

The Smokies

By Steve Elkins

I am supposed to be studying, answering homework questions for my master's degree. It's supposed to help me decide what I want to do when I grow up. I went as far as to pull the textbooks out of my truck and they made it all the way to my desk. My cat George is stretched out at my feet, which he only does when my wife Diane is not home (George loves her more). But what I *really* want to do is tell you about the trip we took to Great Smoky Mountains National Park last week.

So I will.

The trip idea started when Diane came home a few weeks before Christmas with a backpack that she could carry her art supplies in. Inspired, I gave her a number of packable art supplies for Christmas: field watercolor kit, charcoal pencils of all shapes and sizes, brushes, etc. Her response was, "So when are we going to take a fishing trip so I can use all my art supplies?" I should explain our agreement: I fish; she paints. Now, it didn't hurt that she had also bought me a four-piece, four-weight fly rod and reel, along with a Smoky Mountains Angler's Guide, for Christmas...the next thing you know, we were on a road trip to Cherokee, North Carolina for a weekend of fishing (me) and art (her).

It's about an eight-hour drive from our home to the Smokies and I can't imagine why we never made this trip before. I mean, we have great salt- and freshwater fishing in northeast Florida, but we're only eight hours away from some fantastic trout fishing!

January is the off-season for trout fishing just about any place you look, so we didn't obsess about making reservations anywhere, and just decided we would find a place when we got there. We were able to look around the area a little, and then checked into a local hotel that had a very favorable off-season rate. Cherokee is very affordable as fishing destinations go, a little touristy for my taste, but a pleasant place to spend the weekend. We dropped off some stuff and then drove up to Bryson City, one of the entrances to Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

We had learned from the Angler's Guide that there were some rivers nearby that supported healthy populations of wild rainbow, brook, and brown trout, so we headed for the nearest river, Noland Creek. It's about as beautiful as any trout stream I have ever seen. What I didn't know was that the trout here are extremely spooky. So here I was gearing up at streamside while Diane wandered around and took a lot of pictures. I suspect that was enough to scare off all the trout because, on that first day, I didn't see a single fish.

But there's more...remember this was the first week in January and it had been really cold in the Southeast. It had been seven degrees here the day before. The river wasn't frozen solid, but only because it was moving. Every pool and eddy was covered in three to six inches of ice. I did my best with a Prince Nymph as a dropper below a Los Alamos Ant – the old "Dry and Dropper" method - and I kept feeling something bump against my waders as I slowly fished upstream. Part of me thought it was fish (because that happens, sometimes), but finally I dipped my landing net into the water and pulled

out a bunch of ice chunks. Okay, so this wasn't going well. But it was still beautiful, and Diane made some really nice sketches of the area.

We spent another two hours on Noland Creek, and then vowed to return when it was a little warmer. We agreed to trek further up into the park next time, because the higher elevation should yield more fish. We had some snacks in a pleasant, funky little coffee shop in Bryson City, and then returned to Cherokee for the rest of the day. We drove up into the park from Cherokee to see more of the scenery, helped out a couple whose pickup truck had slipped on the ice and skidded off the road (and only missed landing in a river because there's a really strong rock wall along the road). We tried out the Harrah's Casino on the Cherokee reservation and had a great steak and seafood buffet at the Holiday Inn.

The next day I was scheduled to take an eight-hour fishing trip with Jesse Lambert, a local guide with Smoky Mountain Fly Fishing in Cherokee. Jesse is 22 and has been guiding since he was 18. Not only is he great company, but he is an excellent fly fisherman. Jesse's brother, Jason Lambert, is the owner of SMFF and is a really nice guy with a lot of local knowledge.

Diane dropped me off at SMFF, and I met up with Jesse. He rigged up an 8 ½ foot 5-weight rod for me, issued me a pair of waders and boots, and reminded me how to react if I found myself in over my waders. We drove down to a good spot he knew of on the Tuckasegee River, a tailwater near the town of Silva, N.C.

