

FOR SEVERAL MINUTES I SEARCHED the little pool and riffle below me. A cold, late-fall rain created a choppy sheen on the surface and blocked my view of the streambed. Then a commotion in the riffles caught my attention, and I put on my polarized glasses. I had been tracking down a rumor of "brown trout up to 31 inches" and on that November day in 1999, my search ended. For ten minutes, I watched goggle-eyed as a procession of spawning browns struggled up through that shallow run. Half of them confirmed the rumor; the other half were just run-of-the-mill big trout.

Defining much of the eastern and southern boundaries of the 513,000-acre Allegheny National Forest in mountainous northwestern Pennsylvania, the Clarion River may very well be the least known big-trout water in the eastern United States. The Clarion is an accessible river that requires neither professional guides nor special tackle, and is completely fishable without a boat. Furthermore, the lack of consistent, heavy hatches means that those big browns are generalists that survive on baitfish, hellgrammites, and crayfish that can be copied and fished with terminal tackle stout enough to give decent odds for landing them. And, incredibly, with all these pluses, very few people outside the immediate area have heard of this river.

Perhaps that is because as recently as the early 1990s, when new owners took over an aging paper plant at the confluence of its two branches, the residue and thermal discharge from that mill, plus numerous acid mine seeps and poorly designed sewage treatment facilities throughout the watershed, rendered it nearly lifeless. But that, with a great deal of work by individuals, agencies, organizations, and businesses, has changed.

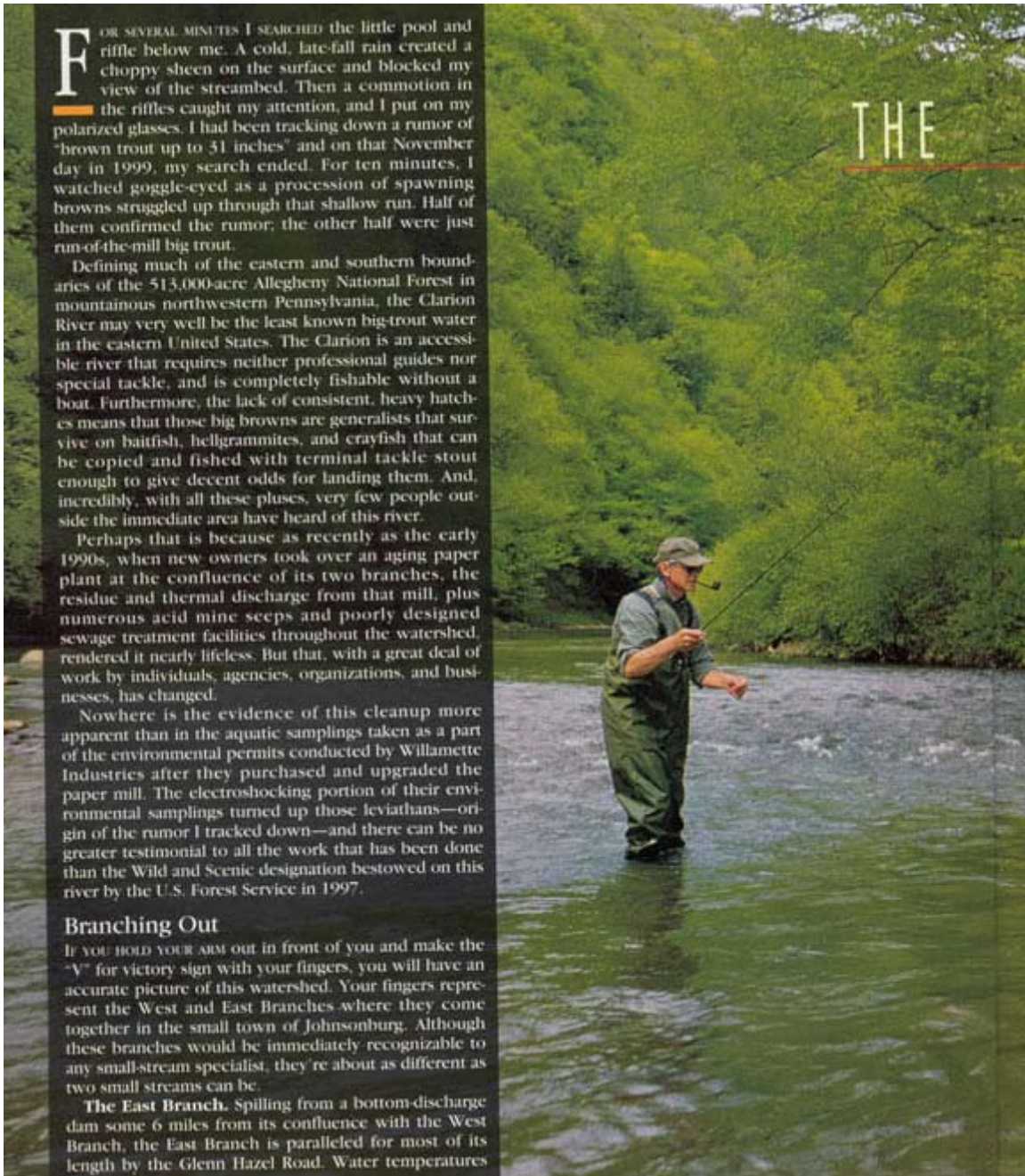
Nowhere is the evidence of this cleanup more apparent than in the aquatic samplings taken as a part of the environmental permits conducted by Willamette Industries after they purchased and upgraded the paper mill. The electroshocking portion of their environmental samplings turned up those leviathans—origin of the rumor I tracked down—and there can be no greater testimonial to all the work that has been done than the Wild and Scenic designation bestowed on this river by the U.S. Forest Service in 1997.

