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Grand Lake Stream, ME

Salmon Magic Downeast

By King Montgomery

Every time my mind wanders to Maine's Grand Lake Stream, my thoughts somehow turn to Princess Summerfall Winterspring, and I just have to smile. In the early to mid-1950s, I had a huge boyish crush on this young, beautiful, and, to me, very sexy "Indian princess" who shared our tiny black-and-white television screen with a puppet named Howdy Doody, a clown called Clarabell, and show host Buffalo Bob Smith. You see, Bob Smith was a devoted angler, and he was a regular at Grand Lake Stream (aka GLS), sometimes with his friend, baseball great Ted Williams.

Other luminaries who pursued noble Down East landlocked salmon, brook trout, lake trout, and smallmouth bass at Grand Lake Stream included Stan "The Man" Musial, renowned angler Joe Brooks, Curt Gowdy, A. J. McClane, and Generals Jimmy Doolittle and Matthew B. Ridgway, among many others.

"Sports" have been coming to the bucolic 125-person village and the unique stream both named Grand Lake Stream since the early 1800s, and in real force since the turn of the 20th century, when railroads pushed through to the more far-flung reaches of Maine. Once Grand Lake Stream, located about 100 miles northeast of

Bangor, was home to the largest tannery in the world, and was in the heart of large-scale logging operations. Trees were felled and the logs rafted in the many lakes and driven downstream to the Saint Croix River, which opened to the Atlantic Ocean and the timber/lumber markets beyond. Grand Lake Stream served as a 3-mile-long sluice from West Grand Lake into Big Lake.

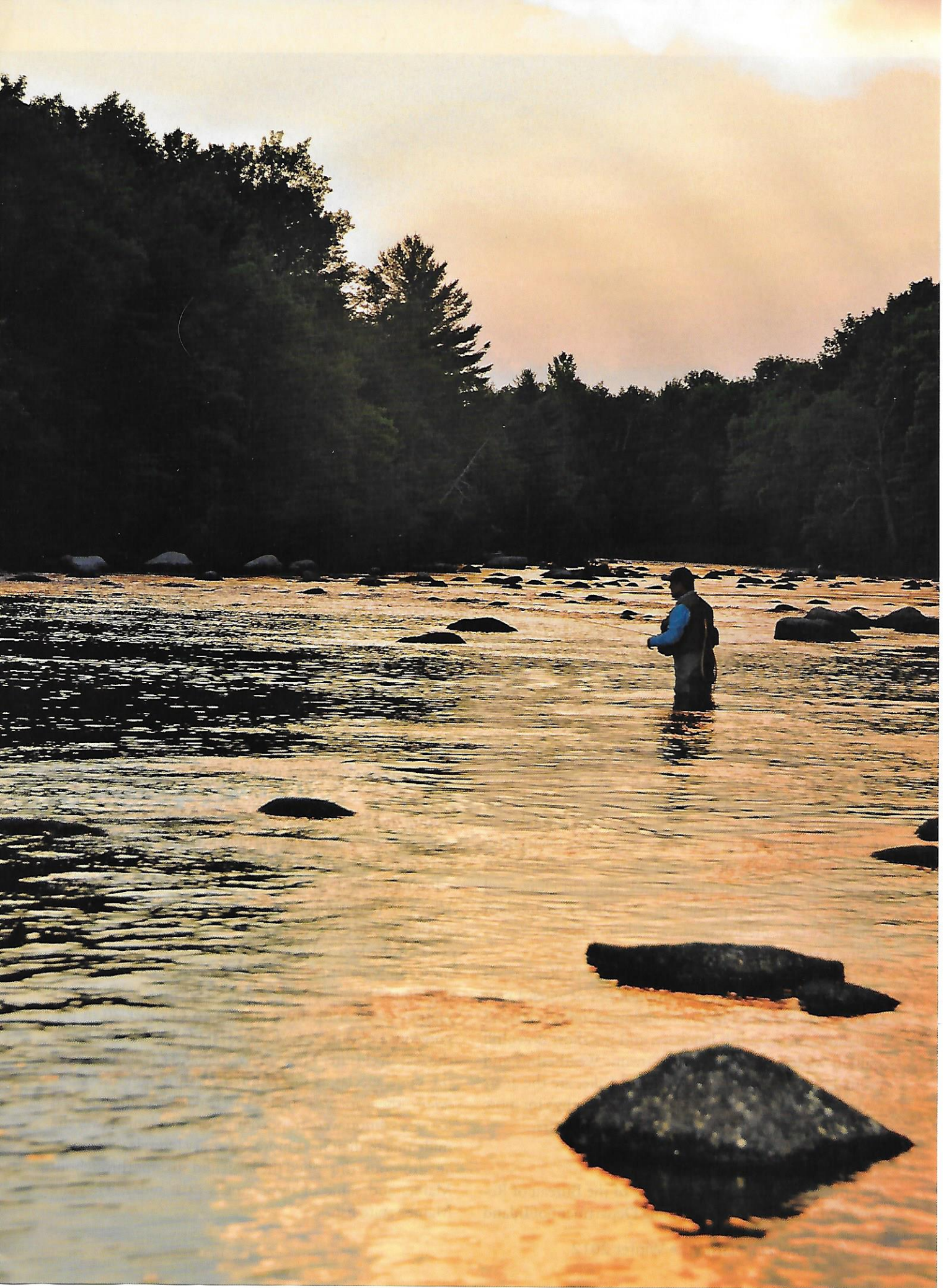
By the late 1800s, after the tannery closed and logging slowed greatly, the town was reachable by boat from Princeton, some 10 miles

