



TROUT *Travelogue*

GREAT FISHING IS JUST A STONE'S THROW OFF THE SCENIC BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY.



A rainbow trout got me in trouble on the Blue Ridge Parkway 21 years ago this May. On a beautiful Saturday afternoon, we were on a picnic across the parkway from Sims Pond in Watauga County. Our two best friends were enjoying the afternoon with me and my wife, who was a week short of giving birth to our oldest daughter.

Jimmy and I had broken out our fly rods, promising that we'd spend just a few minutes trying to see if we could raise a few fish in the Boone Fork of the Watauga River, which crossed under the parkway and skirted the picnic grounds. Jimmy stayed around the edge of the woods. I went prospecting.

About 200 yards deep into the woods, I spied a fish rising at the end of a long pool, just downstream from a tree that had fallen into the water. Five casts in, the fish rose and

missed the fly—I think it was a No. 12 Adams—with a splash. That only whetted my appetite. I guess 10 or 20 minutes passed before I got the perfect drift again, and this time, the fish didn't miss.

Neither did I. In no time, I had a 14-inch rainbow trout in the little net that clipped onto my vest. When I emerged from the woods, brandishing the rainbow and two more small brook trout on a stringer, the atmosphere had become somewhat chilly. "How could you leave me alone for that long?" my wife asked. "I'm about to have a baby. You must not care about me at all." It was a long 90-minute ride home. It seemed that I had chosen a rising trout over my more important duties as a husband.

In my defense, fishing in streams just off the Blue Ridge Parkway can be good to the

point of distraction. I have been back to the parkway countless times since, with fly rod or spinning rod in hand, and I've never forgotten that trip, which produced the first rainbow trout I caught in North Carolina. I've dunked kernels of corn and earthworms, run spinners past likely looking midstream boulders, and flipped flies so tiny that I had a hard time seeing them float past.

The parkway winds 469 miles through Virginia and North Carolina, starting at the Shenandoah National Park near Waynesville, Va., and ending at the entrance to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park at the Oconaluftee Visitor Center. North Carolina's section of the parkway, which ends at Milepost 469, starts around Milepost 216 at Cumberland Knob, land that was originally surveyed in 1749 by Peter Jefferson. His son

Thomas would later write the Declaration of Independence, found the University of Virginia and serve as our third president of the United States.

Parkway property covers more than 93,000 acres, including 75 miles of mountain streams and 66 acres of impounded ponds and lakes. Trout live in almost all of those streams—dainty brookies at the highest elevations, rainbows down a little lower and brown trout at the lowest elevations. The N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission manages a third of the parkway's streams in North Carolina as part of its Hatchery-Supported Trout Waters program. Those streams, plus the wild trout waters that course around and through the parkway's mountaintops and ridges, provide just about all of the opportunities that a trout fisherman could ever want.

The parkway was built from the mid-1930s through the late 1980s, when the last section, the Linn Cove Viaduct, was completed. The original idea was to build a road that would connect the Great Smoky Mountains National Park with the Shenandoah National Park—the "Appalachian Scenic Highway" it was called originally. But as much as for transportation, the parkway was a project that provided jobs in the Civilian Conservation Corps for thousands of people in the throes of the Great Depression. That the ribbon of asphalt could bring people closer to good trout fishing was an added bonus.

NORTHERN SECTION

From Brush Creek and Big Pine Creek a few miles south of Cumberland Knob to the Middle Prong of the Pigeon River near Devil's Courthouse south of Waynesville, opportunities abound for fishermen with a rod and reel and a sense of adventure. Anglers can fish from one end of the parkway to the other with either a Virginia or North Carolina license—no trout stamp required. However, because it can be difficult at times to tell when you have crossed over from federal land to an area where more stringent state regulations apply, it is highly recommended that you possess an N.C. Comprehensive Fishing License.

In general, access to streams is easier the closer you get to the Virginia line, because the stretches of the parkway through Avery, Watauga, Ashe, Wilkes and Alleghany counties don't tend to hug the ridgelines. In fact, there are long segments where travelers are in relatively low country, paralleling streams as they course through woods and farmland.

As you move south on the parkway, the road climbs higher. Most of the streams bridged by the parkway are too small to fish close to the road; they require a hike down the mountain to bigger water. In places, some fishermen leave a vehicle on a road at a much lower elevation, then park on the parkway and fish down.

Regulations vary from stream to stream, from hatchery-supported waters with a daily limit of seven fish and no size or bait restrictions to wild trout waters with a four-fish daily limit and a 7-inch size minimum to "special waters" that require catch-and-release and require single-hook artificial lures or flies.

