

The Brook Trout as Icon

by Michael Steinberg

I once fished a river in Connecticut fed by many springs. It headed into a tangled field of deadfalls and thick grasses, a swampy place through which ran rivulets of cold crystalline water dimpled everywhere with the rises of little fish. The rises were all from wild brookies. They were no more than four or five inches long—sleek velvety fish with black mottled backs and jewel-like bright red spots. When I hooked them on a Hairwing Royal Coachman, they seemed to pop directly up out of the water, wriggling vigorously. I marveled at their beauty and each of them made me smile. We were not ten miles from a suburban world peppered with strip malls, used car lots, gaudy gas stations, and fast-food restaurants, but this was a place exquisitely separate, quiet, and wild, and I was hugely grateful for it, for the rich satisfaction it brought me, for the wild brookies that are the emblem of such increasingly rare wildness.

—Nick Lyons
correspondence with author
6 November 2009



A Brook Trout by Winslow Homer. Watercolor, 1892. Private collection.

THE BROOK TROUT is a most iconic species among anglers in eastern North America. This lovely fish registers as a powerful symbol for several reasons: its beauty, its imagery in art and literature, and its role as an indicator species.

My use of the word *lovely* gives away the reason I hold this small fish in such high regard. There isn't a more striking fish in the East. The sides of the brook trout are sprinkled with dots and dashes of red, orange, yellow, and the occasional blue. Its belly—especially in the fall—turns to bright orange, while its upper back is dark green or even black, providing stunning contrasts. The first time I held a brook trout, I thought that an artist had painted all the colors of a fall

Appalachian forest on this one small, living palette.

Yet the camouflaged back of this fish makes it almost invisible in a stream. It is not until one is pulled from the depths of its icy, dark pool that we can see and truly appreciate these small masterpieces. Sometimes when I sit near a stream, I almost feel sorry for the hikers who quickly walk by, seemingly oblivious to the beauty of the creatures hiding among the rubble on the stream floor. The hikers' lack of attention in turn makes me think deeper about what I might be missing in nature when I'm distracted.

For centuries, the brook trout has served as a point of inspiration in both art and literature. Its image has graced

the canvases of America's best sporting artists, beginning in the nineteenth century with Winslow Homer's paintings of leaping brook trout. His celebrated *A Brook Trout* is one of the most recognizable fish images in American art. It both accurately depicts the species itself and places the fish in an almost unimaginable aerial pose.

Homer's focus on brookies shouldn't be particularly surprising given that in the nineteenth century, it was the only salmonid in many northeastern rivers, a prominent setting for his art. The brook trout remains a popular subject today among piscatorial artists, such as James Prosek, whose vivid watercolors of small brook trout are set among the streams in his native Connecticut; Joseph Tomelleri,



Small Fry—Brook Trout. Oil, 2009.
 BobWhite—BobWhite Studio. Used with permission.

whose scientifically detailed work has appeared in more than a thousand publications and whose client list (ranging from Zebco to Bass Pro) makes him perhaps the best-known fish illustrator today; and Bob White, whose fish and fishing watercolors inspire me to start planning my next trip. These individuals are not only talented artists, but also avid anglers who effectively depict the essence of fish and landscapes.

The allure of brook trout and the landscape in which they are found is also reflected in an abundance of literature. Contemporary authors such as Nick Lyons, W. D. Wetherell, Jim Babb, John Gierach, Craig Nova, and Chris Camuto have all written in great detail about the intersection of life and brook-trout angling. Their work has led me to contemplate the role of the brook trout in my own life. Before these scribes, the connection between literature and brookies specifically is harder to trace, but trout in general and fly fishing in particular provided fertile waters for a rich body of work. Authors Roderick Haig-Brown, Theodore Gordon, Norman Maclean, Henry David Thoreau, and Ernest Hemingway all fished in brookie waters.

Beyond creative inspiration provided by the brook trout is the fact that its presence tells us a great deal about the health of the larger environment. The brook trout is an indicator species for streams, lakes, and watersheds in largely unspoiled conditions. This association with clean, intact environments is another reason the brookie has developed a dedicated following among fly anglers. When I have a brook trout in my hand, I know the water in which I am standing is close to pristine.

Writer Chris Camuto noted in *A Fly Fisherman's Blue Ridge*, "Wild trout are a sign the land is doing well."¹ According to former Trout Unlimited Eastern Brook Trout Campaign Coordinator Gary Berti, "Brook trout are the canary in the coal mine when it comes to water quality. . . . Declining brook trout populations can provide an early warning that the health of an entire stream, lake or river is at risk."²

The brook trout is an iconic species also because it is the most widespread. It is often described as the only native member of the Salmonidae family found in the eastern United States. This is technically incorrect because the closely

related Arctic char is found in a handful of isolated ponds in northern Maine, Atlantic salmon continue to swim in the waters of several rivers in Maine and many more in eastern Canada, and lake trout are also found in the deep lakes of New England. However, the brook trout is the only native Salmonidae found south of New England, in highland areas such as the Allegheny and Blue Ridge mountains.