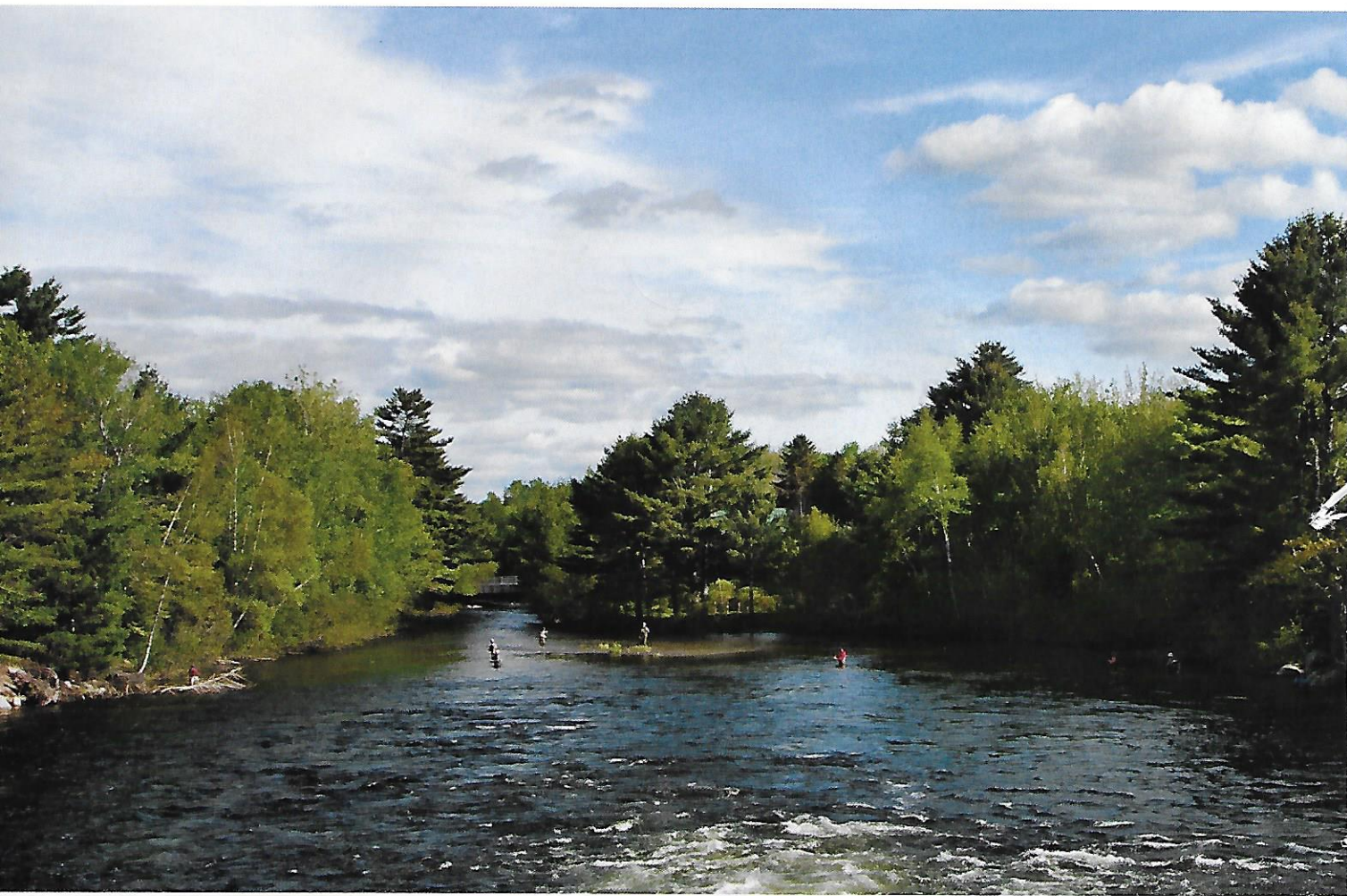
from Grand Lake Stream at the headwaters of the West Branch of the Saint Croix River. Thus, ever-increasing numbers of anglers and hunters could train to Princeton from the more developed New England states, hop on a small steamer, and head to Grand Lake Stream, where sporting camps began to flourish. A rugged road from the Princeton area to Grand Lake Stream eventually was completed as well.

