

## EARLY SEASON TROUT

*By Jack L. Parker*

How many times have you gone opening day to your favorite stream, with visions of big fish, only to find when you arrived the banks were lined with fishermen, or conditions were anything but conducive to any kind of fishing. The water was flowing over the banks and it was not the crystal clarity you remembered on your last visit the previous season. It was now the shade of strong coffee with cream. The excitement that had been swelling inside your chest for the weeks prior to opening day suddenly dropped to the pit of your stomach like 50 lbs. of buckshot. When you saw the condition the water was in you became ill. You may have tried a few half-hearted casts with a weighted wet fly or nymph, but the old enthusiasm had faded. Suddenly, on the way back to the car, you remembered that little feeder creek you crossed back down the road. It looked as clear as a cool gin and tonic on a hot day. "Heck, you could jump across it," you tell yourself. On the way home, you slowed the car down when you crossed the bridge, and gave the stream a closer look. "Well," you surmised, "it just might hold a fish or two after all." You parked your car and decided to give it a try.

If you had passed up that small feeder, you would have passed up some good fishing. That opening day had a happy ending for you. You were able to land and release several fair to good fish. Now you seldom bother fishing the main stem streams until water conditions change. In fact, you make it a point to fish those small passed over streams. You learned a very valuable lesson. Nine times out of ten, you will have the stream all to yourself.

Perhaps, there is even a small stream near where you live. Even if it is not supposed to hold trout, check it out anyway. It may in years past have been a trout stream. And even though no one now fishes it that doesn't mean some of those fish have not survived. As an example: There is just such a small stream near my home. How the trout got there is a mystery. From start to finish the stream does not come in contact with trout water. The fish are probably the results of some long ago forgotten stocking. It takes about three hours to thoroughly cover the stretch of water where the trout are located. The fish, both browns and rainbows, feed a great deal in the tails of the pools. It takes a leader with a fine tippet to be successful with those fish, even in the early season.

Fishing small streams calls for caution. The fish frighten easily. Even the slightest wave from careless wading will send them for cover fast. A good rule to try and follow, as much as you can, when fishing a small stream is to stay out of the water and behind cover whenever possible. For this kind of fishing a short rod works best. It must be capable of making the short, accurate, delicate casts that are so often needed.

Another good example of successful early season small stream fishing happened some years ago. It was before the dams were built on the Little Truckee River. It was late May and the water though clear was quite high. I had wanted to fish a small feeder stream, but the friend I was with insisted we fish the Little Truckee, saying we had a better chance for bigger fish. He won that argument.

It was useless to fish dry flies, so we went deep with weighted wet flies, streamers and nymphs. We tried them all. After fishing most of the day, we were both still fishless. Finally, out of desperation I told him I was going to fish the feeder. He relented saying he would go along and give it a try.

When we arrived at the feeder, which was in fine shape, we had about an hour left to fish. My friend elected to go upstream and I started near the car. At the end of the hour I had caught three fish. My partner was a little late getting back but when I finally saw him coming I walked out to meet him. Upon seeing me, he began to run. I thought something might be wrong. When he was close to me he suddenly stopped, reached into the back of his fishing vest, and pulled out a 3-½ lb. brown. He was so excited he could hardly speak. Finally, after calming down he told me he had caught the fish on a No. 12 Adams, under an old bridge located upstream. Since it was almost dark when the fish was hooked, we figured it had just started its nightly rounds and spotted his fly. My friend will still fish big water, but now prefers the small streams. He says they are more of a challenge. As yet, the 3-½ pounder has not been bettered, but he has caught some nice fish.

If you know of, or are able to find, a spring fed creek you will probably be able to fish it all season long. The water temperature will stay fairly constant and so will its flow. During the late summer and early fall, when other streams are mere trickles, a spring creek can be counted on to have a good head of water. With careful casting there is usually a trout or two that will give you some sport. They are excellent early season streams as well.

When the main stem streams are high and muddy, trout will work up into those feeder streams that are running clear. A good many will return to the main streams when conditions are more normal. However, there are fish that will stay in the feeders. These fish, though sometimes not numerous, are fairly easy to locate, but not always easy to catch.

