

# Fly Fishing the Catskills



The Catskill region is a densely forested mountainous area of New York State renowned for its rivers and streams, natural beauty and scenic landscapes; and for inspiring many of America's earliest and most famous writers, artists, naturalists and trout fishermen. Catskill rivers such as the Beaverkill, Willowemoc, Esopus and Neversink have been pivotal to the history and development of American fly fishing; these are historic waters that are held dear by men and women who fly fish, not only in this country, but all over the world.

The Catskill region encompasses 5,892 square miles. Within this boundary are 287,500 acres of public lands known as the Catskill Forest Preserve that contain open and forested lands, lakes, ponds, rivers and streams that can be enjoyed freely for hiking, camping, hunting, skiing and, of course, trout fishing.

The Catskills offer more than 1,500 miles of trout streams that vary in character; from small streams one could leap across teeming with brook trout, to rivers large enough to float a drift boat and tempt a brown or rainbow into taking a dry fly.

Originally, only brook trout inhabited the Catskills. They lived only in the cleanest and coldest sections of streams and rivers, mostly near the headwaters and in the smaller tributaries where water temperatures were coolest. By the 1870s, brook trout populations and habitat were reduced by over-fishing and streamside industries that fouled and warmed their waters.

By the early 1880s, rainbow trout from the west coast, and brown trout from Europe, were introduced into Catskill rivers and streams; and their impact cannot be overstated. They thrived and populated lower river environments that were too warm for native brook trout; and they reproduced, creating many new miles of trout fishing.



East Branch Delaware River

The Beaverkill is probably the most well-known of the Catskill fly fishing waters. Most of its famed reputation is based upon the introduction of brown trout. They flourished in its lower waters that were too warm for brook trout. The excellent hatches of surface-riding mayflies; and the coming together of brown trout and the magnificent mayfly hatches created some of the best dry fly fishing in the east. The lower Beaverkill is “big water,” with lengthy riffles containing all of the popular caddis flies and mayflies that fly fishers read about; pools are large, deep, and wide - wide enough to provide plenty of room for a back cast.

Without question, hatches of Quill Gordons, Hendricksons and March Browns are favorites with fly fishers; but it is the Green Drake that causes the most excitement. When this mayfly is hatching, the largest trout in the Beaverkill can be found actively feeding on the surface. The Beaverkill remains popular today, though most fly fishers concentrate along two stretches of Special Regulations water known as “catch and release.” Totalling 5.1 miles; these sections can be fished all year, and they contain excellent populations of brown trout.

The largest tributary to the Beaverkill is the 26-mile-long Willowemoc Creek; and while it, too, is dominated by brown trout, one can find solitude and brook trout in abundance along its forest preserve headwaters.

The most popular water on the Willowemoc is the lower seven miles between Livingston Manor and Roscoe; a stretch of river similar to the lower Beaverkill, with large pools and lengthy food-producing riffles abundant with mayflies, caddis and stoneflies.

As in the Beaverkill, the best fishing is found in the year-round “catch and release” Special Regulations section. This section begins upstream of Elm Hollow Brook and extends downstream 3.7 miles. A favorite location is Hazel Bridge Pool, which has become a gathering place for fly fishers. While most will be fishing, others watch from the bridge, offering advice on what flies to use and pointing out rises to those in the water.

The trout here often feed on midges on the surface, and do so practically every month of the year. Catches of a dozen or more trout are not uncommon, and a size #22 Pheasant Tail Midge or



## Major Catskill Hatches

Insect	April	May	June	July	August	September	October
Quill Gordon	■						
Hendrickson (female)		■					
Red Quill (male)		■					
March Brown		■					
Sulphur Dun			■	■			
Green Drake			■				
Gray Fox			■				
Dun Variant			■	■	■	■	■
Blue Winged Olive		■	■	■	■	■	■
Light Cahill			■	■	■		
Cream Variant			■	■	■		

Griffith's Gnat tied to a 7X tippet works exceptionally well. If trout are not rising at Hazel Bridge Pool, they are probably not rising anywhere else on the Willowemoc.