Now about 15 camps in the vicinity of Grand Lake Stream provide accommodations of one sort or another, and some have in-house guides or can tap the large reservoir of registered Maine guides who operate there. It is said that Grand Lake Stream is home to more Maine guides than any other location in



How did this sign know the author would be returning to Grand Lake Stream? It seems that once you visit, you will be back (above). Stream ecologist and author Dennis LaBare fishes the Evening Pool in the gloaming. LaBare is the author of Tagewahnahn: The Landlocked Salmon at Grand Lake Stream. He now lives in Oregon (right).





The Dam Pool, with the gates open, begins with a rush of water but settles just downstream. The salmon congregate in this accessible and easy-to-wade large pool (above). Grand Lake Stream is one of the best landlocked-salmon streams in the country. The salmon are beautiful, and they leap spectacularly when hooked (right).

Maine—about 50 fishing, hunting, and recreational guides work this area. These guides, some members of the native Passamaquoddy tribe, take their clients to ply Grand Lake Stream for landlocks, cruise and float rivers and lakes in search of smallmouth bass, troll for togue (lake trout) from their beautiful and stable square-stern, outboard-driven Grand Lake canoes, or chase brook trout in clear, cool streams. The angling possibilities are such that modern sports, like their predecessors, can fish for different species during a visit.

Historic Weatherby's—the Fisherman's Resort—is the camp where I always stay and fish out of when I visit Grand Lake Stream. The Orvis-endorsed lodge is located just above the state fish hatchery, and is a short downhill walk in waders to Grand Lake Stream. Weatherby's and Leen's Lodge, on nearby West Grand Lake, are the area's two most esteemed establishments—Weatherby's for more than a century and Leen's for more than 50 years.

The Best of Both Worlds

According to John Boland, director of the Bureau of Resource Management for the Maine Department of Inland

Fisheries and Wildlife (MDIFW), “Grand Lake Stream offers some of the finest fly fishing for landlocked salmon in the state. Coincidentally, the best smallmouth bass fishing in Maine is also found in this area. Based on our surveys, nonresident anglers prefer to fish for smallmouth bass above any other fish in Maine, while landlocked salmon are third on their list (right behind brook trout). Here's an opportunity for anglers to get the best of both worlds in one trip.”

