

Erie Times-News

Give a kid memories of trout fishing

Ray Bimber and I were on a string of nice weather for the opening day of trout fishing.

That string was the first few years that I was old enough to follow Ray up and down the steep Allegheny National Forest hills and valleys to reach the small streams that were home to wild brook trout.

So, my earliest impressions of opening day included reliable, nice weather.

Ray had been taking me fishing since I was 2 years old. It was two or three years later before he started taking me to the remote wild brook trout streams. Sometimes we called wild brook trout natives and small streams were called "cricks."

On this particular day, Ray was taking me to East Hickory Creek, in an area that Congress has since declared the Hickory Creek Wilderness.

Wilderness land covers 8,663 acres on the watersheds of East Hickory Creek and Middle Hickory Creek.

Our goal was to fish some beaver dams. It was the first time I had fished for brook trout in beaver dams.

I had been told that bigger brook trout could be caught from beaver dams, and I was not disappointed.

Ray was tall and slender, with broad shoulders. He had been walking those hills all of his life.

Without letting me know it, we would stop a few times to keep from wearing me out.

Always, we picked a comfortable seat, one of the boulders that were scattered along the hillside, or a fallen tree trunk.

It was during these pauses that he nurtured my enthusiasm for fishing and hunting with tales from his youth.

Mike Bleech



Already before he passed away when I was 15 years old, I appreciated the link he gave me to the late 19th century and early 20th century.

That gave me a genuine perspective to compare fishing and hunting as I have seen it with that of what by now is more than 100 years ago, back to a time when spring hillsides were white with American chestnut blossoms.

Nearing the upper beaver dam, we flushed a pair of wood ducks.

They cried, "Peee, peee, peee" as they disappeared behind tall trees.

Even now, the vision of sunlight sparkling off the water that trailed behind the ducks is clear in my mind.

Male wood ducks are among the most strikingly beautiful creatures. They deserve all of the attention you give them.

For a while after the ducks were out of hearing distance, the woods remained quiet.

Then we were moving again, in a crouch, as we neared the edge of the water.

A couple of my first lessons in fishing were to keep a low profile and walk softly.

Mess up on either account, and all of the brookies in the pool you were approaching would be well hidden among the roots of an overhanging hemlock tree.

When we were close enough, I flipped a writhing red worm into the deeper part of the beaver pond.

Within a few seconds, something was tugging at my line. I set the hook into a 9-inch brook trout. It was the longest brook trout I had seen up to that time.

In those years — the 1950s — there were paths along nearly every stream that held trout, stocked or wild. The minimum size for trout was 6 inches, and maybe one in a dozen at wild brook trout streams were longer than 6 inches. People kept the trout they caught at that time, including us. After trout season had been open a few weeks, the population of most small streams was cropped close to 6 inches.

But in our beaver dam, things were different. We did not catch any more 9-inch trout, but we did catch limits of wild brook trout, none less than 7 inches long.

After catching our fish, and before we started walking back to Ray's car, we built a nice, small fire and cooked hot dogs on sticks. Nothing beats food cooked over an open fire, even if it is just hot dogs.

I have made lunch cooked over open fires a standard part of fishing or hunting outings.

Walking back to the vehicle was a lot tougher than walking to the creek because it is all uphill. And the hills you go up are quite steep, so Ray paused more often, and told more stories.

Some of my favorite stories were about Canadian moose hunts. The wild places where he hunted moose have now been gobbled by suburban sprawl.

I have seen old newspaper photos of huge moose being brought home. While researching for a college history course, I came across old newspapers that reported on his hunting prowess.

I have been fortunate to be able to introduce fishing and hunting to a few young people. I tried to do as Ray had done with me, but one cannot compete with memories.

I urge anglers to take a kid fishing during the upcoming trout season. Don't muddy the kid's mind by telling him how much better things used to be. Be upbeat and encouraging.

The truth is that fishing is great now. Focus on this and you will give that kid great memories that include warm feelings of you. Every kid deserves this kind of introduction to trout fishing.

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