Branching Out

IF YOU HOLD YOUR ARM out in front of you and make the "V" for victory sign with your fingers, you will have an accurate picture of this watershed. Your fingers represent the West and East Branches where they come together in the small town of Johnsonburg. Although these branches would be immediately recognizable to any small-stream specialist, they're about as different as two small streams can be.

The East Branch. Spilling from a bottom-discharge dam some 6 miles from its confluence with the West Branch, the East Branch is paralleled for most of its length by the Glenn Hazel Road. Water temperatures

THE



CLARION RIVER REVIVED



JOHN C. STREET

*The hatches are coming back,
but even without them,
the 30-inch-plus browns
have plenty to eat ...*

on the East Branch stay in the mid 50s throughout the summer, and you'll find a limited selection of the standard hatches of Blue-winged Olives, Sulphurs, March Browns, Cahills, and tan and green caddis on this water. Hatches start about a week later than similar hatches on surrounding streams and last a tad longer than the hatch charts tell you. If you want to fish cold water in August, this is the next best thing to a legitimate spring creek.

A #18 or #20 olive-bodied parachute-style dry will cover most of the Blue-winged Olive hatches on this water. I'll frequently tie an olive and dun emerger as a dropper behind a Cahill or a Stimulator when the light is poor—as it frequently is on the overcast days when this little mayfly prefers to hatch—and do much better.

From about the second week in May up to the same date in June, trout readily accept standard Cahill imitations (#14) with a cream-colored body most late afternoons. Mating flights of Sulphurs over the riffles become pronounced by the second week of May. These insects are on the large side (#16) for the species and have an orange cast to their bodies. A lightly weighted emerger fished at the tail of the riffles late in the day—7 to 9 P.M.—will outproduce a dry fly almost every time.

At Bendigo State Park, halfway between Johnsonburg and the East Branch Dam, there's a small impoundment that was originally used as a swimming area. The Willamette Fish and Game Club stocks heavily above this park, and the pools are big enough to support some very nice holdovers. I really like fishing this branch when

The main stem of the Clarion below Ridgway (above) fishes well for trout in the spring and fall; however, you're better off beading for the East Branch (or to the trophy-trout water below Johnsonburg) if you want to fish for trout in the summer. John C. Street photo.

