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WALKING THE STREAMS

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After a short loop walk along a ridge with views of both the noble Catskills and the green, rounded Litchfield Hills, I returned to the campsite by the river. My tent balanced carefully on a sandy promontory, surrounded on three sides by water. Black birch and maple trees rose around the small but well-situated site at the heart of some of the greatest hiking in Connecticut. I had already spotted a small lizard, chipmunks, a toad, a garter snake that turned to look at me with cold eyes, and several groups of friendly dayhikers. I was here for more than hiking, though. I had come to Macedonia Brook State Park to fish for brook trout, to enjoy the slow evening time of feeding.

Above the campsite on the other side of the road perched an older road, now grassy, curved, and soft. A stone wall held in the path like a dam embracing a flood. Why was it abandoned? The way seemed perfectly sound. But I shouldn't complain. It now made the ideal walker's road, and as I leisurely fished the river I saw dozens of late afternoon couples and families taking advantage of this green gift. Normally, I would have joined them, but today I walked the stream instead.

I don't remember who suggested fly-fishing, my father or me. He lived in Pennsylvania, but visited Connecticut often on business. Once, we walked from the lot at Chatfield Hollow to the "Indian Caves," one of a hundred such sites across the state. Archaeological evidence apparently proves that in pre-Colonial times Indians used the valley for hunting and fishing and the number of items discovered in the vicinity of Indian Council Caves suggest that Native Americans held tribal gatherings there. However, common belief is that these were Indian "homes," a ridiculous prejudice. I'm sure no self-respecting Native American would have made a home here in any of these minor holes in the Connecticut cliffs, unless they had been forced to by the incursions of the Europeans. Perhaps they used them when on walkabouts and on hunting trips, but not as permanent homes. Fellow moderns did use them, however; fire rings and beer cans always litter them. My father and I walked around the cliff and clambered up the trail to the top, where we could look down through the chimney and at the sides of the hollow.

My father was not much of a hiker, though. Our real adventures began on the rivers, which he had loved since he was a child. And so, for my birthday one year he gave me all his old gear, along with a book on the basics. I had fished in my own childhood, but hadn't cast a line in about fifteen years. And I had never used a fly rod, never put on waders and headed down a stream to hunt for trout. This is exactly what my father began to teach me: how to wade, to cast, and to perform all the little functions that make a successful angler. Later, when we began catching trout, he taught me how to clean a fish and how to bake it in my stove.

Connecticut stocks its rivers with over a half million trout and a couple thousand salmon. More than four-thousand of its six-thousand five-hundred and eighty seven miles of rivers and streams have wild trout, as well. This is an astonishing fact, especially considering our small acreage compared to, say our neighbor to the west. On my hikes through the state, I inevitably crossed fishable streams, with angling signs and the occasional lone fisherman, sitting patiently on a stump or wading through the river like a heron. We have some great

fishing, and the most wonderful thing is how close all of it is. Where I grew up in Pennsylvania, the fishable streams and rivers were long drives apart. Here, I could nearly hop from one to another, fishing my way across the state, and don't think I haven't considered that option.

On that marvelous first day of my Connecticut fishing experience, my father and I arrived at 6:00 a.m. after many others were already stationed on the picturesque Mill River in Hamden. Leaf-litter and branches choked the brook trails. Avoiding them, we began to wade the stream. Suddenly, a new and electrifying world opened to me. Instead of trail, or greenway, or haunted back road, I was walking a new corridor, full of merry sights and sounds. Fish appeared beneath my feet, swimming frantically for cover. Restless, spring birds swept back and forth from bank to bank. Along that one short stretch of the Mill under the looming head of the Sleeping Giant, I saw a hawk dive at a duck, an osprey catch a fish, a snapper turtle and water snake wriggle past my legs, and legions of trout waiting solemnly in deep, clear pools. And I met dozens of fishermen, all friendly and inquisitive. "What fly are you using?" "How many today?" "Water's too low, ain't?" My father and I drank morning coffee together, shared stories of outdoor experiences, and reveled in our fish.

At Macedonia Brook years later, I lit a small fire to roast potatoes. While they warmed, I cooked pasta and boiled lemon tea. Wind whispered through the tall trees around the camp, nestled in the hanging brook valley. Hills rose on all sides. The brook curved and curled around boulders and logs. Dragonflies flitted around the campsite – green, blue, brown, and black. A few tried for my small green fly, but changed their minds at the last second, as unfortunately did the fingerling native brook trout. I saw nothing over five inches, but perhaps they just knew better and hid. My tiny army-style tent had not been used in eight years, too small to comfortably fit two. But for this lonely fishing expedition it was sadly perfect.

