



July 2008

Driftless Days . . .

Roderick Haig-Brown once wrote that it's easy to learn new things on unfamiliar water; what's truly difficult is to learn something new on familiar water. I often think of this when fishing the customary streams of the Driftless Region, and perhaps that is why I never get bored fishing water I've been on hundreds of times. A different season, weather pattern, stream condition, fishing partner or even my own attitude all seem to combine randomly on any given day to create yet another new and unique fly fishing experience. The learning process is never-ending, and to the imaginatively curious fisherman and fly-tier, local waters remain both a constant challenge and great source of joy. Not too many seasons ago I remember fishing on the Upper Iowa River late in the afternoon on a September evening, well within walking distance of my home. I had landed a number of good trout, as well as two nineteen-inch smallmouth bass, all on dry flies as it happened. As I walked back home across the meadow, I looked up and was startled by a full harvest moon rising above the limestone bluffs along the river. The sky was a deep evening blue, and the last of the sun's rays were at rest at the treetops, lighting up the incredible autumn foliage of the season. A chill was in the air, and I knew another great fishing season was coming to its appropriate end. Or better yet, its fruition. And I knew there was not another spot on earth as beautiful as the one in which I was standing. This is what Wendell Berry was referring to when he gave the title Travelling At Home to one of his recent books.

Or maybe it's simply that I like to fish!

Even so, it *is* interesting to get out of Dodge now and then and see some different sights. It's refreshing and invigorating, and it doesn't have to be expensive. A few short seasons ago I had the opportunity to fish a few streams in the Appalachian Mountains of Virginia, the happy guest of Robert and Sally Schultz, who had relocated to Roanoke and Roanoke College after many years of residence in Decorah and careers at Luther College. Robert and I go back quite a few years and have fished together I'm not sure how many times. Perhaps two hundred or more? So we "fell to" and fished the mountain streams around Roanoke as hard as our wives would allow, which was pretty hard as Elizabeth and Sally are both professional fly fishing widows. At one point I asked Bob if he was "fished out" yet. He said no, but he most certainly wanted to continue working on it. Definitely my type of guy. One of my fondest memories of that trip remains standing in the current at Roaring Run fishing a pool that was literally at eye-level, just upstream. Roaring Run is in places a series of staircase waterfalls and pools, and we really had to be quick on the strike to hook trout. Which we were.



We climbed one incredible waterfall and both reflected that the day would come, hopefully in the greatly distant future, when we physically would not be able to make the climb. I broke a rod on a large fish in the pool below that waterfall, and had to leave the rest of the trout to Bob that evening. On a surprise side venture, I had the opportunity to hold a signed first-edition copy of Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass in the Roanoke College Library's Rare Books Room. There's more to life than fishing. There's literature, too.

And then last fall I was able to return the guiding favor, on a more humble scale, when Robert came back to Decorah for a weekend writer's conference. I picked him up at the Rochester airport and we heading for "The Stream" for an afternoon and evening of fishing, just like the old days. His plane was an hour late but of course I had calculated that into the guiding equation. When we arrived at our fishing destination, we geared up and walked about a half mile to where I'd anticipated the fishing would be good. We looked upstream for thirty seconds and then the Blue Wing Olive hatch started. Just as I had planned! I believe I recorded somewhere just how many trout we landed that day, but I think that's where the number will stay. It doesn't always happen that way, but this time it did. A stupendous Blue Wing Olive hatch is always a good way to begin a writer's conference. The proof is in the pudding; shortly after the hatch, Robert had another fine book accepted for publication.

My good friend Altoona Joe now has a family cabin in "Northern Wisconsin". In my own



defense, I must say I knew Joe for some years **before** he and his family built the cabin. The fact that we've been able to use it as an Extremely Posh Fishing Resort is just one of those perks of life I can't do anything about. I don't know Joe's brothers-in-law, but I have a deep sense of gratitude towards them nonetheless. Joe and I were able to make two long weekend trips to Wisconsin in 2007, one early in the season and one later. A definite highlight of northern Wisconsin fishing is Duncan Creek, the stream from which Wisconsin's famed brook trout propagation program began many years ago. Going to Duncan Creek and fishing for brook trout there was like a pilgrimage for me. Later this year I'll comment more specifically on



the wonders of Wisconsin trout fishing.