Hatchery-supported water is what most fishermen first run into when they enter the parkway via N.C. 89 at Lowgap along the Surry-Alleghany line. Brush and Big Pine creeks run on parkway property for 7 or 8 miles, almost to the junction of U.S. 21. There, Little Glade Branch, a tiny wild trout stream, flows out of Little Glade Mill Pond and crosses the parkway around Milepost 230. It's a

narrow stream for sure, but it was part of a stream restoration project undertaken by the commission in the 1990s.

The next good trout waters are Basin and Cove creeks, the headwaters of which are on the Doughton Park property around Milepost 244. A trail leads from the parkway into the Basin Cove drainage. Commission biologist Kin Hodges said, "Basin is a great stream—depending on how far you want to go." It's full of wild rainbows, but climbing from pool to pool can be tough at times. Basin and Cove offer fishermen an opportunity to park one vehicle at the bottom of the mountain on Longbottom Road and another on parkway property for a daylong trek.

Meadow Fork and Cranberry Creek are both accessible from parkway property around the junction with N.C. 18 at the Alleghany-Ashe county line near Milepost 250. Both are hatchery-supported streams. Hodges said that Meadow Fork "is a decent stream, with a good bit of its length on the parkway. We did a creel survey four or five



Northern Section — Blue Ridge Parkway

- 1 BIG PINE CREEK
- 2 BRUSH CREEK
- 3 LITTLE GLADE BRANCH
- 4 BASIN CREEK
- 5 COVE CREEK
- 6 MEADOW CREEK
- 7 CRANBERRY CREEK



WRITTEN BY DAN KIBLER | PHOTOGRAPHED BY RICHARD BERNABE



years ago, and we found a few wild browns in addition to the hatchery fish. They were healthy fish.

“Cranberry is the stream where the folks you talk to up here go when they want to fish a hatchery-supported stream,” Hodges said. “People will swear that it holds more fish, but we stock it at the same level as the others. It’s a little bigger, so you can get in there with a fly rod without having to go through bushes on your hands and knees.”

CENTRAL SECTION

In Watauga County, the center of parkway trout fishing is the area around Moses Cone Memorial Park and Julian Price Memorial Park, between Mileposts 292 and 298. Tiny Sims Creek, Sims Pond and the Boone Fork of the Watauga River are around Milepost 296. “The Boone Fork is managed as wild trout waters upstream of the lake on the parkway,” Hodges said. “Downstream from Price Lake, it’s catch-and-release only now. The catch-and-release section used to go all the way to the Watauga River, but some private landowners closed that end, and now it’s just catch-and-release on the parkway.”

Wilson Creek is one of North Carolina’s more renowned trout streams. Its headwaters rise along the parkway on the eastern slopes of Grandfather Mountain around Milepost 302. Wilson Creek and a number of its smaller tributaries actually cross the parkway, but commission biologist Bob Brown said, “The parkway is so high up that where they cross, they’re small. You’ve got to park and hike down to do any good.”

The parkway’s next offering is also one of its most famous: the Linville River. Through much of Avery County, the parkway courses through the mountains east of the continental divide, so its streams flow east, eventually to the Atlantic Ocean. The Linville, around Milepost 316, is one such stream, rolling down the mountains through Linville Gorge before flattening out and pouring into Lake James. “The Linville is a bigger stream; it’s hatchery supported, and there’s a lot of access, a picnic area and all,” Brown said. “It’s a

relatively big stream, 75 feet wide in some areas, and some places even wider, and we stock it pretty heavily.”

After the Linville, however, there’s very little fishing available until you reach Milepost 349 and Mount Mitchell, the highest point east of the Mississippi River. The headwaters of the South Toe River are around the parkway’s junction with N.C. 128 (the road that leads up to Mount Mitchell), including Big Lost Cove Creek, Upper Creek and the South Toe. The best access to the streams, according to Brown, is from U.S. Forest Service roads that branch off the parkway and head down the ridge into Yancey County. “It’s all wild trout through there, brookies on the upper end and rainbows and browns further down,” Brown said. “Some of those streams are fished heavily, but it’s not like people are standing shoulder to shoulder.”

Commission biologist Scott Loftis of Waynesville said that on the western side of Mount Mitchell there is at least one stream before the parkway reaches Asheville that’s worth hiking in to fish: Carter Creek. Its headwaters are on parkway boundaries around Milepost 355. “It’s a good little wild brook trout stream,” Loftis said. “It’s catch-and-release, single-hook artificial lures only, and it has limited access from the bottom. One of the better ways to reach it is from the top, but you may have to walk in an hour to reach fishable water.” Of course, if you enjoy solitude and catching wild fish, the walk might be worth it.



