive strikes. You may also pull your fly just under the surface on the retrieve, and sometimes that's the right trigger for a strike. Don't worry about style points here. You can always tell your friends later that you were taking fish on emergers.

By letting the fly wake at drift's end, you're drawing attention to it. Wet fly anglers have a term for this: the

Keep It Simple

A basic kit of dries and subsurface patterns is all you need for mountain brookies. Hook size matters, though, because it's a lot easier for a 4-inch char to get its mouth around a size 20 than a size 12 fly. If you're missing strikes, try going a hook size smaller. Here are four patterns—a dry, a wet, a nymph, and a streamer—that are consistent producers for me.



Ginger Elk-Hair Caddis

Bushy. Buggy. Simple. Sometimes that's all you need to catch wild brookies.

HOOK: 1X fine, sizes 14 through 20.

THREAD: Tan 8/0.

BODY: Golden Brown Hare-Tron, palmered with brown dry fly hackle.

RIB: Fine gold wire.

WING: Small clump of ginger elk hair.



Gray Hackle Peacock

I give this classic wet a tungsten bead head and some wire under the body to get it down quickly in the deep, fast water. Fish it in the dangle, the swing, or stripped.

HOOK: TMC 5263, size 14.

THREAD: Black 6/0.

BEAD: Copper, tungsten.

TAIL: Crimson hackle fibers.

BODY: Peacock herl over lead-free wire.

HACKLE: Grizzly hen.



Golden Knight

This streamer is based on a sand eel pattern I fish for stripers, but you can see its lineage in classic bucktails like the Mickey Finn.

HOOK: Your favorite streamer hook—smaller is better.

THREAD: Black.

BODY: Gold braid.

WING: 10 hairs each of white, yellow, and orange bucktail, taken from the tip of the tail, mixed, under two strands blue flash, under four strands black Krystal Flash.



Little PT

An easy-to-tie nymph that makes an excellent dropper off a bushy dry.

HOOK: Size 16 to 20.

BEAD: Copper tungsten.

THREAD: Brown 8/0.

TAIL/BODY: Three or four pheasant tail fibers over working thread tapered from the bead to the tail.

RIB: Counterwrapped fine copper wire.

When you're fishing a pool that is at the base of a precipitous drop, you have no choice but to fish upstream.

TODD KUHRT





If you're fishing a pool where it's easy for the brookies to spot you, use the natural landscape as cover.

and slash at the dry. That's certainly not a bad thing.

One of the advantages of fishing upstream subsurface is that the brookies can see the fly coming at them from a long way. That being said, casting a subsurface fly upstream is my least favorite way to fish for brook trout. I use it only when I have no other approach to a pool. The presentation is problematic because of the nature of the environment: small, often fast water. The moment a fly sinks below the surface, it becomes fair game. I find myself scrambling to get tight to the line quickly enough, and I often feel the pull of a strike that I missed.

If the water is very deep, and you want to sink the fly quickly, put a BB shot on the tippet at the head of the dropper fly, or use a fly with a tungsten bead and wire on the shank. I have yet to encounter the wild brook trout who thought a BB shot looked out of place on the tippet. To keep the fly off the bottom, and to keep it moving toward me, I begin stripping as soon as I make my cast.

Some brookies will chase the fly the entire length of the pool, nipping all the way until the fly is at your feet. It's fun to watch, but when I'm committed to the subsurface cause, I much prefer fishing downstream.

Downstream Subsurface

In any given year, my biggest wild brookies come on the downstream subsurface fly. You have a multitude of presentation options. Dead drift. Jig. Swing. Dangle. Strip. Sometimes all on the same cast.

Start by jiggling a weighted wet fly or streamer in the white water at the head of a pool. You don't need much fly line to do this, and you're not so much casting as you are dunking the fly into the brook. As with any downstream presentation, be aware of the structure of the pool and its surroundings, and use a stealthy approach to make sure you don't spook the fish. Move the fly to the edges of the white water with your rod tip, working every slot you see.

