

Valley Angler

Sometimes Bigger Isn't Better

by Bill Thompson

I was able to sneak away from the shop for a couple of hours the other afternoon. Took the time to fish one of my favorite small streams. I was pretty confident that I could find trout without a lot of effort, turned out I was wrong. I did scare up a few trout, but none of my usual pools produced a single trout.

Right from the start I came up empty in a pool that has fished well all season long. After only a few minutes of casting I moved on to the next pool. In the last week or two a large pine tree had fallen across the stream making it possible to fish only half the pool. I kept on moving until I came to the next pool and it too proved empty. Only a couple of weeks ago a client of mine hooked two nice brook trout from that pool. Even sweeter, they were the first trout she had ever taken.

It had only taken less than forty-five minutes to cover this stretch so I still had an hour or so left to fish. I slogged back up river as quickly as I could. I waded right up the middle of the river and never once moved a fish. I kept thinking, "What had happened to the fish". I found it hard to believe that someone or even a lot of someones could have fished this stretch out. It is fairly unusual for me to ever meet anyone fishing here, but then I am not there every day so I would guess it's possible for someone with a fish fry in mind to do a number on the place.

After huffing and puffing past the point where I first started I came to the first pool upstream. Same thing here, no fish. A few minutes later I came to a pool that has never failed me. I hadn't fished here since last season and I was very much surprised as to how much the pool had changed. Mother Nature had given this place a beating. The big tree that had held the pool and provided cover for so many seasons was moved some thirty feet downstream beside the right bank. I didn't think it would be fruitful, but I cast up into what remained of the fast water. Bang, I had the first hit of the day and missed him.

I took the time to change flies and tried again. I missed again, but the third time is the charm and I had the first trout of the day. A few moments later, after releasing the first trout, I caught another in almost the same spot. It was time to reel in and call it an afternoon and I reluctantly headed back to the truck.

All the way home I couldn't stop dwelling on the lack of fish. Less than two weeks ago I would have caught a couple of dozen small trout in that section and now they were gone. Maybe they were moving further up stream in search of spawning water or just maybe some son of a gun did fish them out. Just about everyone I know that fishes that river releases their catch. Sure, I know that not every fish that is released survives and that the mortality rate is probably higher than most of us "holier than thou" anglers would like to believe.

This river is not catch and release nor is it fly fishing only. Anyone with a mind to can take the limit: five fish or five pounds, whichever comes first. It is highly unlikely that anyone will ever limit out with just one or two trout in this little stream. To fish this place out, as long as they are playing by the rules, would take quite a concerted effort by more than one fisherman. There were none of the tell tale signs of empty worm containers scattered along the bank. Not that anyone bent on cleaning out an area

would have to use worms.

This stream has a pretty good mix of wild trout as well as stocked ones. It is a good bet that by this late in the season the stocked ones are beginning to dissipate. Hatchery trout, for the most part, rarely have the stamina to survive more than a season. I would bet that a stream like the Saco has more than a one or two per cent survival rate of the stocked trout. There just isn't enough food to support the number of fish in the river. To be sure a few do make it, especially the brown trout, which explains the rare ten pounder that is taken every so many years. Considering the size of the trout that my client caught a couple of weeks ago in that small stream, it is quite obvious that those fish were stocked. Most of the fish I have been catching this season in that river have been stocked fish. Most assuredly the larger fish that were stocked in a stream this small would never achieve the growth rate to have produced fish this big.

Which brings up the question, "why do we stock so many fish?" Well, the answer is quite obvious. If we are to have any kind of sport fishing at all we have to stock and if we are to achieve a high catch rate we need to stock in large quantities. Without a sufficient number of fish in a heavily fished river, like the Saco, we would soon be out of business. For some of us business is the key word. Sport fishing is an important part of the economy in our "Valley" and sports demand big fish and lots of them. It is not likely that anyone is going to demand an end to this practice anytime soon.

What bothers me is why do we stock the smaller streams that have wild trout populations? One would think that the state would go out of its way to protect the few remaining streams that support wild trout. Again the answer is obvious, none of us have the will to make the sacrifices necessary to bring about the change. In order to ensure healthy wild trout populations we would have to have some serious regulation changes. No stocking for starters. At a minimum a two fish limit or maybe even no kill and even more serious, close the river down for a year or two to reestablish and stabilize the population.

Perhaps the biggest change would have to be the mindset of the fishing community. We would have to accept a fish population that doesn't exceed the critical mass of the stream and smaller trout. Sometimes bigger isn't better. Those guys on Wall Street might have thought of that before they got us all into the mess we are in now.

See you on the river.