

North Carolina 2002
Outdoor Recreation Guide
with Lodging and Outfitters Directory
By Dan Kibler

If you laid all of the trout streams in North Carolina end to end, they'd stretch almost all the way across the United States. Twenty-one hundred miles of fish-able trout water, that's what the Tar Heel State has to offer anglers who don't necessarily think of a rainbow as something that appears in the sky after a good rain.

And some of those streams are as distinct as fingerprints. Some are big waters, mountain rivers too wide to cast across. Some are tiny rills that drain the highest of high country, their banks so choked with vegetation that casting is done by pinching your dry fly between your thumb and fore-finger, pulling back hard enough to bend your rod tip almost in half, then letting go and rubber-band slinging it up under a limb to an eddy where a 6-inch, native brook trout might hide.

Biologists with the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission have divided the state's trout streams roughly into two parts: those that will support a population of native trout year-round - and those that won't. Native streams are managed with two or three different sets of regulations, depending on the exact stream and its history, with an eye toward protecting against overfishing. The streams that don't support a thriving population of native trout have their resident fish augmented by trout raised at one of the state's three cold-water hatcheries -to the tune of 600,000 catchable-sized fish per year. They're put in for one reason: to be taken out by fishermen.

On some native streams, fishermen are restricted to artificial lures only; on some, the restriction is extended to only flies. On some of the hatchery supported streams, catch-and-release fishing is the norm from October through May, with fish creel only from June 1-Sept. 30. Throw in different regulations for streams in the Great Smokey Mountains National Park and on the Cherokee Indian Reservation, and you've got plenty of streams and situations from which to choose. Trout season is open year-round on wild-trout waters; on hatchery supported waters, it is open except for that period of time from Feb. 28 through the first Saturday in April; this year, that's April 6.

Most of North Carolina's trout streams lie west of the continental divide, which runs roughly from the spot where Surry and Allegheny counties meet close to the Virginia border in northwestern North Carolina, southwest through Watauga, Avery, McDowell, Burke, Buncombe and Henderson counties to the South Carolina state line. The streams west of that line are generally 2,500 feet above sea level- a lot are a lot farther into the high country -and most streams that don't lie at the bottom of valleys run cold enough to support native trout. There are a few native streams east of the continental divide; most of them are on the east slope of the divide.

A handful of North Carolina streams are among the most famous in the Southeast, including the Davidson River in Transylvania County, Eagle, Hazel and Forney creeks in the GSMNP, plus the delayed-harvest section of the Nantahala River in Macon County.

The Davidson River's headwaters are in the high mountains of Transylvania County, southwest of the town of Pisgah Forest. The lower section of the stream, from its confluence with Looking Glass Creek, is managed as a hatchery-supported river. It gets regular stockings from the Pisgah Forest Hatchery upstream, with a lot of attention paid to the area around the public Davidson River Campground.

Upstream from the hatchery-supported water is a long section of water managed as catch-and-release only, artificial flies only. It's that section of the river where a fisherman can match wits with 20-inch rainbows and browns using flies as tiny as No.16 or 18. This is the section that gives the Davidson its blue-ribbon designation from most trout-fishing experts.

Eagle and Hazel creeks are among the most famous of waters in the GSMNP. They can be accessed only by boat, from the south shore of Fontana Lake. Eagle and Hazel are two of the biggest creeks that drain the southern face of the park's mountains; they're relatively close to the lower end of the lake, where the easiest access is by boat from the public docks at Fontana Village. Primitive, back country campsites are available from the park for fishermen who would like to backpack in from the lakeshore and spend a day or two testing the park's native rainbow and brown trout. Forney Creek is also on the north side of Fontana Lake, but it's on the eastern end of the lake, near Bryson City, with a little easier access. Fishermen can drive west on the "Road to Nowhere" out of Bryson City, winding up at a parking area that's about two miles from the creek. There are backcountry campsites along the creek at three locations. "Forney Creek doesn't get nearly as much pressure as Hazel Creek," said Jim Mathis, who runs Almond Boat Park at the confluence of the Little Tennessee and Nantahala rivers west of Bryson City. "And the last two or three years, there have been better fish coming out of Forney Creek than the more-famous streams at the other end of the lake." You need to go well upstream in the Nantahala from Mathis' boat dock to reach the section of the river that is famous for its trout. Coursing downstream roughly from its junction with Whiteoak Creek, the Nantahala is managed as a delayed-harvest stream, with catch-and-release only fishing from October through March. "It was one of the first group of streams that was put into the delayed-harvest program," said biologist Mickey Clemmons of the N.C.