I planned on heading to the mighty Housatonic River the next morning, where my dad and I had our most successful expedition ever. I actually convinced him to camp with me at Housatonic Meadows State Park, meeting there like two gypsies. Then, we walked the river, step by step, catching trout and smallmouth bass. The warm August water made waders unnecessary, my sandals gripping the slippery underwater rocks. Eager birds dove in the canyon, catching mosquitoes and flies in the evening air. Other fishermen remained sedentary, standing and casting, switching flies with frustration. We explored forward and backward, side to side, wandering the stream. The waist-deep water rushed by. That day I knew for sure I had found a new perspective and terrain to explore. This walking was different, allowing for a slower and more precise experience. I could feel every step, examine every overhanging tree, and live every moment with absolute care.

After a night in front of a roaring fire, we drove to nearby Kent Falls State Park. It was not a walker's paradise, though the staircase up the nine-waterfall cascade made for an amazing quarter mile. I scaled it while my father sat on the rock ledges by the bottom-most pool and fly-fished. He caught seven native brook trout in only half an hour, letting a nymph drift with the water over the falls, where the unsuspecting fish gulped it down. Then, he drove me back to the trailhead for the classic Lion's Head hike and left for home in Pennsylvania, happy with his impressive catch. More than the fish for me, though, was time spent walking the stream. And somehow, more than that was time spent with my father doing it. Although I often chased the eternally slippery quarry from pool to pool on my own, having my father there made it greater.

All these memories were with me as I relaxed by that June fire, the smell of citronella and woodsmoke mingling pleasantly in the summer air. The constant gurgle of the brook comforted and surrounded me. Ferns and flowers encircled the sandy area. A park ranger came and talked to me briefly, handing me a car permit. "You've got the luxury suite here!" I knew it. The evening deepened and clouds covered the sky. Forecast for tomorrow was rain. Bah! If I stopped walking every time rain became imminent, I would never get anything accomplished.

The sound of the stream took me back again, to earlier that spring when the circle became complete. On the first day of fishing season, my brother joined my father and me at the usual 6:00 a.m. and parked under the shadow of Sleeping Giant by the Mill River, named for the corn mill installed by the founders of New Haven centuries earlier. Like my father, my brother was not exactly a walker, but he was here to share this experience. The dark, muddy river rushed along, higher than I had ever seen it. I tried to fish the upper section,

but the murky water splashed into my hip boots. So, I walked along the old quarry road, past where I could see my father teaching my brother how to cast a fly, and found a miraculously unfished section of stream. I immediately snared a nice trout. Showing my family this abnormally productive stretch of stream, which no other angler had found yet, I smiled at their enthusiasm. My brother hooked his first fish in twenty years. I caught another and my father quickly captured his limit. In the shadowless afternoon, we attempted to fish the gorgeous Farmington River, with its white, dinosaur egg boulders and steep canyon walls, but it was running about a foot too high and we caught only spring air. That didn't matter. I was following the path of Connecticut's shining rivers with my family, and if this was the only way I could get them into the forest with me, then so be it.

We fished the Quinnipiac Gorge in Cheshire, where I caught an ancient trout, so heavy that I accidentally dropped it back into the cool brown stream. We fished the Salmon River near Colchester, under the Comstock covered bridge, where my father and I walked up the gorge and down the stream, feeling every inch of the stony bottom imprinted on our footsoles. I fought a huge trout for ten minutes before landing it, then triumphantly baked it for lunch in butter and lemon, enjoying every delicate morsel of my victory. And when my brother moved to Springfield, MA, we fished the deep-running Scantic River northeast of Hartford, catching browns and rainbows, meeting in the middle like all families must do.

I caught nothing that summer evening on the solemn Macedonia Brook. The fire died, the night closed in, and I slept. The next morning thunderstorms blew in, ruining my plans for another morning of fishing, in spite of my tough attitude the night before. But none of that mattered. I vowed to bring my family to that brook next time, promised to ramble even farther along that tiny, loitering stream, and maybe even get them to stroll the old grassy road with me. Trout were not the only reason I made my slow, unhurried way along the little rivers and streams of green Connecticut.

Eric D. Lehman is a professor of English at the University of Bridgeport and has previously published travel stories, fiction, essays, and poetry in various magazines and journals, such as *Hackwriters*, *Switchback*, *Nature's Wisdom*, *Niederngasse*, *Simply Haiku*, *Identity Theory*, *Artistry of Life*, *The Onion Union*, *Voltaire's Inkwell*, *Boots'n'all*, *Mastodon Dentist*, *ken*again*, *Ultraverse*, and *Venture Magazine*.

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