Landlocked salmon—called tagewahnahn by the indigenous Passamaquoddy and ouananiche by the indigenous Abenaki people—rule the fishing in GLS. The salmon season runs from April 1 to October 20 in this gorgeous tailwater. The fish are late-fall spawners, hence the season closure. These marvelous and engaging fish are the same species as the vaunted Atlantic salmon: *Salmo salar*—the leaper. As the ice sheets retreated after the last ice age, salmon were trapped inland and adapted over the millennia to their new, more sedentary lifestyle. No longer anadromous, they plied the lakes and streams throughout Maine, and some of those stocks exist today. They are Maine's state fish.



Eastern brook trout have a similar evolutionary history, and some of their kind still run out to sea and back to fresh water today, but most are landlocked. They live in Grand Lake Stream, chase the same flies as the salmon, and it's not unusual to take a brookie while fishing for landlocks.

Some smallmouth bass are found in Grand Lake Stream proper, but excellent populations are in the lakes

and rivers of the area. The Saint Croix River serves as the border between Maine and New Brunswick, Canada, along much of its course. It is full of smallmouth bass that seek out its rock ledges, patches of aquatic vegetation, fallen tree sweepers, and drop-offs.

Many of the lakes and streams have smallmouth bass mixed in with salmon, brook trout, and togue. If bronzebacks are what you're looking for, this is the place to be. But in Grand Lake Stream itself, it's all about the salmon.

Tagewahnahn

"Grand Lake Stream is one of the top five landlocked salmon fly-fishing waters in Maine. The fishing action for salmon in Grand Lake Stream is the best in the spring, starting on April 1, and continues into early July and then picks up again in late September and extends to the closing date of October 20," notes Greg Burr, regional fisheries biologist for the MDIFW. "Depending on the season, salmon catches average between two and 20 fish per day and the salmon average between 16 and 21 inches with the occasional fish up to 24 inches. The regulations on the stream are fly fishing only from April to October 20, bag limit one salmon 14 inches from April 1 to September 30, catch-and-release from October 1 to October 20."

Another accomplished biologist and stream ecologist, Dennis LaBare, introduced me to Grand Lake Stream. He spent summers in the area and fished the stream for more than 40 years. With help from his wife, Stacy, he wrote a beautiful book on Grand Lake Stream in 2006, and it remains the best reference. I have relied heavily on *Tagewahnahn: The Landlocked Salmon at Grand Lake Stream* not only for this article, but also for guiding me when I fish this very special place. It is noteworthy and commendable that 25 percent of the net proceeds from the sale of the book is divided between the Grand Lake Stream Historical Society and the Maine Council of Trout Unlimited.



Grand Lake Stream is a tailwater fishery that begins at the sluice gates on the dam at West Grand Lake. A dam of one type or another has been here since at least the early 19th century; a more precise date apparently is not recorded. Grand Lake Stream ends about 3 miles downstream when it enters Big Lake.

