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THE MAGAZINE

OF AMERICAN FLY-FISHING

JULY/AUGUST 2000

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Batting

And keeping



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the secret to success secret

CLIFF HAUPTMAN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICHARD PROCOPIO

I have no aversion to bats, unless they are hooked on the end of my fly line. I have seen pelicans on Deerfield pier in Florida grab squid baits and get the hooks stuck in their throats, flying off on seven-foot wingspans and getting jerked back and hauled in, crazy-eyed and flapping hard enough to knock a small child cold. In each case, the fisherman had to wrestle the struggling bird to the deck and somehow manage to fold it in under his arm, wings tucked up safely enough, but the two-foot beak still swinging like a billy club. Usually it takes two guys, but since everybody there is an expert, a whole pinochle game's worth of people holds the pelican still long enough for someone to cut the line short so it will not trail behind and tangle before the hook works itself out. I cannot imagine too many fellow anglers rushing over to help me subdue a flying rat with razor teeth and the quickness of a cobra.

From the moment I figured out how to catch landlocked salmon on Grand Lake Stream, the bat threat was a constant worry.

Grand Lake Stream, a fly-fishing-only, blue-ribbon landlocked fishery in the heart of Down East Maine, connects West Grand Lake with Big Lake. The flow in the stream is controlled by a dam at the outflow of West Grand Lake and the pool below the dam—the first on the stream from the water's point of view, but the last from that of a salmon heading upstream to answer the spawning urge—is a deep, clear, continuously circulating pool called the Dam Pool. From above, it looks like a squirrel-cage air blower, with a big, 150-foot belly of clockwise-eddy water over on the left, and a channel of faster water hugging the right side and forming the main current. Big Lake is three miles downstream through a couple of sets of falls and long runs of flat, crystalline pools that glow with the reflected neon greens of spring trees—or reds, yellows and more in the fall—and the blinding blue of pure and cloudless sky.

None, not even those who have spent an entire fishless day pounding it with every fly in their arsenals to no avail whatsoever, doubt for even an instant that the





Above: On Grand Lake Stream, as anywhere else, some seasons are better than others — and some salmon are more feisty than others.

Below: On West Grand Lake, boathouses wait, as they have for decades, to release their craft for an early morning smallmouth sojourn.

Dam Pool holds vast numbers of large salmon, smallmouth bass, even trout. It is big, deep, mysterious and auspicious. It funnels the nutrients of an entire enormous lake into its center. It circulates those nutrients and mixes them with the frothing, oxygenated water gushing through the spillway of the dam, and it holds that vitalizing mixture in a revolving smorgasbord for fish and in an irresistibly captivating galaxy for anglers.

When I first fished the Dam Pool a couple of years ago, it was in August, a truly dumb time to fish for landlocks on Grand Lake

Stream, but that was when I could get there. Everyone knows the words to that tune. I had heard about the stream ever since taking up residence in New England some 30-odd years ago. It enjoys the same romance as names like Rangeley and Sebago. Synonymous with Grand Lake Stream, at least for me and a few hundred others over the past 100-plus years, is Weatherby's ("The Fisherman's Resort," as it bills itself). Owned by Charlene and Ken Sassi for the past quarter-century, Weatherby's origin as a fishing lodge was back in the late 1800s, when the region was one of the world cen-

ters for tanning hides. The combination of a great fishery and a bunch of guys waiting around for their goods to be processed inevitably led to the establishment of a legendary lodge that I would one day yearn to visit, even in August.

As expected, I caught no landlocks in the Dam Pool in August. So I took Ken and Charlene's suggestion to heart when they told me, much in the same tone as though telling me that the skiing in Maine would be vastly improved come January, that I should come back in May. So I did—on Memorial Day Weekend.

There were nearly as many anglers as blackflies. Weatherby's, though undoubtedly deserving of celebrity, is not the only lodge on the stream, nor are the residents of the village of Grand Lake Stream averse to wetting a line on a holiday weekend. On the evening of my arrival, the several other famed pools where salmon historically reside—Cable Pool, Picnic Pool, and the renowned Hatchery Pool, all of which I had entirely to myself in August—were abundantly occupied by well-entrenched devotees. I headed for the Dam Pool; oddly, it was vacant.

Looked at from above, and facing the dam, the Dam Pool flows clockwise, on the left side creating a tremendous back-eddy. Facing the dam from the bottom of the eddy, casting into the pool in the lowering light and ebbing tide of blood-sucking insects, I watched my line drift around to the left and carry the bead-



head nymph from five-o'clock on the imaginary watch face to about eight before lifting it up and casting again, over and over, with the same August results. The surface of the pool was undimpled by fish, unruffled by hatching insects, undisturbed by any success on my part. Then a small, tan, fluttering caddis broke free of the surface far out in the pool, then another, another, another . . . and then a fish rose.