And then there's South Dakota!

In the past two years, I've had the opportunity to experience Black Hills fly fishing on two occasions, both trips being about a week in length. My first trip was in the autumn of 2006, just before the Labor Day weekend. The second was quite recently, during the second week in June of this year. I've spoken to a few fishermen who've said they didn't really have much luck fly fishing in the Black Hills, but there could be reasons for that. One could certainly be bad luck, another bad timing, both of which can happen on any fishing venture and quite probably will at some point. Another factor can be bad weather, also a perennial problem. But I've noticed that many fishermen hit the Black Hills very briefly on their way to other fishing grounds further

west in Wyoming or Montana, and I've wondered whether they haven't given the area adequate study. If you fish Rapid Creek in Rapid City or below the Pactola Dam and then give up, you might come away landing few, if any, trout. There are other places to fish, particularly if you're there long enough to learn something about them.

I find many things of interest in fishing the Black Hills trout streams. First of all, it's a very accessible location, roughly 650 miles from Decorah, or about a ten-hour drive, the majority of it being interstate travel. The drive up, the drive back and a stay of a few days makes for a very reasonable trip. For me, it's just far enough to be an adventure, but not so far as to be too time-consuming or expensive. The grandeur of the mountains, which rise to the range of seven-thousand feet, and the Ponderosa pines which cover them are truly breathtaking, and I've certainly found the area to be a unique and incredibly beautiful place to fish. Virtually all of the areas' trout streams originate as snowmelt and runoff from the higher elevations and could be characterized as "freestone" waters as opposed to our Driftless Region's "spring creeks". Then, rather oddly, most of them disappear entirely as they work their way eastward into the dry and arid foothills of the Badlands. Most of the fly fishing occurs at higher elevations, though all of the streams have regular flats and still waters to fish in addition to generally mild rapids.

Another interesting feature of the Black Hills is the vast array of things to do and see other than the trout waters themselves. If you stay anywhere within the approximate center of the Black Hills system of parks, you can make very easy day trips to a plethora of potential sites of interest. Actually, you can fish in the morning, make a side venture to a point of interest in the afternoon and easily get back in time to fish again in the evening if you wish; any variation can work. So it's a nice place to bring one's family or friends, get some excellent fly fishing scheduled, and still catch many other interesting sites or area events. Or if the spirit moves you, you can fish from dawn to dark one day and site-see the next.



Mount Rushmore and the Crazy Horse monuments are almost a must-see, as is Custer State Park and the Needles Highway just north of Custer. Custer State Park is a great place to drive through in search of wildlife, including buffalo, mountain goats, bighorn sheep, antelope, muledeer and the occasional mountain lion. The Black Hills have a number of caves one can tour, including Wind Cave in Custer State Park, generally considered the most superb in the vicinity. The granite pinnacles along the Needles Highway are spectacular, particularly if you don't mind a hairpin road that runs through a number of one-lane tunnels. Mount Rushmore, Custer State Park and the Needles Highway can all be briefly toured in a single day, though you can spend as much time as you like in any of these three locations. Rapid City itself, the town of Wall and Wall Drug and the historic town of Deadwood are interesting as well, particularly if you find you need an "urban fix". Any of a number of easily found information centers provide excellent maps, brochures and schedules of events for the entire area. Similar information of course can also be found on South Dakota visitor websites.