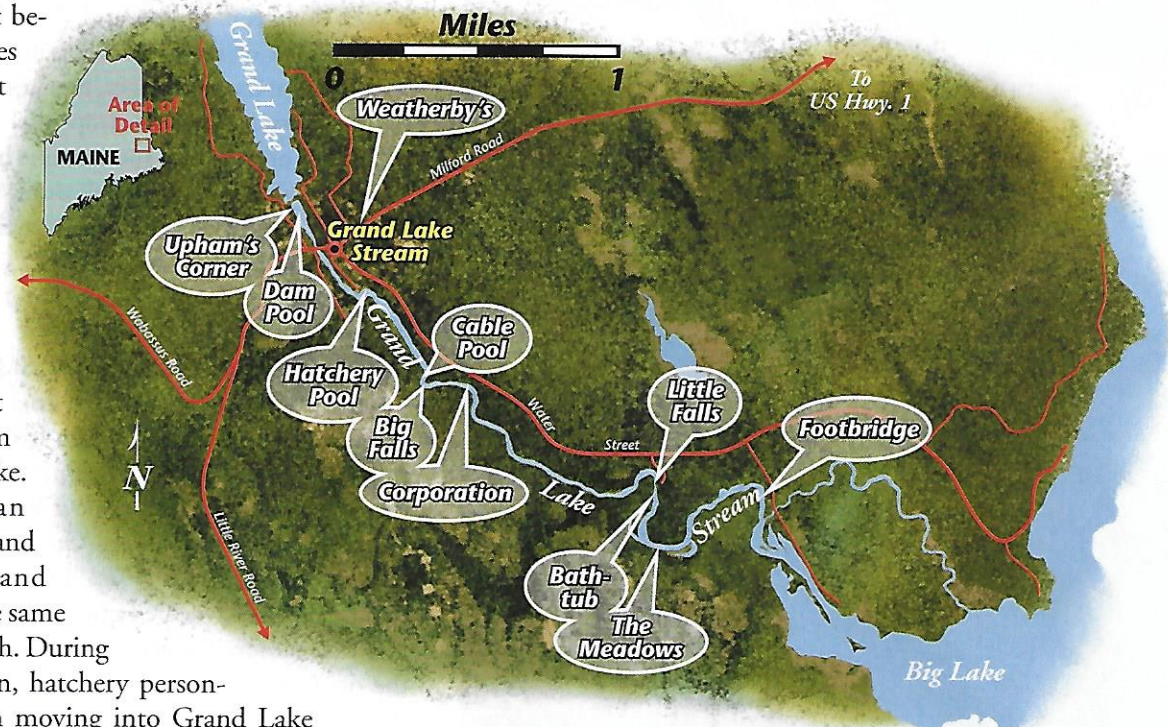
The salmon can move out of West Grand Lake and into Grand Lake Stream, and the same is true for Big Lake fish. During the November spawn, hatchery personnel intercept salmon moving into Grand Lake Stream and strip eggs and milt before releasing the spent fish. The eggs are hatched and young salmon are raised in the hatchery about 500 yards downstream, where the old tannery used to stand. A fish cultural facility of some kind has been located near here since about 1870.

Grand Lake Stream is not a pristine, virginal, wild river full of fish untouched by human influence, although it does appear so to the eye, and, once you fish it, to the heart as well. But it is a success story of how something very good can be made out of a really bad situation. John Randolph, publisher emeritus of *Fly Fisherman* magazine, says it best in his foreword to *Tagewahnahn*: "This important book describes how man-restored quality fisheries of the modern world can be created now and henceforth enjoyed by future generations."

Just below the dam is the Dam Pool, or Town Pool, and because of the relative ease of public access from both sides of the stream, it is very popular. There is plenty of room to spread out and share the considerable salmon bounty here. At times fishing this water can be a social event as well as a rod-bending experience. If you're a grumpy angler, don't fish here; you'll ruin the experience for everyone else.

As the stream tumbles and glides its way to Big Lake, it crosses under the only vehicle bridge over it not far from the Pine Tree Store, and enters the Hatchery Pool. Here, several years ago, I caught my first-ever landlocked salmon on a dry fly, guided by Weatherby's owner Jeff McEvoy and his 11-year-old daughter, Keaton. The pool is accessed through the hatchery grounds by foot—no private vehicles are allowed.

At the next bend, the stream becomes the Evening



Pool, and then the Glide, both relatively slow-moving runs full of large to medium-size rocks and other nice spots where salmon can rest or lie in wait for prey. Near the end of the Glide is Gowdy Point, where television sports personality Curt Gowdy liked to fish. Then the stream forms the faster-moving Cable Pool as the water gains momentum to tumble down Big Falls. The stream then turns a corner into the Corporation and Seven Islands stretches.

A big elbow bend at the end of Seven Islands leads to Little Falls, whose large plunge pool, called the Bath-tub, is where many salmon hang out. Farther down, at the bottom of the U-turn, is the slower-moving Meadows reach, a great, long run conducive to dry-fly fishing. At the end of the Meadows is a fine forest trail back to Little Falls and the land and parking areas that are part of the Grand Lake Stream Fisheries and Wildlife Management Area.

Beyond the Meadows, the stream continues around a sharp right bend and under a private, chain-suspended footbridge. Here the stream access becomes more difficult, and the lower GLS is best accessed by small boat from Big Lake. Anglers are fine as long as they are in the water, either in a boat, where possible, or wading. But please respect private land along the stream, and always get owner permission to cross over or fish on private property. Maps are available that show public access at the Pine Tree Store, at Weatherby's, and in *Tagewahnahn*.

