

Gregory M. Tollefson
413 Daly
Missoula, Montana 59801
(406)721-6741
Offered: FNASR
Approx. 2000 words

ROCK CREEK IS NOT A CRICK

The picture is so clean and clear in my memory it could have happened yesterday. My father and I were going to spend the day fishing one of our favorite stretches of river. When we got rigged up I discovered I'd left my fly box in the car so I raced back through a narrow band of trees to the road to get it. As I re-emerged from the trees, fly box in hand, I was confronted by the sight of my father, already consumed in an effort to land a very large fish.

Standing calf deep in the swift water, legs spread for balance, bamboo fly rod held high in the air, he was alternately thumbing out line and retrieving it as fast as he could as the fish ran and stalled. As I watched the silver-sided monster cleared the water three times in theatrical attempts to dislodge the fly. My father kept a tight line and after several minutes that seemed like hours was able to gradually slide the fish into shallower slow water.

Still holding the rod high, he reached back for his landing net and prepared to slip it under the fish. He made one of those awkward stabs with the net that fishermen tend to make when they are a bit more excited than usual. Maybe the net touched the big rainbow. Maybe it saw it coming. At any rate, in one final twisting lunge, the fish spit the fly and swam off into the dark water.

Unaware of his audience, my father stared, limp and slack jawed for just a moment, looking hopelessly in the general direction the fish had gone. Then, for reasons I did not really understand at the time, he slowly sat down, right where he was in the shallow water.

When the talk comes around to trout fishing in Montana, the magical names of the great rivers immediately come to mind. The Madison, the Beaverhead, the Big Hole, the Missouri, the Yellowstone and the Big Horn--these are the fabled waters that anglers from all over come to fish. When you talk to the locals in Montana, though, there are other names that come up just as often. The stream my father was sitting in that day 30 years ago is one of them. It is known as Rock Creek.

Prior to and since that day 30 years ago, Rock Creek has been one of Montana's most productive streams, as well as one of its best-kept fishing secrets. Harboring rainbow, brown and west slope cutthroat trout in unusual numbers, the waters of Rock Creek have long been recognized by local sportsmen and professional fisheries managers as an extraordinary resource.

Unlike the great rivers of the upper Missouri basin, Rock Creek has not suffered from unchecked commercial exploitation and rampant unplanned development. Fishing pressure can be heavy at times, but even at its worst, it cannot begin to compare with activity on, for example, the Big-Hole during the salmon-fly hatch. The stream remains essentially what it has always been--a place to find beauty, solitude and high-quality

fishing. The credit for this is due in large part to far-sighted management policies of the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks and the tireless efforts of local sportsmen's groups and conservation organizations.

Rock Creek, or "Rock Crick" as it is invariably called locally, originates in spectacular beauty among the peaks and crags of the Anaconda-Pintlar Wilderness area and flows northward for sixty or more miles to the eventual junction with the Clark Fork of the Columbia. The middle and east forks come tumbling out of timbered canyons and merge in a broad ranching valley some 40 miles upstream from the mouth. Ten miles downstream, the west fork pours in and the valley narrows into a steep, rocky canyon that winds all the way to the Clark Fork.

A "creek" in name only, this stream is a small, very swift river with numerous braided side channels, deep holes, log jams and even a stretch of rapids several miles long appropriately known as The Dalles. The bottom ranges from fine gravel to boulders. Abundant aquatic vegetation gives the water a dark cast and provides excellent habitat for the diversity of insect life it supports. Streambank vegetation ranges from dense willow and alder to steep lodgepole slopes. In many areas, the stream is bordered by sheer^e cliffs or steep unstable sliderock.

If the stream sounds intimidating, it shouldn't. Rock Creek is followed closely for most of its length by a well traveled gravel road. Much of the stream is bordered by public lands, affording virtually unlimited public access. Where private

land occurs along the lower reaches, numerous public fishing access sites have been established. In the ranch country of upper Rock Creek it is easy to get permission by just asking. There are fish to catch almost anywhere on the stream so access is never really a problem.

Unlike most larger rivers, Rock Creek is not open to trout fishing year round. For the six months of winter, the stream lies fallow with only an occasional whitefish enthusiast to disturb the silence. From mid-May to the end of November however, the passage of time for local fishermen is noted by the type and location of insect activity. Tackle shops and bars keep daily tabs of such things and post this vital information in conspicuous locations. "What are the bugs doing up on Rock Creek?" is as common as "Hello" among the faithful.