RECIPE

NUTRIA NYMPH



HOOK: 4XL nymph, weighted with 10 to 12 wraps of .032" diameter lead.
THREAD: Black Kevlar (so you can bind the Nutria guard hairs tightly).
BODY: Nutria fur with guard hairs, spun onto thread and wrapped over shank.
TAIL: Match-size clump of either mink guard hair or black squirrel tail one hook-gap long.

either the spring melt or heavy showers make the main stem too ugly to fish. Try the new "Delayed Harvest" (artificial lures only) stretch that covers 1 1/2 miles of stream below the East Branch Dam. Some days, and why I haven't a clue, this water is chock-full of native brook trout in the 5- to 8-inch range. In July and August—again for reasons I can't understand—I generally have this entire section to myself, especially on weekdays.

The West Branch is a quintessential eastern freestoner running through a wide valley from the hamlet of Wilcox down to Johnsonburg and covers that entire 6-mile stretch alongside Route 219. It fishes well early in the year but warms quickly. The hatches here lean heavily to caddis, but there is a decent selection of Cahills (#12 and #14) and March Browns (#14) as well as a hatch of small stoneflies in May and June known as the Little Green Sally, *Alloperla imbecilla*, that is copied very nicely by a lime-bodied stimulator with a natural deer-hair wing on an #18 hook.

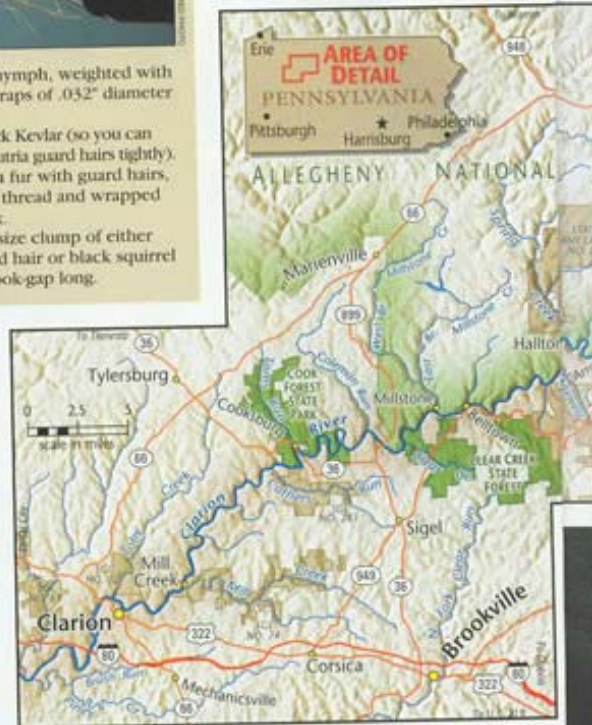
March Browns emerge as early as April 1 and as late as mid-June on both branches, although, as you would expect, hatches are spotty on the extreme ends of the calendar. Standard, full-hackle patterns will work for searching the water, but I prefer fishing a #14, 3X-long, weighted Hare's Ear to imitate the stocky nymphs.

This no-wading, catch-and-release, fly-fishing-only section just below a little cluster of houses at Tambine, while not big water, can be difficult to fish because of



The West Branch of the Clarion (right) has good hatches, including a Green Drake, and plenty of holding water for large fish. The Nutria Nymph, a generic pattern representing hellgrammites, stoneflies, baitfish, and cranefly larvae among other things, works well for trout throughout the Clarion River system and is deadly on the larger water below Ridgway for smallmouth bass (above).

THE CLARION RIVER REVIVED



the wading restrictions. It is some of the prettiest water on this branch, however, and worth the casting problems its heavily vegetated banks can create.

The big attraction on the West Branch is the Green Drake, which starts around June 1. It's hard to be too rah-rah about this big mayfly because good hatches are weather dependent, and some years it just doesn't seem to come off at all. Most of the regulars who follow this drake fish the spinner fall just after dark with extended body Coffin Flies (the female spinner) on a light-wire, #10, 2X-long hook. When I know the time is right, around June 1, I'll probe the runs and pools with a shaggy, weighted, tan nymph tied on a #10, 2X hook, and will often pick up some of the nicer fish in this branch.