There was just enough light left to change flies, and I tied on a #14 Royal Trude, the thing I could see the best, and watched it drift again, this time on the surface, from 5 to 8. Caddis were still hatching and, in their abundance, now put a slight fuzz on the surface. Rises were getting more frequent and frantic, too, with some walloping smacks as fish left the water and belly-flopped back. Darkness was falling fast, and although the flow in the pool remained constant, my ignored fly seemed to be drifting with a more frantic urgency. A light on the walkway atop the dam cast an artificial moonbeam toward me across the surface of the pool so that, even as the rest of the water vanished into blackness, the wedge of light silhouetted hatching caddis, rising fish, floating line and my scorned fly.

This is when the bats came out, swooping in and out of the light, nabbing airborne caddis inches from my fly. On my next backcast I felt a slight glitch, the familiar flick of a fly just ticking the tip of a branch, but where no branch existed. I started thinking about pelicans and about how those guys in Florida never have to perform that exercise alone, in the dark.

On my next cast, instead of the drag-free drift, I tried skittering the Trude across the surface and heard the fish tackle the fly before I felt it. The 15-inch salmon gleamed like a new idea when I held it in the light from the dam, and I realized then that a full moon was rising over my right shoulder, enhancing the effect.

I skittered the fly again on the next cast, and immediately hooked and landed a slightly larger fish of 16 inches. I let the next cast drift—no skitter—and it rode along as if it were invisible. Then I cast again and skittered the fly: *Whack!*—a 14-incher. In the time it took to land and release that fish—what, about two minutes?—the pool went from a rapid simmer to an icy calm: sudden, complete and with an unequivocal feel of finality. Clouds had covered the moon.



Going Batty

Weatherby's bills itself as "the fisherman's resort" for good reason. Overlooking Grand Lake Stream, Weatherby's is perfectly located to offer its guests a diversity of fly-fishing.

The stream itself is, of course, renowned for its extraordinary spring and fall runs of landlocked salmon, but it is also home to smallmouth bass throughout the year. The entire three miles of the stream is fly-fishing only. The flow is controlled by a dam at the outlet of West Grand Lake and is kept constant throughout the season. The stream's stone-and-gravel bottom makes wading possible for most of its run. A 5-weight outfit is as heavy as you'll need on the stream.

The weather makes precision impossible, but the season for salmon in the stream generally begins in May and peaks around the beginning of June, remaining good through the month. Early, before the hatches begin, streamers are the flies of choice, including the Grey Ghost (above), Nine-Three, Supervisor and other smelt imitations. Once the hatches are in full swing, dry flies and nymphs work best. You are often fishing to salmon you can see, so you can gauge your skill at hatch-matching by the reaction of the judges.

Although some salmon remain in the stream throughout the heat of the summer, especially in the deeper, well-oxygenated spots like the Dam Pool and around the falls, good fishing for salmon will not occur again until late September and early October, another popular time for visiting anglers, but far less crowded than Memorial Day weekend and without the blackflies. Similar fishing tactics apply.

Smallmouth fishing in the stream, which is productive all the way from spawning in early June until the end of the fishing season, employs the same tackle and many of the same flies you use for salmon. Smelt-imitating streamers are still effective, but so are Woolly Buggers and crayfish imitations. Big dries, like Royal Wulffs, will work, as will bass poppers and Muddlers. In the

Dam Pool, I caught a three-pound bass on a beadhead Woolly Bugger as I dragged it behind me while walking to a new spot.

The lakes—West Grand Lake and Big Lake—are also great places to fish for both salmon and bass, as well as lake trout. West Grand Lake is the place for landlocks and lakers very early in the season, just after ice-out, while the fish are still near the surface. Trolled streamers that imitate smelt, as well as dry flies cast to rising fish, are productive.

Big Lake is the prime place to go for smallmouth bass, which spawn along the shorelines of its numerous islands and can also be found later in the season around its rocky shoals. Crayfish imitations, Woolly Buggers and Clouser Minnows all work well in deeper water, where you will have to fish once spawning is over and the water warms in summer, but the real fun comes from casting deer-hair poppers and gurglers against the shorelines just as the water temperature reaches about 60 degrees. Usually, that takes place around the first of June. A 7-weight or 8-weight outfit is perfect for casting the fluffy bugs on the usually windy lakes.

To fish the lakes you will need a boat. All the guides employed at Weatherby's own Grand Lakers, 20-foot, square-stern canoes with outboard motors. Hiring a guide, therefore, gets you a boat, as well as the services of an expert who will take you to the best spots, handle the boat, prepare an unforgettable shore lunch, impart useful advice, provide amiable company and afford all the other advantages of an excellent Maine guide. There are also boats—with motors—for rent if you prefer to go it alone.