You must seek out the holding water of the stream. Often, a good bet is a narrow riffle next to a high bank. This kind of water is often deeper than it looks. It serves as a natural funnel for the various trout foods. Never pass up a section of stream with an undercut bank. Even if the center of the stream is shallow, the relentless action of the current against the bank will wash out a spot deep enough to hold a fish or two. Fish wherever any obstruction has fallen into the water to form a pool. A deep pool found at the bend of a stream is never to be overlooked. Do not pass up any water until you make certain it is not a suitable spot for a fish. For example, one of the most overlooked kinds of water, especially in small streams, are those rather fast, shallow stretches. They look too fast and shallow to hold fish. Often, this kind of water will be littered with potholes. Trout seek out these holes because they offer protection from the current, and the current serves the fish a veritable smorgasbord of food. So, to pass up these shallow riffles is a big mistake. The best way to catch these fish is to use a high floating dry fly like a bi-visible, or bounce a nymph right along the bottom. You may be amazed at the size of the fish you catch from these stretches, and how hard they fight. In the small stream, no piece of water no matter how unappealing it may look should be passed over until you make sure it is not holding water.

In the early part of the season, the weather tends to be somewhat unpredictable. If you happen to be on a small stream and it begins to rain, don't give up and head for home. If you do, you may miss some fantastic fishing. You may do best using terrestrial imitations such as beetles, ants and spiders, because the rain tends to knock these insects off the overhanging foliage and they end up in the stream. Cast upstream letting the fly drift downstream in a natural manner with the current.

Some anglers may feel that fishing small streams is for kids. They believe the water will hold nothing but fingerling trout. They foolishly feel that there is no skill required in fishing them. However, to successfully fish the small stream takes a measure of skill and concentration that is sometimes not required on other types of water. To be sure, to be a successful fisherman on most trout water takes skill. That is unless one is fishing for freshly stocked hatchery fish, or wilderness water that is seldom or never fished. It takes a bit of added effort on the angler's part to become an accomplished small stream fisherman. This skill, when acquired can be put to good use on any kind of water.

Now, just how does one go about locating small streams? One way is to get a series of topographical maps of the area you are most interested in. Study them carefully and check out the likely looking streams. Also, when you pass any stream that you think is a prospect, stop and give it the once over. For years, I had driven past a small stream on my way to a favorite creek, but I had never paid any attention to it. I was just too intent on reaching my destination. One reason was that near the highway it runs through an almost impenetrable mass of trees and undergrowth. Then one day a friend mentioned that upstream from the highway and a walk of about half mile the stream runs through open meadowland. I decided to give it a try. The walk was certainly worth it. I did not see another footprint other than my own, and there was a brightly colored rainbow in almost every likely spot eager to take my fly.

Someone once said you could always tell a fisherman because they will often stop on a bridge to check out the stream running below. Here are some good points to follow. When checking out a stream, prior to the actual fishing, check for water temperature. Now, unless you carry a thermometer, just check it with your hand. The water should be cold when you immerse your hand. Most trout fishermen should have a good recollection of how cold a trout stream should be due to past experiences. Next, check out the streambed for underwater nymph life by turning over rocks, digging into the mud and looking on the underside of submerged logs. Also, there should be plenty of holding water. By that I mean there should be areas where trout can hide, such as pools, riffles with large rocks to break the current, undercut banks, overhanging foliage, logs, etc. Now what comes next? Providing you have come up with some positive findings, the next step is to break out your tackle and go fishing. Don't give up easily. Give the stream a chance. You may not catch a fish immediately. Be patient. If, however, after you feel you have given it a fair try and are fishless, still don't mark the stream off your list. Try again on another day. You may get a surprise.

These methods of testing a stream are certainly not very scientific but they do offer good guidelines. You must treat the small stream with the respect it deserves. Release your fish with care; as of course you would in any water. Keep, if any, very few of the fish you catch. Yard for yard a small stream certainly cannot hold the number of fish a large stream is capable of holding. If you are not easily discouraged you may be compensated for your faith in the small streams, especially in the early season.