

Valley Angler

Last Call on the Merrymeeting

by Bill Thompson

A sometime critic of mine has told me, on numerous occasions, that most of my columns are about me not catching fish. In my defense fishing is not all about catching fish, although it is for some. However, in an effort to refute his complaint I have made an effort this season to write more stories in which fish are indeed caught and landed. Up until now I think I have done quite well, unfortunately on my last two outings I came away defeated and with the smell of skunk upon me.

Over the years it has been a semi-annual event for old friend Rick Davidson and I to fish the Merrymeeting River for salmon during the extended season. For whatever reason we didn't go last year, but this year we managed to find the time. It is always good to fish with Rick and this year we had the added bonus of adding Rick's old college roommate to the party.

We all arrived at the river at about ten in the morning and quickly assembled our rods and got into our waders. The Merrymeeting is a popular destination for anglers in the fall and the parking lot was almost filled to capacity. A quick glance at the assembled cars and trucks announced that you were in the company of fly fishers as almost everyone displayed some kind of decal, bumper sticker or license plate that alluded that the owner fly fished. A great many displayed Trout Unlimited decals in their windows and one license plate, on a pick-up, read "FLYFISH".

After gearing up our first stop was on the small foot bridge that crosses the river. This is important and is a ritual practiced by just about all who fish the river. First off you check out the competition and try and figure out where you might find a spot to wade in without causing too much interruption to the already assembled anglers in the river. The second part is even more important. Everyone takes a moment to peer down into the water to look for salmon. Anytime you are anywhere near the bridge there will always be one or two anglers looking over the side of the bridge. The bridge also makes a good central location where fishermen will exchange information. Most Merrymeeting anglers are quite free with information and will tell you where fish have been caught and even show the flies that have been successful. While standing on the bridge you may even witness someone actually hooking and landing a salmon. This always gets the blood flowing and your next step will be to hurry off to find a place to cast in hopes of catching your own.

For the next six hours the three of us cast our arms off, all to no avail. For whatever reason this was not to be our day. None the less we still had a good time and Rick and I during the ride home were able to solve a great many of the world's problems. Rick and I have been fishing together and solving world problems for I think right around twenty-five years now and the world is still in a mess. Apparently all this time no one has been listening to us.

A couple of days later, after our trip, I found myself with a day off and made a second trip to the Merrymeeting. It was a Tuesday and I foolishly thought that the river might be a little less crowded. As soon as I turned down the road that follows along the river I knew that I would not be fishing alone. Should you choose to fish the Merrymeeting leave your sensibilities at home. Behavior that would not be tolerated on any river in the world is accepted here. The one lone exception would have to be the Salmon River in New York, which is the perfect definition of "combat fishing".

Now before I go off sounding like a snob I should point out that there is a certain amount of comradely found on the Merrymeeting not found on the Salmon. Most everyone you meet on the Merrymeeting has an attitude of friendliness and a willingness to share that and makes this a great place to fish. However, it is common place to have another fisherman join you and come much closer than would be accepted in most cases. The Merrymeeting is a small river and is very popular during the short season that is available to anglers in the fall. As a result you just have to get used to the fact that you are going to have company.

I have often thought that a rotation system, like that found on many of the better known salmon rivers around the world, would be the perfect solution for the Merrymeeting. On the other hand if this were to take hold the river just might lose some of its charm.

Despite the number of fishermen present I did find myself alone in one of the more popular spots on the river. This was not to last too long as I was soon joined by another angler. They say that position in life is everything and in fishing this can be very true. The other fellow was just a few feet above me, but he had the right location. Within minutes of his entering the water he was on to a good salmon. If this was not enough to add insult to injury he proceed to hook and land several more good fish some of them hooked not more than a few feet from where I stood. On the Merrymeeting success breeds company and not to long after this fellow began to catch fish we were joined by two more fishermen. When the last one joined the fray I was more or less edged out of the pool. So I reeled in and headed down river.

Down river I ran into a couple of fishermen that I knew and a couple that I didn't, but had recognized my truck in the parking lot and were familiar with my column. It is always a good feeling when someone tells you that the like reading your stuff. I am sure that what little status that I might have had dropped a notch when I admitted that I had not caught anything.

I dubbed around a little longer and watched a gut catch a real beauty on a two handed rod. The Merrymeeting is a pretty small river and the two hander, at least on the surface, looks like overkill; however they do have a place. I had watched this same fellow the day before use his long rod to its full advantage drifting nymph patterns. He had hooked several fish in the same small piece of water that many anglers had overlooked or only given it a few half hearted casts. I think that you are going to see a lot more two handed rods in the coming years. I certainly love mine.

Well, if nothing else I did learn a couple of new tricks despite having to return home with the smell of skunk on me. That is the way it goes sometimes.

See you on the river.