Although Esopus Creek continues beyond the Ashokan Reservoir, it is the section above the reservoir that is of most interest to trout anglers. From its source near Slide Mountain, it flows approximately 25 miles before reaching the reservoir. Access is provided primarily along the shoulders of Route 28 which parallels the stream from Big Indian to Boiceville. Immediately downstream of Big Indian, the Esopus is of moderate size, with small pools and riffles that are strewn with large boulders, forming excellent pocket water.

The size of the Esopus increases dramatically at Allaben, as additional flow enters from the Shandaken portal, an 18-mile tunnel that transports water from Schoharie Reservoir to Ashokan Reservoir via the Esopus Creek. The volume coming from the portal often exceeds the natural flow of the stream, especially in summer. The cold water that comes from deep in the reservoir is beneficial to the trout fishery.

Below the portal, the Esopus is "big water," with long riffles and deep pools, and stream widths greater than 100 feet. During the spring and summer, Esopus regulars favor high-floating dry flies such as an Elk Hair Caddis, Humpty, or Hair Wing Royal Coachman when fishing fast water. In pools, standards like the Adams, Light Cahill, March Brown and Dun Variant work well. One of the best hatches on the Esopus is the *Isonychia bicolor*, which is imitated by the Dun Variant. While this mayfly may emerge from

May to October, it is most abundant in the fall.

The Esopus Creek and its tributaries are dominated by rainbow trout that are born in the watershed and, in time, migrate

to the Ashokan Reservoir to grow and mature, before they return to the Esopus to reproduce and continue the cycle. There is also a good population of brown trout. DEC surveys have revealed that 75 % of the resident trout populations are wild, making the Esopus one of the most prolific wild trout streams in the Catskills.

Historically, the Esopus is known for its spring run of large rainbows, as well as for the abundant number of smaller rainbows that inhabit its waters. The best time to fish for these large rainbows, some in the two to four-pound range, is from the 1st of April to May 15th. Weighted nymphs, such as a Gold Ribbed Hare's Ear or a Zug Bug, are favorites. Some fly fishers will opt for using split shot and a pair of wet flies, such as a Lead Wing and Royal Coachman.

The 15 mile section of the lower Neversink River from Hasbrouck to Bridgeville, below the Neversink Reservoir is another popular Catskill trout resource. The Neversink is primarily a brown trout fishery and, in recent years, improved water releases from the reservoir have resulted in more wild trout, better growth rates and greater angler satisfaction.

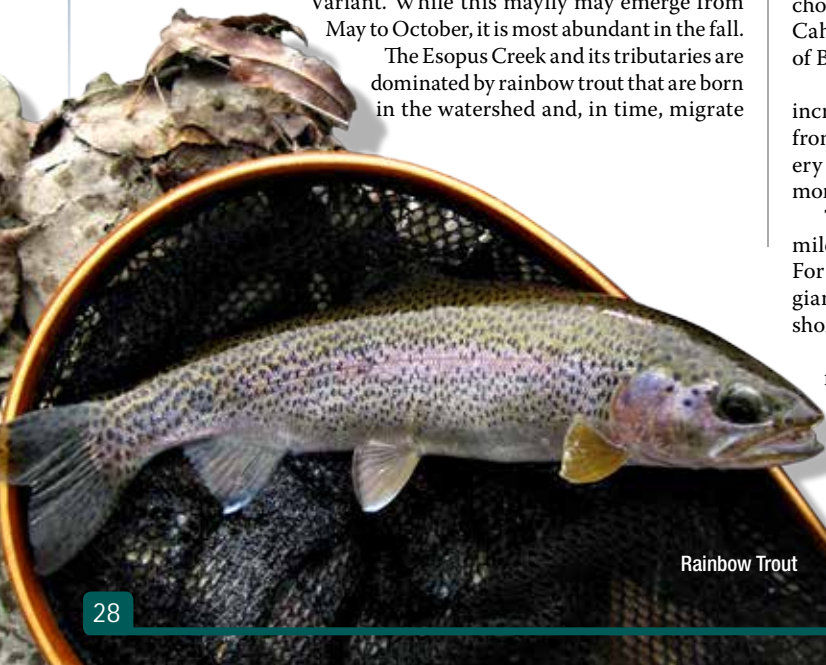
The lower Neversink is a good early-season fishery. April fishing conditions are often better than other streams, since the run-off of melting snows and heavy rains of spring are captured by the reservoir. Spring time flows are clearer and slightly warmer, as water coming from the bottom of the reservoir is generally between 38-41° F, and favorable to trout feeding activity.

