



TROUT FOR THE MASSES

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Who says you have to travel to the Smoky Mountains for excellent trout fishing? Two state parks located within an easy drive of North Carolina's population centers provide a variety of opportunities for trout.



It happened almost 15 years ago, but I remember it like it was yesterday. I was fishing Section 4 of Bullhead Creek in Stone Mountain State Park, flicking a No. 12 Adams dry fly into a long, oval-shaped pool. I had landed one 10-inch brown trout, but I had spent a good 30 minutes trying to trick two enormous browns that were sunning near the tail end of the pool into striking. I changed flies two or three times, but to no avail.

The two trout, which really looked about as long and thick as my lower leg, showed absolutely no interest in my offerings. I took a break, moved upstream about eight or nine steps and started blind-casting toward the head of the pool, a little chute of water that emerged from between two boulders at about a 45-degree angle. I didn't see a big trout anywhere. Frankly, I was just hoping to find something 10 inches long in the fast water to soothe my 20-inch, brown trout headache.

On about my third drift—actually, the first time I got it right—a trout sipped at the surface, and my fly disappeared. It wasn't exactly the 10-inch fish I'd expected or hoped for. It was about twice that long or more. I had it on for about five seconds and got one look at its enormous, torpedo-shaped body before a 90-degree, left-hand turn and a head shake made my cobweb-sized leader part company from the fly.

I know my hands shook at the thought of actually hooking a 20-inch-plus rainbow trout. They shook for quite a while. In fact, I was quite useless from that point on. I fished out the remainder of the beat, not making a single passable cast and certainly not catching anything, before I headed back down the streamside path to my truck.

After a sandwich, a cold soda and a bag of peanuts, I drove about a half-mile, parked at an old, wood-framed Baptist church and hiked 45 minutes

up Garden Creek to a place where a 10-inch trout would have been a monster and all of the brook trout I caught were six or seven inches long. I released them all.

On the way home, I paused at a big elbow pool where Garden Creek joins the East Prong Roaring River and waved a greeting to an acquaintance. He was drifting earthworms, and the brace of trout on a stringer tied to his belt bore witness to his abilities as a human seine.

When you think about it, there are not many places where you can fish for trophy trout, tiny natives and hatchery-raised fish within a thousand yards of each other in the same day—and all in public streams. In part,

Both Stone Mountain State Park, near Elkin, and South Mountains State Park, near Morganton, have a variety of streams for trout anglers of all abilities to test their skills.

that's why Stone Mountain State Park and its neighbor to the southwest, South Mountains State Park, are attractive to trout fishermen of all kinds, from the Orvis-clad, bamboo-carrying, fly-fishing purist to the guy in jeans and calf-high rubber boots and his 10-year-old son, out with a can of corn, a few earthworms or some salmon eggs, trying to catch supper.

And that's a lot of what the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission was thinking when it decided how to manage streams within the boundaries of the two state parks. Because they are the closest areas with good concentrations of trout water to some of the state's major population centers—Charlotte, Winston-Salem and Greensboro—the idea to appeal to the entire spectrum of trout anglers took hold.

"The thing that both of these parks have is a variety of the angling experiences that we try to provide with the different programs we have," said Doug Besler, the Wildlife Commission's cold-water research coordinator.

"They both have delayed-harvest streams where adult fish are stocked in the fall and the spring, and that allows for some high catch rates during the fall and winter months, and harvest of these trout in the summer. Then, we have numerous streams with wild trout and natural reproduction that we don't manage at all other than set limits and some bait and lure restrictions."

Stone Mountain State Park is located along the border of Wilkes and Alleghany counties, down the mountain from the Blue Ridge Parkway, approximately 25 miles north of North Wilkesboro and an hour's drive from Winston-Salem—90 minutes from Greensboro or Charlotte. The park, which contains almost 14,000 acres of rugged, mountainous land, was the vision of Phillip Hanes, a textile magnate from Winston-Salem who donated 1,100 acres

in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Several other donations, plus a handful of major purchases, brought together the majority of park acreage by the mid-1970s.

Stone Mountain State Park has 17 miles of trout streams that are divided into a handful of categories, all of which lie in the Yadkin River drainage. The centerpiece is the East Prong Roaring River, a large stream with two universal-access fishing piers that winds through the heart of the park and that underwent a \$600,000 renovation several years ago to improve stream and habitat conditions.

Once managed under hatchery-supported regulations, the East Prong was one of the first streams to be designated as a delayed-harvest stream when the Wildlife Commission started that program in 1994. Those streams, which have become some of the Wildlife Commission's most popular, are stocked at heavier-than-normal levels, and all fishing is single-hook, artificial-lure, catch-and-release-only from Oct. 1 until the first Saturday in June. From June through September, regulations revert to hatchery-supported, allowing anglers to harvest stocked fish. Downstream from the park boundaries, a section of the East Prong covering several miles is in the hatchery-supported program.

