

Valley Angler

Skunk Cabbage and Fiddleheads

by Bill Thompson

If you haven't been fishing yet time is passing you by. All of the planets are aliened and the moon is in the house of Pisces. The leaves are the size of a mouse's ear and more importantly skunk cabbage and fiddleheads are in bloom. By whatever means you choose to determine the time to go fishing the time is now.

I am not too sure about the planets or mouse's ears, but I can tell you that skunk cabbage and fiddle heads are good indicators of when to go fishing. Some time ago I wrote a column entitled "Flowers and Bugs" based on the premise that it was possible to predict mayfly hatches by the flowers found along the side of the stream. The article was inspired by a little book by Ivan L. Mahoney called *Trout Flies and Flowers*. Turns out that there is another book out there dealing with the same subject by Bob Scammell of Alberta, Canada. Bob's book is called *The Phenological Fly*.

Phenology is the study of mating, nesting, blooming, migrations and insect infestations (mayfly hatches come under the heading of "insect infestations") in order to predict seasonal phenomena. There was a time when people lived closer to nature and phenology was more of an essential part of survival. Knowing when to plant or go hunting was how people made their living. Most people today are far removed from nature to the point where these once basic skills are long forgotten. Today's fishermen rely on the Internet for the latest fishing information.

Recently I have been given quite an education on fiddleheads (*Matteuccia struthiopteris*). I just stuck that little bit of Latin in there so you would know that I had done my homework. Although I have lived in New England for all but six years of my life, up until last week I had never tasted fiddle heads. I have no idea how this could have happened considering that my grandmother was an old fashioned "Mainer" who had a great deal of natural knowledge and believed in eating food found in the wild. She was particularly fond on dandelion greens. I always hated the taste of dandelions and avoided them at all costs when they were served. Somehow I have always had the impression that fiddleheads would taste the same as the dandelions which may account for why, up until now, I had never eaten them.

The subject of fiddleheads came up in the shop recently and I mentioned how I had never eaten them to a friend. Rich Quint has long been both a good friend and customer of our shop. I should mention that Rich has been a very good friend of Summer's and has always brought her huge dog bone treats from the Paris Farmers Union feed store on a regular basis for years. Rich volunteered to bring us some fiddleheads the next time he was in the shop. Good to his word Rich provided us with not only fiddleheads but also some smelt that he had caught last winter. I wasn't too sure about sampling the fiddleheads, but I knew I would enjoy the smelt.

That evening Janet cooked up the smelt and fiddleheads for our supper. The smelt were fried in bacon fat, dipped in an egg wash and rolled in seasoned flour. The fiddleheads were steamed and served with butter and lemon. No five star restaurant could have served a finer meal. Both the smelt and especially the fiddleheads were delicious. For the record there is no resemblance to the taste of dandelions and fiddleheads and neither one tastes anything like chicken.

Rich also brought in a few samples of fiddleheads in various stages of development as a tutorial on

how and when to harvest them. Like I said I have learned quite a lot about these tasty little ferns in the last few days.

You may be wondering, at this point, what skunk cabbage has to do with all this. Skunk cabbage and fiddleheads appear at the same time and they are most likely found growing in proximity to each other. You will find them growing alongside brooks and small streams just about everywhere you look these days. By now most of the fiddleheads in our area have gone by but if you are willing to drive north a bit you are likely to find some that are edible. Which kind of proves the point that fishing locally is pretty good right now especially if you fish the ponds. On the other hand fishing to the north of us is just starting to get good. Maybe there is something to this phenology stuff after all.

See you on the river.