Next, strip a little more line out and cast the fly along the current seams beyond the white water. Move your rod tip toward the center of the stream, let the fly swing across—and hold on. If you don't have a customer, let the fly dangle. Sway your rod tip

Small-Stream Gear

ROD: Think small—shorter rods in the 6- to 7-foot range. You'll be dealing with cramped casting quarters, so choose the right tool for the job. I have a preference for very slow-action rods. The weight rating is up to you, but remember that your quarry is measured in ounces, not pounds. My favorite small-stream rod is a custom 7-foot fiberglass blank rated for 3- to 6-weight lines. (I use a 5-weight.)

LINE: I do a lot of roll casts and bow-and-arrow casts—as well as precision casts around saplings and deadfall—so I want a line that loads the rod quickly. A double-taper floating line does that job well, and when one end wears out you can just reverse it.

REEL: My small-stream reel is simply a line-storage device. Save your reel dollars for steelhead.

LEADER AND TIPPET: Matching your tapered leader length to rod length is a good rule of thumb. I typically use 4X or 5X tippet, and if your flies end up in streamside branches as much as mine do, you'll be happy with a stouter material.

Upstream Subsurface

I don't do a lot of nymphing for wild brookies; the vast majority of my subsurface fishing comes in the form of wets and streamers. If I do fish a nymph, it's usually as a dropper tied off the bend of a bushy dry with one to two feet of 5X or 6X tippet. The dry acts as a strike indicator, but brookies will frequently ignore the nymph



When you hold your quarry in your hands, there's a great deal of romance in thinking that you may be the first human that fish has ever seen.

back and forth, letting the fly cut across the current. (Remember, brookies love a moving target.) This is an ideal presentation for soft-hackled wets and streamers.

Of course, you should also try a conventional down-and-across cast with a strip retrieve. If you have room, don't be bashful about throwing a mend or two to help sink your fly. Try pausing the fly during your retrieve. You never know what might draw a strike.

If I can, I like to fish walled-in pools from above, crouching on the rock ledges that form its boundaries. Because these pools are typically very deep, it can be a chore to induce a fish to rise to a dry. Subsurface is a different story. Wild brookies are curious and always interested in new visitors to their world, especially if it looks like something good to eat. To ensure you're getting down as deep as you can, use shot or a heavily weighted fly, and make sure your leader is completely submerged. If you lose contact with your fly, watch the tip of the fly line for strikes.

Ultimately, there's no substitute for getting out on the water and putting these tactics to practical use. Experiment with different approaches on your favorite small stream. What proves fruitless on one day may light up the brook on another. That joy of discovery will keep you coming back for more. And the nice thing is, the brookies will always tell you when you've gotten it right.

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12 under 8

Small streams and delicate flies call for short rods. Here are a dozen popular rods under eight feet well-suited to brookie streams, with options to fit any budget.

MANUFACTURER	MODEL	LENGTHS	LINE WEIGHTS	SECTIONS	PRICE
Cabela's	Three Forks	7'6"	3	3	\$50
Cortland	Brook	6'6" and 7'3"	3	4	\$200
Echo	Echo 3	7'6" to 7'9"	3, 4	4	\$350
L.L. Bean	Pocketwater	6'6" to 7'10"	3, 4, 5	4	\$195 to \$210
Loomis	Whisper Creek GLX	7'9"	3, 4	3	\$640
Orvis	Superfine Touch	6' to 7'6"	1, 2	3 and 4	\$495
Redington	Torrent	7'6"	3	4	\$250
Sage	Circa	7'9"	2, 3	4	\$750
Scott	F2	6' to 8'2"	2, 3, 4, 5	3 and 4	\$645
St. Croix	Avid	6' and up	2 through 7	2 and 4	\$250 to \$290
Thomas & Thomas	ESP	7'6"	3, 4, 5	4	\$360
Winston	Boron Ilt	7'6"	3, 4	4	\$755