The brook trout's native range roughly spans the spine of the Appalachian Mountains, from northern Georgia to northern Labrador in Canada, and west to the Great Lakes and Hudson Bay regions. Within this vast geography exist such distinct populations as "coaster" brook trout in the Great Lakes, "salter" or sea-run brook trout along the coast of New England, southern and northern strains in the Appalachian Mountains, and unique strains in some Maine ponds. Fish size changes based on geography. Brook trout in the southern mountains are generally small because they are today limited to headwater streams with less food and cover. Farther north, brookies are found in larger streams, rivers, and lakes, all offering a wider assortment of such high-reward food items as forage fish. Habitat scale or opportunities correspond with the scale or size of the fish. It is a strange feeling, though, knowing that the tiny 6-inch brook trout I caught in foot-deep clear streams in South Carolina is the same species as the giant 20-incher I caught in the deep black rivers in Labrador.

Because of stocking efforts during the past two centuries, char and trout today are found outside their natural range and overlap with introduced species such as brown and rainbow trout. The brook trout is now widespread in western North America and has become an invasive pest, displacing many native cutthroat trout species. So while conservationists in the East work to protect brook trout, those in the West seek to remove them. Their presence and impact became clear to me while fishing with my wife a few years ago in Montana's Lee Metcalf Wilderness Area, far outside the brook trout's natural range. For every native cutthroat we caught, we probably landed ten brook trout—my wife cut her fly-fishing teeth on hungry brookies that day. Although that experience remains special, the memories are somewhat tempered because brook trout don't belong in Big Sky country. The experience would have been more "pure" had we only caught native cutthroats.

Beyond the iconic status of the brook trout itself, the environment in which it is found is also part of its past and present appeal. To fish for brook trout is



Bob White's One Last Look series perfectly captures the personal moment immediately before a trophy fish is released. Any angler can envision him- or herself in exactly that moment: appreciative of the fight and beauty of the fish, and slightly reluctant to let it go without another look. BobWhite—BobWhite Studio. Used with permission.

often to fish in the last remote and rugged landscapes in the East. Part of the allure of fishing in general is the landscape, whether it's the junglelike mangrove swamps of the tropics or the cold, boulder-laden streams flowing from mountains. The brook trout's home environment—streams in the hemlock-covered Appalachian Mountains and silent ponds in northern New England—are some of the most beautiful landscapes in the eastern United States. One inviting feature of these waters is that they do not receive the same levels of fishing pressure when compared with lower-elevation, more-accessible streams. It is not uncommon to spend a day completely alone while hiking up a brookie stream, even though you may only be a few hours from New York or Atlanta. During most brook-trout fishing trips, my only companions are brightly colored salamanders, birds in the treetops, and an occasional black bear.

These streams are not home to large, blandly colored, hatchery-reared fish. Instead, these cold trickles are for anglers who appreciate the intangibles that nature has to offer: great views from the tops of mountains, the physical challenge of hiking up rugged streams, and the chance to catch colorful native fish. When brookies strike at the end of my invisible leader, the mountain has bestowed upon me a living gift.

Today, brook trout in the eastern United States receive more conservation attention than they ever have through growing numbers of federal, state, and local conservation and restoration projects. This interest is not driven by the simple, yet understandable, desire to catch big fish. Brookies, in most instances, are not and never will be big fish; I feel a sense of accomplishment when I catch an 8-inch fish in a headwater stream. The motivation to improve and protect brook-trout habitat is driven largely by the love of native fish and their landscape. The interest in making spaces for native species for the sake of simply having native species seems like a healthy motivation compared with managing a species and ecosystem solely for producing trophies.

I am not naïve about our past or present impacts on native-trout landscapes. In almost all areas where brook trout are found, the ax and plow were close at hand at some point during the past three hundred years. And before European impacts, Native Americans too altered the landscape through fire and agriculture. Pristine forested landscapes are rare in eastern North America today, except for a handful of remote old-growth forests scattered throughout the mountains. Historic nineteenth-century photos of the Green or Shenandoah mountains show fields growing stumps and stone walls, not the mature forests we associate

with these areas today. But wilderness also can be thought of not in hard measurements (such as miles from roadways or thousand-year-old forests), but in terms of personal meaning.

When I hike and fish up a mountain stream, I sometimes like to imagine that its true headwater or source is in some far-off remote wilderness, well beyond my reach, rather than my stopping point at the moment. Even if headwaters are within reach, I often stop fishing and hiking short of them so that the stream retains some secrecy in my mind. Wilderness is a place where native species still dominate, where one can find peace, meaning, and some mystery in the natural landscape. These places are the mountaintops, gorges, and remote ponds where colorful brook trout still hover in their frigid dark water. If there still are wild and native brook trout out there, wilderness abides.



ENDNOTES

1. Chris Camuto, *A Fly Fisherman's Blue Ridge* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 24.
2. Gary Berti, Trout Unlimited press release, 3 May 2006, www.tu.org/press_releases/2006/new-data-shows-brook-trout-imperiled-throughout-entire-eastern-range. Accessed 1 May 2008.