Seasons of the Salmon

After ice-out in spring, the salmon get antsy as the days lengthen and the water warms. Aquatic insects, including caddisflies, mayflies, and stoneflies, stir and become active,

and the salmon take note. Some terrestrials, flying ants in particular, show up; a plethora of smaller fish and other comestibles are also available, allowing the stream to offer a veritable smorgasbord of piscine fare.

Hendricksons (Red Quills) and March Browns, joined by some caddisflies, are out by May and early June, and the Sulphurs are not far behind. As the water warms, dry-fly fishing picks up, but these salmon, though salmonids, are not trout. Just because there is a mayfly or caddisfly hatch, or a spinner fall, does not mean they feed on the insects. And then there are times when you can cast a dry attractor fly over seemingly barren water and fish rise to it with abandon. Go figure. It seems these little Atlantic salmon don't bite on our schedule, and that's as it should be.

For many of us, fishing dry flies is the most fun, but the great majority of fish are taken on subsurface offerings, and Grand Lake Stream salmon are no exception. Most anglers I have observed and fished with use a 5- or 6-weight rod,

One-Eyed Poacher

(Originated by Bob Upham;
tied by Alec Stansell, www.favoriteflies.com)



- Hook:** Streamer hook, size 4 or 6
Thread: Black
Body: Embossed gold tinsel
Wing: Yellow bucktail, red bucktail, and yellow marabou
Overwing: Wood duck flank
Eye: Red iris with yellow pupil, on right side of head only

Examples include Carrie Stevens's Gray Ghost and Grand Lake Stream resident Bob Upham's Howdie Doodie (intentionally misspelled, after the name of my favorite princess's puppet buddy) and his One-Eyed Poacher. Upham, who also has a spot at the Dam Pool named for him, is the unofficial Grand Lake Stream "river keeper."

a floating line, and a 9- to 10-foot leader tapered to 4X or 5X. Tie on one or two weighted nymphs and a strike indicator—plastic Thingamabobbers in small and extra-small seem to be the most popular. If the flow is heavy, add a small split shot or two to get the fly or flies down. If you're averse to using indicators, a hopper/dropper rig can score, too. I believe nymph fishing actually takes more skill than drifting a dry fly.

As summer moves along, terrestrials join the mayfly and caddisfly ranks, and all of the beautiful Atlantic salmon and eastern brook trout streamer patterns that mimic various baitfish will entice fish, too. Many of these somewhat gaudy streamers originated in Maine.