"We were trying to diversify and come up with the most opportunities with diverse regulations," remembers Joe Mickey of nearby





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For more information, call Stone Mountain State Park (336) 957-8185, South Mountains State Park (828) 433-4772 or the N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation (919) 733-PARK.



Jacob Fork (left) is one of the jewels of South Mountains State Park. Stone Mountain (above, center) meanwhile provides awesome vistas in addition to excellent trout fishing.

State Road, who was the commission's fisheries biologist for northwest North Carolina when the regulations were changed. "Pennsylvania had a delayed-harvest program, and we decided to give it a whirl. The East Prong was an ideal location, because there was easy access with the road parallel to it, it was all under public ownership, it had good water quality, and it was large enough to hold a lot of fish."

Stone Mountain also has a handful of quality wild-trout streams of varying sizes, from tiny Widow Creek (which will challenge even the best fly caster) to Stone Mountain Creek, Big Sandy Creek and Garden Creek, the latter probably the best native-trout water in the park. Big Sandy has four major waterfalls on its run along the south side of Stone Mountain—a 600-foot-tall granite dome that gives the park its name—and it has only rainbow trout. Garden, Widow and Stone Mountain creeks, which run along the south side of Stone Mountain, have brook trout in their upper reaches, and rainbows or browns in their lower elevations.

And the park also has Bullhead Creek, once part of a fishing club of 215 acres that eventually became state property, and which was supplementally stocked by the fishing club, then by Trout Unlimited in the late 1970s. Bullhead is a relatively large creek whose higher reaches, including its Rich Mountain Creek tributary, have enough elevation to be good wild-trout waters, with a lot of brook trout. Bullhead is managed as a catch-and-release only, barbless-hooks, fly-fishing-only stream, and fishermen who pay a daily stream fee are assigned a "beat" or section that's all their own. Anglers gladly pay the fee because Bullhead's trout—in part because of an ongoing program of supplemental feeding—are legendary in size. It's nothing to climb up a few feet off the streamside trail for a better look at a pool and see a half-dozen browns or rainbows bigger than 18 inches, languishing in the clear waters.

"They do get big," Mickey said. "Many years ago, there was a 30-inch brown caught and released, and it was documented."

South Mountains State Park is about 15 miles south of Morganton in Burke County, 25 miles north of Shelby. The first 6,000 acres of the former Civilian Conservation Corps land was purchased in the mid-1970s, and the park now covers almost 17,000 acres. The park adjoins the almost 23,000-acre South Mountains Game Land.

Jacob Fork is the park's most-popular trout stream. It rolls out of the high country man-

aged as wild-trout waters until its junction with its biggest tributary, Shinnery Creek. Downstream from that point to the park's boundary, Jacob Fork is managed under delayed-harvest regulations. Shinnery Creek and the rest of the park's trout streams, with the exception of the Henry Fork watershed, are managed as wild-trout waters. Within the park's boundaries, the Henry Fork is managed as a special catch-and-release only, single-hook, artificial lures-only stream. It is managed as a wild-trout stream in the game land portion and as a hatchery-supported stream below the park boundary.

"Streams in the state parks get a lot of public pressure—the number of visitors is very high—and some of those streams could theoretically be managed for wild trout. But the angling pressure could be high enough that they wouldn't provide real good fishing, so they're in the delayed-harvest program," Besler said.

Scott Cunningham, a fishing guide from Morganton, calls South Mountains State Park, "our little gem. You don't have to go clear up into the mountains to trout-fish. It attracts a lot of people from Charlotte and Gastonia and Shelby," he said. "There are several good options. Jacob Fork—they keep the delayed-harvest section loaded up pretty good—but they're good at spreading the fish out. They've added a whole new section of delayed-harvest on the bottom of the stream, about two miles where they've extended the (park) boundaries.

"Shinnery Creek is pretty small, but about 100 yards above where it comes into Jacob Fork, there's about a 10-foot waterfall. That's wild-trout water there, but it's where all the delayed-harvest fish wind up, so it's a place where you can catch a few fish and take them home."

Managing Jacob Fork as a delayed-harvest stream actually helps the rest of the park's wild-trout streams as far as fishing pressure is concerned, Besler said.

"In the state parks, people like to come and harvest fish, and we give them the opportunity to catch and keep some fish if they want to during certain seasons, and that also takes some pressure off the wild-trout streams, even though we see very little harvest in wild-trout waters," he said. "Catch rates in our delayed-harvest streams are probably double the hatchery-supported streams. Our data shows that each delayed-



- Catch and Release/Single Hook/Artificial Lure
- Wild Trout Water
- Hatchery Supported Water
- Delayed Harvest Water



harvest fish is caught an average of 4 times. Basically, we're trying to recycle those fish as much as possible, and we adjust the number of fish we stock in certain streams to meet the pressure."

Hatchery-supported regulations include a daily creel limit of seven fish and no size minimum. The daily creel limit on wild-trout streams is four fish, with a 7-inch size minimum.

Camping is available at both state parks in backcountry, family and group situations. Hiking trails crisscross both parks, and plenty of picnicking sites exist. ☒