Of the two times I've fished the Black Hills, the first trip over Labor Day weekend in the fall of 2006 was best for me fishing-wise. The water was low and clear on Rapid Creek above Silver City, and I did extremely well with hoppers and crickets. Rapid Creek above Silver City is a

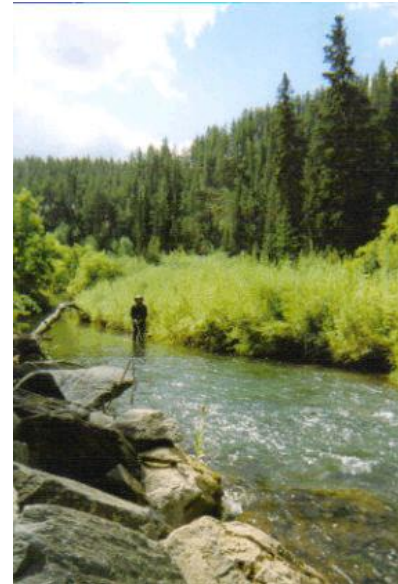
more wild and scenic river to my mind than it is below the Pactola Reservoir, where it essentially becomes a heavily fished tailwater, and I guess the upper section is more to my fishing taste. All you have to do is find Silver City on a map, drive to it and take the gravel road paralleling the river about a half-mile west, where you can park in a couple of locations and fish upstream. The Deerfield Trailway, an old railway taken up and converted into a hiking and mountain-biking trail, leads upstream for many miles and crosses the water a number of times. You can hike or bike up and stop to fish wherever you like. I have run into very few fishermen in this area on both trips, particularly on weekdays. Yet there is a great deal of water to fish even if there are other fishermen out and about.

Our second trip this past June proved more difficult fishing-wise than the earlier autumn trip, but South Dakota has experienced the same unusually heavy rainfall we have had here in the Midwest, though not quite so dramatically, and Rapid Creek was too off-color to fish until about two days after we arrived. The wet and cool conditions affected the dry fly hatches, and we didn't see a lot of rising trout all week long. As it turned out, Rapid Creek fished decently with streamers later in the week, and my friend Altoona Joe did quite well with the dry fly on tailwater streams throughout the week, even though there were very few flies or rises on the water. I really don't know how he did it; you'll have to ask **him**. I'm sure it won't be the last time I'll get out-fished! Castle Creek is a smaller tailwater stream flowing out from the Deerfield Reservoir, entering Rapid Creek about eight miles above Silver City. It is definitely worth a good look.

My favorite fly fishing website for the area is at www.flyfishsd.com. They even have stream-flow statistics. If you can hit Rapid Creek at less than 90 cfs, you'll do just fine. You can scroll through the site and find a great deal of information on both Black Hills fly fishing and the Black Hills in general.

Accommodations are plentiful throughout the entire park system and include motels, rental cabins, RV parking and tent camping. Much of this can be found on the web. I would certainly suggest making reservations at the accommodations you choose before going. On our own two trips to the Black Hills, Elizabeth and I have stayed at **Happy Trails Cabins**, located in Silver City. We've had two wonderful vacations there and plan to go again as soon as we can. You can walk to Rapid Creek from your cabin and catch trout for breakfast before anyone else is up!

Rita and Tally Chapman are the cabin owners and will make certain you are comfortable and very well oriented. Bring along a couple of good books, too; what a wonderful place to read and relax. Their website is www.happytrailscabins.com; you can view lots of information there, including photos of the cabins and their interiors, prices, a booking calendar and local points of interest. The cabins all have fully-equipped kitchens, and all you have to do is bring food. Items requiring refrigeration can be picked up in easily found Rapid City grocery stores before driving the final leg to Silver City, about forty miles from Rapid City.



Wherever you venture this summer and fall, I wish you the best of fishing **and** traveling. And I hope to see you on the water!

Be Vigilant!

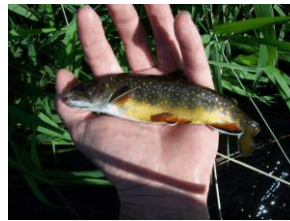
“Red” Canoe

Trout Unlimited

Iowa Driftless Chapter

*“I went out to the hazel wood,
Because a fire was in my head,
And cut and peeled a hazel wand,
And hooked a berry to a thread;
And when white moths were on the wing,
And moth-like stars were flickering out,
I dropped the berry in a stream
And caught a little silver trout.”*

*from “The Song Of Wandering Aengus”
William Butler Yeats*



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