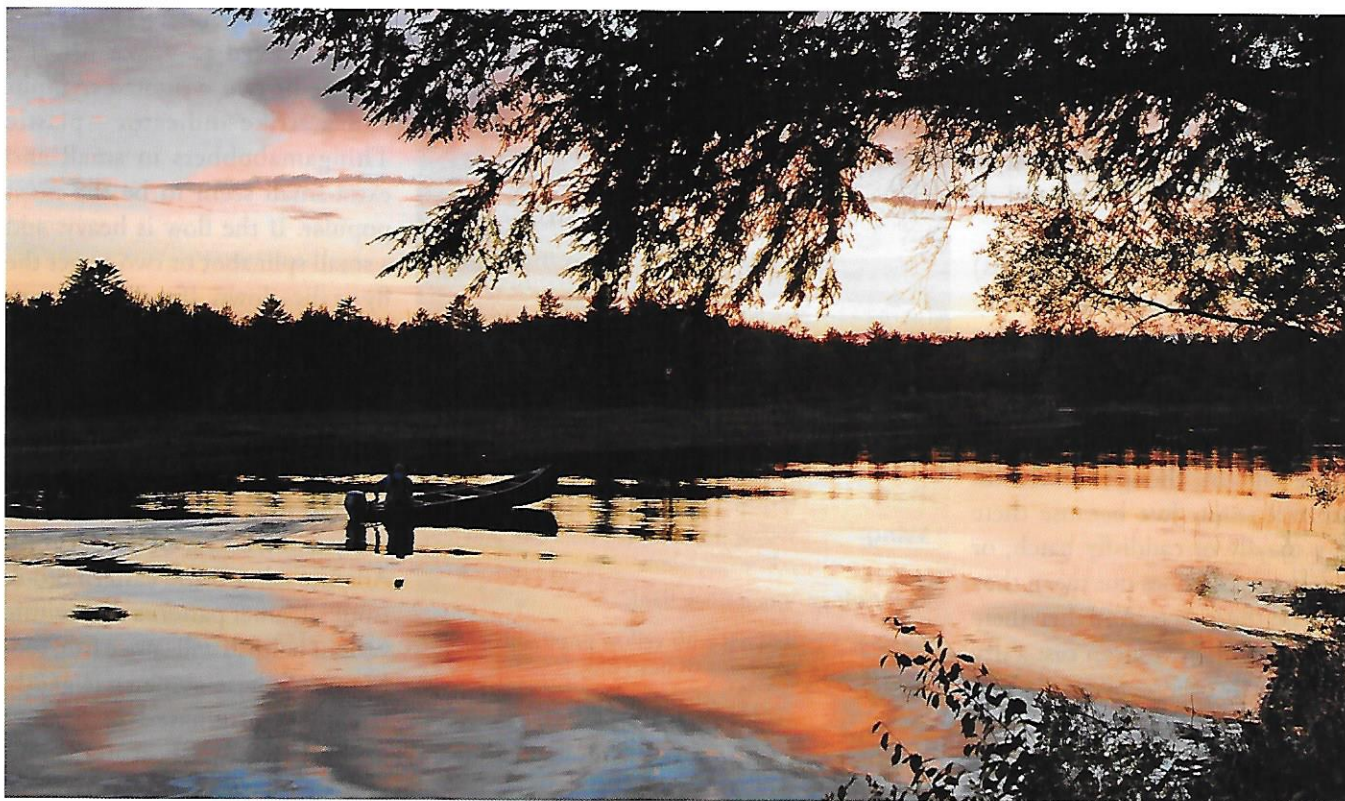
And don't forget basic Woolly Buggers—they work here much of the angling year.

A long-held tenet of dry-fly presentation since the influential writings of Frederic M. Halford in the late 1800s and early 1900s is that the drift of the offering must be drag free. Maybe that's true where you fish, but both brookies and landlocks like dragging, twitched, or skated flies. Try it sometime—you might just like it.

As summer moves along, tan, olive, and zebra caddisflies are about, and several species of Blue-Winged Olives add to the mix. Fishing always is good on Grand Lake Stream, but catch-



Bethel's Laurin Parker fishes Grand Lake Stream for the first time. His first GLS salmon came from the Dam Pool.



The sun sets on the lower end of Grand Lake Stream directly above Big Lake, as a Grand Laker, an example of a beautiful home-grown canoe, heads for home (above). A majestic bald eagle watches over the river (below).

ing does slow from July to September, unless there is an unusually high flow out of the West Grand Lake dam. But plenty of fish are around and they do need to eat; you just have to work a little harder for them. By October, things pretty much are over on Grand Lake Stream, and thoughts turn to grouse and woodcock—Weatherby's offers guided bird trips, too. Some enthusiasts do persist in fishing until the end of the season. According to LaBare, pupal emerger patterns, soft hackles, and egg patterns work very well on pre-spawn salmon and brookies. If I visit Weatherby's in October, it will be for a cast-and-blast.

The Boston Five

On my last trip to Grand Lake Stream, Jeff McEvoy introduced me to Garry Crago, now the president of the Greater Boston Chapter of Trout Unlimited; he and four other Boston TUers were up for their annual spring salmon fishing. Crago is an old hand on Grand Lake Stream—this was his 26th year, and he knows the stream very well.



Over the decades Crago has perfected the technique for nymphing salmon when the water is reasonably clear, and it usually is. He locates salmon and casts well upstream

and across. As the nymph nears the fish, he takes his eyes from the strike indicator and looks at the fish or the shadow of the fish. If it reacts, he raises the rod, and often is hooked up to a salmon. Too often, nymphers miss takes, and this tactic sure does help.

I asked Crago about Grand Lake Stream and Weatherby's. He told me, "My experience on Grand Lake Stream now spans more than 26 years, and it has become my favorite fly-fishing destination. The attraction is based on a number of things: the natural beauty of the area, the friendliness of the locals, but especially gin-clear Grand Lake Stream that has a large population of landlocked salmon."