Five-weight outfits in the 8- or 9-foot range, although slightly more stick than you might think you need when you first look at these two streams, will be welcome for

the longish casts required in the few large pools. And both branches are classic nymphing water so you'll appreciate both the length and the backbone to throw a little lead.

Both branches receive stockings of nearly 12,000 brooks, browns, and rainbows each year from the Willamette Fish and Game Club and many of these are holding over, especially in the East Branch. The results of this "jump start"—which has been going on for nearly ten years—in rebuilding the fishery is remarkable.



The Main Stem

All-Tackle, Trophy-Trout Water. The 7½ miles between Johnsonburg and Ridgway was given the designation "All Tackle Trophy Trout" water (bait, lures, and flies are permitted but there is a limit of two trout during the regular season) in 1995 and contains characteristics of both of the branches, as well as a tantalizing preview of the sinewy, rocky river it will become in another 20 miles or so.

If you're a slightly better caster than I am, you can probably throw a 5-weight line across this 60- to 80-foot-wide section of the river. Each bend has either a deep run or rock-studded pool, but the low flows of summer can make for long, shallow riffles in between.

Most of the hatches found on the branches are present in the first two miles below their confluence, but, perhaps because the cooling water of the East Branch dissipates within this distance, these hatches taper off by the time you reach the lower five miles of this specially regulated water.

Take note that two landowners with property contiguous to this specially regulated section have posted their ground against trespassing. The Clarion River, however, is considered navigable, so access may be gained by parking on either end of their signs and walking either upstream or down. As long as you stay inside the normal spring high-water mark on the bank, you are legal.

Either a brown-bodied, deer-hair caddis or a yellow- or green-bodied Stimulator in #14 and #16 will match the dominant caddis that comes off most evenings from May to September. I can usually keep myself busy with either an olive or dark-brown Hare's Ear (#14 or #16)

Continued on page 76



THE CLARION RIVER . . .

Continued from page 59

are fully recovered before releasing them. A quick fight—requiring the use of appropriately heavy tippet material—and careful release will prevent unnecessary mortality.

While I love it dearly and fish it regularly, the approximately 50-mile section from the Clarrington Bridge to the backwaters of the Big Piney Dam is too busy during the prime summer months for my taste. Two state parks, Clear Creek and Cook Forest, with all the privately owned canoe rental operations and tourist attractions located in their immediate vicinity, tend to contribute to the theme-park atmosphere. Coincidentally, this is where the Clarion begins to feel more like a river to me, since two of my best double hauls will not span its 200-foot width. It's also where the most blizzardlike of all the hatches takes place.

Beginning in the last week of May, a little black caddis, *Chimarra atterima*, comes off the riffles in numbers that can make anglers believe they will suffocate. Forget matching this hatch, however, if you are interested in catching the really big ones, because the bigger fish are more interested in the chubs and shiners that are working the surface than they are in the bugs.

Although it is easily covered—off the River Road that runs on the north shore all the way from Cooksburg up to above Halton—by a wading angler with felt soles and there are plenty of fish (again, primarily—but not exclusively—small-mouth bass), it is not the stretch to fish if you like solitude in the summer. However, if you go early in April and May and then again late in October and November after the “leaf peepers” are gone, you will easily understand why the U.S. Forest Service gave it the coveted Wild and Scenic River designation.

I've caught more big trout in this stretch, specifically between Belltown and Portland Mills, than in all the others combined, primarily because it's closer to my home. I can fish it in off times like early morning and late evening, and of course in those glorious months before and after the aluminum hatch. Of course, if I were into honest subterfuge, I would also tell you that the biggest trout I have ever seen (as opposed to ever caught) in the Clarion are way back up at where our fingers join in Johnsonburg.

A Few Things Worth Remembering

THOSE BIG SPAWNING BROWNS I encountered in November 1999 were coming out of the “All Tackle Trophy Trout” section between Ridgway and Johnsonburg.

Continued on page 66