Neversink fly hatches are similar to other Catskill rivers. Good choices of flies are the standard Catskill fly patterns, such as the Light Cahill, Hendrickson and Quill Gordon, as well as the various types of Blue Wing Olives and Sulphurs.

The East and West Branches of the Delaware River are becoming increasingly popular with fly fishers. More stable, cold water releases from New York City reservoirs on these rivers have improved the fishery as well as trout fishing conditions, especially during the summer months, giving the Catskills a 'second season.'

The East Branch below Pepacton Reservoir flows approximately 32.6 miles from Downsville to Hancock, where it joins the West Branch. For several miles below Downsville, the East Branch is similar to a giant spring creek. The water is cold year-round, riffles tend to be short and shallow, and pools are long, slow and glassy.

The East Branch offers good summer trout fishing when natural flowing streams become low and warm. In July and August, hatches of Blue Wing Olives and Sulphurs can be incredible, and trout can be found rising all day long; however, East Branch trout can stop feeding or be "put down" by one poor cast. Long, softly placed, accurate casts of small flies tied on tippets of 6X or 7X are a must; and even when properly executed, a trout may stop rising. This



Rainbow Trout

is considered technical fishing, and fly fishers often spend an excessive amount of time changing patterns, searching for “the right fly.”

About 15 miles downstream of Downsville, the East Branch is joined by the Beaverkill, and from this junction down river to Hancock, the character of the river is more natural in appearance. This is “big water” where pools are so large that locally, they are known as “eddies,” with names like Bolton’s Eddy, Fishs Eddy or Pease Eddy.

Although the East Branch upstream of its junction with the Beaverkill is populated mostly by brown trout and a few rainbows, the water downstream contains browns and rainbows in equal numbers. This portion of the lower East Branch has many of the hatches the Catskills are known for, but many trout fishers prefer when Green Drakes are hatching in late May or early June.

In July and August, the West Branch offers good flows of cold water and excellent hatches of Sulphurs and Olives. Infinite numbers of these tiny mayflies cover the water day after day, enticing trout to rise with a frequency not often seen on other rivers. This is challenging fishing, and those who are successful can be rewarded with large trout, most often browns, but on occasion a rainbow or two.

The trout population is dominated by browns; rainbows are fairly common, and brook trout are rare enough that they are a pleasant surprise. The West Branch, like other Catskill rivers, has its devotees who fish its waters through the season and are also year-round stewards, protecting and preserving the exceptional trout fishing it offers.

There are about 16 miles of the lower West Branch between Cannonsville Reservoir and the Village of Hancock; and in this stretch is a two mile section of “catch and release” water that can be fished from April 1st until October 15th. Access is limited, even though Route 17 parallels the West Branch from Deposit to Hancock.

In general, the West Branch is dry fly water that offers great surface activity. However, fishing for its large, steadily rising trout can be

demanding. In many places pools are slow-moving and glassy; trout have plenty of time to look over your fly, causing the conundrum of which fly to use. As a rule, use a fly that is similar to the size and color (light, medium, or dark) of the one that is on the water; but importantly, cast accurately and softly, “timing” the fish as it takes naturals off the surface. Don’t crowd rising trout, and use as fine a tippet as you dare.

Although the waters described previously are the most well known, good fishing can also be found in other Catskill streams including the Little Delaware River, and Rondout, Catskill and Schoharie Creeks.



**Ed Van Put** is a former member of the DEC’s Bureau of Fisheries. He now spends his days fishing the waters of the Catskills. Ed has written numerous books on Catskill flyfishing. He can be contacted at [edvanput@hvc.rr.com](mailto:edvanput@hvc.rr.com).