Discussing Weatherby's Lodge, he continued, "I have long considered it as important an element to the trip as the stream itself. It has a rich history, with many famous guests having stayed there and fished the stream. The rustic

cabins and the lovely white clapboard main lodge have long been my home when visiting GLS. A daily breakfast and dinner with other anglers is a great way to start and end each day.”

Another member of the “Boston Five” is Jim Miller. We talked one day on the Dam Pool, and he volunteered as a “fish model” since he was catching them regularly on nymphs. “Landlocked salmon fishing in the Northeast comes with much history, lore, and tradition,” he told me. “Nowhere is this better exemplified than at Grand Lake Stream. GLS is a prolific, busy, quaint, and rather small stream compared to some of the other storied venues. Nonetheless, the fishing can be exceptional and sometimes magical. Our crew from Greater Boston Trout Unlimited found this out again during what has become a spring ritual.”

Another TU member, Keith Weinstein, waxed eloquent in a post-trip email, telling me:

Several hours later and 23 salmon released, true balance presented itself. I sat flanked by Brothers of the Angle in Weatherby’s warm and wonderful dining room—a rustic restaurant which could easily accommodate a family of 50. Spectacular vintage photographs of known and anonymous fishermen and women graced the walls. Calmness set in as Frank Lepore [Weatherby’s manager/sommelier/host] stopped by. After introductions he gave us insight into wine pairings for the night’s meal. The list was broad and we were guided well. The four course meal which followed was filling and full of delicate flavors. Reviewing the day we found it remarkable to have lived some extremes: screaming winds and surging waters, offset by Pinot Noir and stuffed pork chops. We didn’t create the balance as much as the universe delivered it. It happens all the time at Weatherby’s.

Jim Miller, also a TUEr, summed up the fine fishing quite well when he described the group’s last evening, recalling, “We tossed dries and had numerous doubles, a couple of triples, and a quad that turned the pool into mayhem. When we left the river that night we looked at each other and one person remarked, ‘Did that just hap-

Grand Lake Stream NOTEBOOK



When: April 1–Oct. 20.

Where: Grand Lake Stream, ME, a 3-mi.-long landlocked salmon dream water.

Headquarters: Grand Lake Stream Area Chamber of Commerce, www.grandlakestream.org. Weatherby’s, (877) 796-5558, www.weatherbys.com.

Appropriate gear: 4- to 6-wt. rod, floating line, 9- to 10-ft. leaders, 4X–5X tippets.

Useful fly patterns: Prince Nymph, Hare’s Ear Nymph, Copper John, Sparkle Pupa, Adams, Sulphur patterns, Hendrickson patterns, Red Quill, March Brown, Goddard Caddis, Elk Hair Caddis, hoppers, ants, Gray Ghost, Mickey Finn, One-Eyed Poacher, Howdie Doodie, Woolly Bugger.

Necessary accessories: Hat, rain gear, earth-tone clothing, polarized sunglasses, sunscreen, insect repellent.

Nonresident license: \$11/1 day, \$23/3 days, \$43/7 days, \$47/15 days, \$64/annual.

Fly shops/guides: *Grand Lake Stream:* Weatherby’s Lodge, (877) 796-5558, www.weatherbys.com; The Pine Tree Store, (207) 796-5027. *Freeport:* L.L. Bean, (877) 755-2326, www.llbean.com.

Books/maps: *Tagewahnahn: The Landlocked Salmon at Grand Lake Stream* by Dennis LaBare, www.gllsalmon.com; *Where Cool Waters Flow* by Randy Spencer. *Maine Atlas & Gazetteer* by DeLorme Mapping.

pen?’ The photos revealed that it wasn’t our imagination. It was truly magic, salmon magic, at Grand Lake Stream.”

Grand Lake Stream, to me, is a happy place, and I will visit again when and if I can. I now know why the sign entering town says “GRAND LAKE STREAM—WELCOME BACK.”

They knew I would return. ➡

King Montgomery is a freelance writer and photographer who lives in Burke, Virginia.