Central Section — Blue Ridge Parkway

- 8 BOONE FORK WATAUGA RIVER
- 10 WILSON CREEK
- 12 SOUTH TOE RIVER
- 14 UPPER CREEK
- 9 SIMS CREEK & SIMS POND
- 11 LINVILLE RIVER
- 13 BIG LOST COVE CREEK
- 15 CARTER CREEK





SOUTHERN SECTION

On the south side of Asheville, the commission manages 6 miles of Bent Creek as hatchery-supported waters, upstream from the N.C. Arboretum around Milepost 393. A section between 4 and 5 miles long starts on the parkway and ends at Lake Powhatan, a 7-acre pond that is stocked by the commission and includes a pier. “I’d categorize Bent Creek as a medium-sized stream,” Loftis said. “Lake Powhatan provides a fishing opportunity for people who may not be able to wade a trout stream. There’s good access to the pond, plus a pier, and you could drag a canoe from the parking lot to the pond. The arboretum boundary is downstream from the lake maybe a mile.”

From Bent Creek south to the end of the parkway, most of the stream access is by hiking down from parkway property, Loftis said. The first

major stream that can be reached that way is the North Fork Mills River, between mileposts 400 and 405. “Those are all headwaters streams with wild trout,” Loftis said. “Two of the creeks come together to form the Hendersonville water supply impoundment. The headwater streams are managed for wild trout above the impoundment to their source. The North Mills River is designated delayed harvest below the impoundment downstream to the U.S. Forest Service Boundary.”

The parkway provides access to streams on both sides of the road for several miles below Mount Pisgah, Loftis said. “The parkway is the boundary between Transylvania and Haywood counties, and on one side, you drop off into the South Fork Mills River headwaters, the Davidson River headwaters, the French Broad headwaters, and on the other side, it’s the East Fork and West Fork Pigeon River. It’s kind of interesting, because on one side of the parkway you’re fishing the Middle Prong of the Pigeon River drainage, and on the other, it may be the French Broad River drainage. The headwaters of the South Fork Mills River are around the Pink Beds area



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(Milepost 410.3), then you’ve got Looking Glass Creek, the Davidson River and the North Fork of the French Broad River.”

The Middle Fork of the French Broad originates under Devil’s Courthouse (Milepost 422.4), an unusual exposed bare rock summit that’s rich in Cherokee legend. “You’ve got brookies up high and mainly rainbows below,” Loftis said. “There are brookies and browns in the Pink Beds area, and brookies in a number of the small tributaries that form the South Fork. As you get down into lower elevations, it’s mostly browns. The stream is pretty small on the upper end; there’s better access from U.S. 276.”

South of Waynesville are some of Loftis’ favorite streams on the parkway, the Yellowstone Prong and Dark Prong, which join to become the East Fork of the Pigeon River. He said that the Yellowstone Prong is excellent around the Graveyard Fields area (Milepost 418.8). “You pull off near Graveyard Fields, and about a mile downstream, you’ve got a series of falls below Graveyard Fields that are called Yellowstone Falls (Milepost 417.9),” he said. “In the Graveyard Fields area, you’ve got a lower gradient section with a coarse sand bottom and bedrock. It’s managed as wild trout waters. Downstream of Graveyard Fields, it gets more rugged, going



through a series of falls, then the Dark Prong comes in. Below the confluence of the Yellowstone Prong and Dark Prong, it becomes the East Fork of the Pigeon River. It’s a pretty good one-day trip back and forth to the parkway.”

The headwaters of the West Fork Pigeon River and Middle Prong are a few miles farther south, around Milepost 424. “The Middle Prong is a nice wild brook trout stream,” Loftis said. “People will leave a car down on N.C. 215 toward Canton near the Sunburst Campground, park up on the parkway and work their way downstream. It’s a real nice weekend trip; you have to camp overnight in the woods. There are brookies toward the headwaters, and you get into some browns on the lower third. The Middle Prong is wild trout to the confluence with the West Fork.”

The last major streams along the parkway are along that section of the road that forms the Haywood-Jackson county line. Loftis said that a number of excellent wild trout streams are in the Caney Fork watershed for several miles on either side of Milepost 430. “You’ve got streams like Laurel Creek, Rough Butt Creek and Piney Mountain Creek, which form Caney Fork,” Loftis said. “It’s pretty good fly-fishing in there, with brookies in the headwaters and rainbows the farther down you get.”

So tie some flies, pack the rods and jump in the car. Angling adventure waits just off the Blue Ridge Parkway. Just make sure your duties are taken care of at home before you go — you might want to stay and fish for a while. ♦

Dan Kibler is the longtime outdoors editor of the Winston-Salem Journal.

Southern Section — Blue Ridge Parkway

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- 17 BENT CREEK
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- 19 SOUTH FORK MILLS RIVER
- 20 LOOKING GLASS CREEK
- 21 DAVIDSON RIVER
- 22 NORTH FORK FRENCH BROAD RIVER
- 23 DARK PRONG
- 24 YELLOWSTONE PRONG
- 25 MIDDLE PRONG
- 26 ROUGH BUTT CREEK
- 27 PINEY MOUNTAIN CREEK



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