Outstanding smallmouth bass fishing is also offered on the nearby St. Croix River, which forms the international border between Maine and New Brunswick, Canada.

To arrange your own stay at Weatherby's, contact the Sassis at 207-796-5558 (May 1 to mid-October) or 207-237-2911 (mid-October to April 30). On the web at www.weatherbys.com/. —C.H.

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WEATHERBY'S

► Continued from page 49

I was out there alone again before breakfast, before the sun cleared the trees, in fact, and I waited in vain for a hatch or any repetition of the activity of the previous evening. I cast and skittered, but with the absence of the real thing, the salmon took no interest in my antics. Even when the sun crested the trees and bathed the pool with full, clear, North Woods, hemlock-scented Maine sunshine, nothing changed.

Over bacon and eggs, I told Ken Sassi that I'd had some success on the Dam Pool around dusk. He is so sincerely concerned about his guest's enjoyment of this truly wonderful place that I made it a point to reassure him I managed some worthwhile fishing despite the crowds. He told me about other anglers throughout the pleasantly homey dining room—hung with mounted salmon, brookies and bass—who had been successful on the water, but many of them had gone out on Big Lake with a guide in search of smallmouth bass, for which the lodge—and the area in general—is equally famous. The pair who had managed to consistently catch salmon in the stream over the past few days were a couple of elderly fellows who store their stream-specific flies by the dates of the hatches and can present a facsimile of every stage of those insects and their anomalies as need be. These men are denizens of a league to which I cannot even relate, let alone aspire.

After a supper of roast beef, I again rushed down to the Dam Pool. Four other guys were there already, although none were guests at Weatherby's. It remains the only time in my life that I have encountered four left-handed casters in one place. I took a spot at the right-hand end of the line as though they had saved it for me. Just as on the previous night, things started happening a few minutes before dark. Unwilling to give away my discovery, I simply let my fly drift on the current, just as the lefties were doing, and none of us caught a thing amid the fluttering hatch and gulping fish. When it got too dark to see, the four lefties left—God bless them—and the instant I skittered my fly I got a jolting strike from a salmon I never got to touch; it leapt in the beam of light from the dam, and I could actually see the backlit fish and fly part company in midair. A couple of casts later the same thing happened, but it was off to the side of the beam, and I only felt it. Finally one stayed on, and it proved to be the largest yet, a beautiful 17-incher that threw the hook but had it recatch in its head, just

above the eye. A lucky break, but I'll take it. Right after that, the action suddenly ceased.

On my final evening, after a day of bass fishing on Big Lake—which deserves an article of its own—I made hasty tracks back to the Dam Pool. There were eight guys there: the lefties and four others. I did not even try to squeeze in, figuring they would all leave at dark. I tied on my Trude and waited. The hatch started, fish began rising, and eight rods went methodically to work. Nobody caught anything; nobody even got a hit. It got dark, and two of the newest guys gave up in disgust. I took their place and threw caution to the wind; apparently these others were here for the duration, and I was leaving the next day anyway. I skittered my fly and landed an 18-incher. None of the others had seen how I had done it. They kept casting while I played and released the fish. On my next cast, I had on another fish long enough for my companions to notice the pronounced bend in my rod, the slicing of my line across the center of the pool and the sudden loss of resistance. I cast twice more and, in rapid succession, landed a small bass and a 10-inch brookie. On my next backcast, I simultaneously felt a slight tug and heard a faint snap. My fly disappeared on silent, leathery wings.

Darkness had concealed my technique, but it also made it impossible to tie on another fly. I had no light. I was through. As I waded to shore, one of the lefties realized my situation.

"How about I lend you my magnifier-light for the name of the fly you're using?" he offered.

"That's very nice of you. Royal Trude," I said without hesitation, knowing full well that without the crucial directive to skitter it, I was telling him nothing at all.

He responded with one of those enlightened "Ahhhh!" looks on his face and excitedly handed me his gizmo.

God, what a cad I am, I thought.

With the sounds of frenzied, splashing fish and whistling fly lines in the dark behind me, I struggled to tie on another fly; even with the gizmo, it proved an unworkable task for my aging eyes. Finally I gave up, handed the lefty his gadget and thanked him anyway. I wondered if I couldn't fool my conscience into silence.

"Try one of mine, and watch out for the bats," I said, handing him a Trude before climbing the bank. ○

Cliff Hauptman's latest book is *The Dog-Nose Chronicles*, from Willow Creek Press (Minocqua, Wisconsin).