The bugs are always doing something. The first two weeks of the season are nymph time, as salmon-fly nymphs known as "helgrammites" crawl from beneath streambottom rocks on the journey to shore. Once ashore and hanging securely from bushes and trees, these ugly bugs become the gaudy orange and brown salmon-flies that are the stuff of anglers' dreams.

In early June the spectacular salmon-fly hatch begins a month-long journey upstream. It leaves nothing but gorged trout and satisfied fishermen in its wake.

Soon after the salmon-fly hatch, a smaller cousin appears in the form of the golden stone fly. In late July, more excitement arrives with the spruce bud moth hatch. The month of August brings

grasshoppers. The arrival of fall signals more nymph activity and the beginning of the brown trout spawn. Streamers become effective by mid-fall. Throughout the season, heavy caddis and mayfly hatches occur daily, continuing well into the cool of autumn. Rock Creek must have been designed with the fly fisherman in mind.

Although the fishing is good all season, nobody will argue that it gets any better than it is during the salmon-fly hatch. These big insects drive trout and fishermen nuts. Trout seem to lose caution and guile when the big morsels start falling into the water. The salmon-fly is the prime rib of trout food and the feeding frenzy it ignites can last for several days as the hatch slowly moves upstream. Imitations, known as "sofa pillows" are the big sellers in local tackle shops in early June.

A typical June evening finds fishermen driving out from Missoula and following the gravel road upstream until the cloud of insects swarming over the stream appears suitably thick. A quick survey of the water's surface pinpoints the location of a concentration of dimples indicating feeding fish. As likely as not, the sofa pillow gets the undivided attention of a fat brown or rainbow on that first cast and the fun begins.

One June evening a few years back, I was visited by a friend, Dan Paschke, returning to his home in Kalispell from a less-than-satisfactory trip to the Big Hole. He was depressed by the crowds, the sheer number of boats and the rudeness he encountered from other fishermen in that circus-like atmosphere. I assured him

that it wasn't that way on Rock Creek and he agreed to take a ride out with me. He was skeptical until we reached the stream.

. As we rounded a bend six miles upstream from the mouth, we were greeted by a sight that can send the most sober fisherman into convulsions of rapture. The air above the water was filled with insects, diving, climbing, swarming and falling into the water. Cliff swallows were darting in and out, feeding at will on the big bugs. The deep long run on the far bank tailed out into a flat pool that was alive with feeding fish. There wasn't another fisherman in sight.

Dan had all he could do to quit shaking while he was rigging up. His first hurried cast brought a fat rainbow to the surface and a grin to his face that may still be there. We caught and released more than 30 fish in two hours that evening, including a hefty brown in the twenty inch class. Dan is a believer now. When he makes his trips to fish the Madison or the Big Hole, he also plans to fish Rock Creek both going and coming.

Despite the quality of the fishing, Rock Creek is not a mecca for those who want to fill their freezers. During the mid-1970s the formerly generous bag limits were severely restricted. Since that time, one stretch of river has been designated "catch and release only," while the daily limit on the remainder of the river is now three fish, only one of which may exceed 14 inches.

The use of natural baits is restricted to youngsters under 14. The rest of us are limited to flies and other artificial lures. These regulations have been well received by the fishing public.

It is important for the first-time Rock Creek angler to know a few other things about this river. It is extremely swift and tricky to wade or float. Felt-soled waders and a wading staff are musts. Some folks strap special metal cleats over their boots to assure good footing on the mossy rocks.

Float fishing is not recommended for the novice. Numerous logjams, tricky currents, dead-end channels and other obstacles make float fishing extremely hazardous for the uninitiated. Many boats are lost every year by those who fail to exercise proper caution or simply don't know the stream well. If you really want to float this stream contact a local guide.

While fishing Rock Creek, don't forget to look around. Wildlife abounds here. It is not unusual to see deer, elk or bear here at anytime. Bald eagles and osprey are also interested in Rock Creek's fine fishing and the lucky angler may get to witness one of these regal birds on its fishing grounds. An added attraction is the occasional sighting of bighorn sheep along the steep slopes above the stream.

Solitude is one of the most rewarding aspects of Rock Creek fishing. It is not unusual during mid-week to fish all day without seeing another angler. With that in mind, remember to give plenty of consideration to other fishermen. Give them wide berth and don't disturb their water. There is plenty of room on Rock Creek.

Despite the fact that the whole of Rock Creek seems to produce fish, longtime devotees tend to have favorite spots. Mine is a bend in the river through a small band of trees from the road. I saw my father sit down in the water there.