Wildlife Resources Commission." Mainly, we chose it because it's probably the best creek for delayed harvest. The road goes right along the stream, so there's easy access for fishermen and easy enforcement. "It does have some wild trout, but in the summertime, because of the low (water) flow, it gets so warm that it's not the best habitat in the world. The wild trout will all move up the creeks. We stock a lot of fish in that stream, and over June and July, they're steadily caught out. We've had some of our highest catch rates, six fish per hour, there, and it's very, very popular." The Nantahala is also managed as a hatchery supported stream in those sections upstream that lie within the Nantahala National Forest, all the way to Nantahala Lake and above.

Two state parks in western North Carolina offer a buffet of fishing opportunities for trout lovers: South Mountain State Park in Burke County and Stone Mountain State Park in Wilkes and Allegheny counties.

At South Mountain, about 10 miles south of Morganton, the state park covers 7,500 acres. Three main creeks run through the park: Shinney Creek, the Henry Fork and the Jacobs Fork River.

Shinney Creek is largely wild-trout water, featuring mostly rainbow trout. The upper section of the Jacobs Fork is also wild-trout water (rainbows, also), but from the mouth of Shinney Creek to the park's boundary, it is part of the delayed-harvest program, stocked with browns, rainbows and brook trout. The Henry Fork is a wild-trout water, with catch-and-release fishing only, and only using artificial lures.

Stone Mountain State Park, about 20 miles north of Wilkesboro, is home to handful of quality creeks that are managed under a number of different sets of regulations.

The three "feature" streams in the park are the East Prong Roaring River and its two biggest tributaries: Stone Mountain Creek and Bullhead Creek.

The East Prong and Stone Mountain Creek are delayed-harvest streams with- in the park's borders. Upstream from the park border, Stone Mountain Creek is a wild-trout stream; below the park's boarder, the East Prong is a hatchery- supported creek. Within the park, stocking rates in the two creeks are very heavy, and hourly catch rates exceed five to six fish per hour during catch- and-release months.

Bullhead is a year-round catch-and- release, artificial flies only creek. It's a big creek, cascading off the eastern face of the Blue Ridge Parkway, fed by Richland Creek. Both are divided into a series of sections, and fishermen can "rent" sections on a daily basis for a nominal fee.

Bullhead was the centerpiece of a trout-fishing club before the park lands were donated to the state, and its fish are among the largest caught in North Carolina, thanks to catch-and-release regulations and some supplementary feedings. Not only are anglers restricted to artificial flies, but they must be barbless or have had their barbs mashed flat. Landing nets are also required.

The park also has three more crackerjack wild-trout streams: Widows, Garden and Big Sandy creeks. Garden is the biggest of the three; it drains the Blue Ridge Parkway area east of Doughton Park, and is mostly brown and brook trout. Widows is a tiny creek that feeds the East Prong; it is the most demanding when it comes to tight casting. Big Sandy runs around the base of Stone Mountain; it's mostly a rain- bow stream.

Several hundred streams belong to the hatchery-supported program. They receive periodic stocking of rainbows, brook trout and browns, with about two-thirds of all fish stocked in March, April and May -the peak months of the season.

Streams in the extreme western mountains get an annual stocking of around 300,000 trout. Northwest North Carolina and the western foothills area get around 150,000 trout each. About 40 percent of trout stocked are rainbows, 40 percent are brook trout and 20 percent are brown trout - which are more difficult to raise in hatcheries.

Most trout are stocked at the 7 to 10 inches in length, but about one trout stocked in 10 will exceed 14 inches, with some real bruisers stocked 'after their reproductive capabilities are exhausted in the state's hatcheries: Pisgah Forest in Transylvania County and Armstrong and Marion in McDowell County.

Over the past 10 years, the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission has added to the diet of hatchery trout certain additives that produce the beautiful coloration usually associated with native trout.