The Tuckasegee was very different than the mountain streams in the Rockies. It was wide, shallow, and gave ample room for a full cast in any direction (usually). It took me a while to get used to the current, but even though I never fell in, I came close a few times. This was my first experience with tailwater fishing, and Jesse advised me to keep an eye on a specific rock in the river, so we could tell when the reservoir was releasing water.

Did I mention the cold? The water was just above freezing, but the air wasn't. For the first hour or two, we alternated drifting nymphs and breaking ice out of my guides. Even with waders and multiple layers of clothing, I was numb from the knees down. You reach a point where the burning feeling in your legs is actually welcome when you're that cold. Strangely, you also look forward to standing in shallower water, and you welcome short trips over big rocks. Finally, the sun cleared the trees and warmed the valley up to about 50 degrees.

We moved around and tried a number of spots, but this *was* the first week in January. At some point, one has to take the time to look around and appreciate the awesome natural beauty this place has to offer. If only it wasn't so damned cold! The hills around this valley, in their winter state, filled me with a strong sense of wonder at their true age – this is the oldest mountain range in the world, and a lot has happened in these hills over the last 300 million years.

Finally, success! Once the day warmed up – about 11:00 - apparently the trout did, too. I had read about tiny Blue Winged Olives and midges that composed most of the local trout's winter diets – apart from the dog food that some rental-cabin caretakers toss out into the river – but didn't really expect to see any this time of year. But the next thing you know, trout were rising to small bugs and you could see them in the air: tiny Blue Winged Olives and sporadic adult midges dotting the water as they laid eggs on the surface. And they were *tiny*! We started out with a #18 Blue Winged Olive, which is

about the length of my smallest fingernail. I made a few good casts and drifted the fly right over a rising trout, who took a close look at my fly and then refused it. It turned out to be just a little too big, so Jesse switched me to a #22 light-colored midge dry fly – about the width of a pencil. A quick cast and drift over the same finicky brook trout and I was hooked up to my first tailwater trout: about 14 inches, which is a small fish at home, but a good sized trout, no matter where you are. We released him to go and sulk in a deep pool and continued to catch rising trout for the next hour or so. At the end of the surface action, I had caught my first North Carolina Slam: brook, rainbow, and brown trout. I landed most of the fish I hooked; a few executed effective LDRs (long-distance releases).

Then something odd happened. I looked over at my rock (I'm supposed to be watching a rock, remember?) and it wasn't there! I looked over at the pool where my rising trout had been, and the water was a darker color than it had been before, and now a number of leaves were drifting past my legs. And then a tree branch drifted past. The reservoir had begun releasing water for power generation, which meant the current and depth were increasing.

Here's the problem with the current increasing: You can't see the bottom anymore. If this river had a smooth bottom, it would be no big deal, but the bottom where we were fishing was pretty irregular, so you had to look and feel your way across it. When the current was slow, it wasn't too difficult. But as the current increased, it became more difficult to see where I was stepping, and so I had to feel my way across the bottom with my boots. You also learn to move around with your hip to the current because you have less drag that way – something I originally learned in the surf, but it came in handy here as well. Again, I never fell in, but I also didn't let Jesse get more than an arm's length away, and had to grab for him a few times to keep my balance. When we moved to a new spot, he offered me a wading staff, which I accepted and used extensively.

The last trout I caught that day was a very pretty rainbow, about 14 inches, which attacked a white #8 Woolly Bugger on a downstream drift. The trout here really like the dark and light Woolly Buggers, especially as they're sinking and as they quarter. When the reservoir releases, this is the fly to use. It imitates a small fish, or shrimp, or whatever. I suppose other streamer patterns could work just as well, but this is what I used and it worked. Just make sure it has some weight to it so it will sink some in the faster water.

The drive back to SMFF was pleasant, with the heater on full, and slowly being able to feel my toes for the first time in eight hours. This is when I learned what a trooper Jesse is: He had been standing in the water next to me for eight hours, with a hole in his waders and a boot full of ice-cold water, and had never said a word about it. Back at the shop, I bought a few things I had decided I needed (like a pair of fingerless gloves that convert to mittens). Diane picked me up and I went off to the hotel to take a long, hot shower.

We'll be back there again.