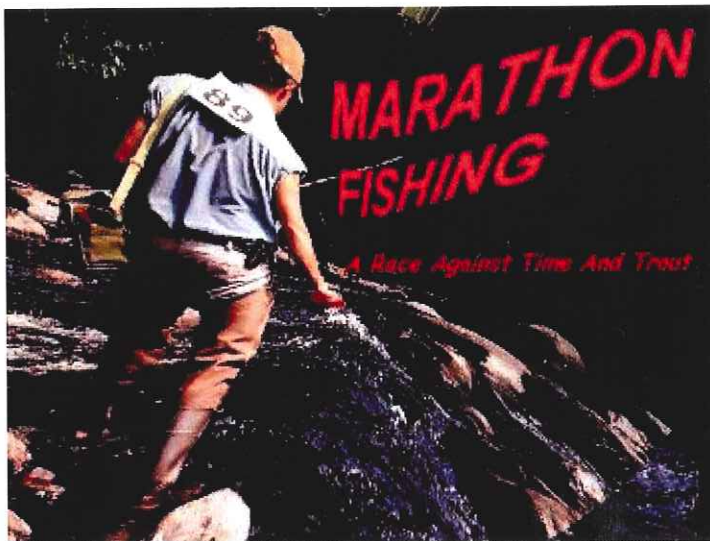


Feature Article - March 2000

A Race Against Trout and Time

by
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We all know that store-bought trout are cheaper than the stream-caught variety, and that fly fishing is all about borderline obsessive-compulsives embracing a challenge. So we insist on difficult casting, light tippets, lighter rods, smaller flies, bigger fish. Every angler has his or her bests, which could always be better. "Bests" are usually quantified as an expression of large size, quantity and/or difficulty. Big as your leg, on a 6X? How many fish in a day? The most fish in an hour? And it's not enough that within an easy day's drive you have beautiful streams, lakes, bays and an ocean. Let's fly to the Bahamas! Argentina, perhaps? You mean you haven't done the Zambezi?



O.K., so I haven't done the Zambezi, but I will, so help me. (Anybody out there know patterns for tigerfish?) In the mean time, I've devised something to help keep me challenged in this hemisphere, and I heartily recommend it to anyone who feels the need for something different. Its called Marathon Fishing.

Here's the drill. One day, five rivers, at least one fish from each. Now you could make it easy on yourself and work streams in close proximity to each other. Or you could raise the stakes and say each stream has to be in a different drainage, as I have. Many variables are possible, depending on where you live, and you could work it so that you catch a fish from an ocean, a lake, a river, a stream and a canal.

There will be little time for Match the Hatch. More than likely, you'll either fool fish fast with expertly executed presentations of an Adams, BWO, caddis, cricket, GRHE, etc., or you'll have to cut and run to where the trout aren't infatuated with esoteric trailing-shuck subimagos.

However you do it, a marathoner has three major concerns: strategy, pace and endurance. Allow me to illustrate through example.

8:30 AM, East Branch of the Delaware, Delaware Drainage: Off to a late start due to faulty alarm clock (one with a snooze button.) The weather: Sunny, 70 degrees, climbing to 85. As I had never fished the river on foot before, I was uncertain where to pull over, but in this game you can't hem and haw. I steer into the first pull over, Route 30, just off 17. I find a longish rock-bottom pool, a riffle just upstream, and a large stream bend pool beyond that. A fish rises across from me, and I roll him but can't bring him up again. I tie a bead head dropper to a small stimulator; still nothing. Working another fish farther up stream, I switch to rusty spinner, then an Adams, which gets me another roll. Two small trout are jumping out of the river like kids on the last day of school up in the flat water at the bend pool, but my chances for a quick fish are in the riffles where the trout can't take a long look at the fly. Impulsive, less selective fish are what I need. Time is 9:35AM. The longer I spend here, the more it cuts into my time on the next stream, and the higher the sun rises. I put down the remainder of the fish, dash up the hill, put down the convertible top, and throw the fully-assembled rod in back. Off I go, the day begun badly and me fearing complete failure. Trout 1, Angler 0. Coffee.

10:40AM, Esopus Creek, Hudson Drainage: I know the Route 28 Shandaken spot well from years ago, but found it all asunder from floods on the marathon before last. I couldn't resist putting it on the docket, if for no other reason than it's good to have a familiar stream or two on the roster. In past years I put the Beaverkill on the schedule, which served me well but didn't give me the different-drainage difficulty factor. I find a couple anglers fishing side by side just below the bridge and charge along the heavily-overgrown railroad tracks. Well down from the duo, I cross the top of a riffle and start to work the smallish, shadowed pool below. My bead head GRHE hangs up in tree roots on the far bank, I play fetch and spook a nice bunch of fish.

Things look bad until I start on the pocket water just above the pool and get a 10" brown on the bead head. I should reel up and run off, but can't resist a few more casts. I bag two 10" rainbows and lumber back up the tracks, wondering whether I should get partial credit for the extra fish. The parking lot now has three cars, fellow anglers carefully un-tubing their rods, cleaning sunglasses, comparing comparaduns. I chuck my rod in the backseat, jump behind the wheel, and leave the Esopus in a cloud of dust. Time: 11:40AM. Clark Bar & Lime Gatorade.



Noon, Schoharie Creek, Route 42, Mohawk River Drainage: This stream is a quick jump from the Esopus, and I feel I'm on a roll from that quick three fish. I came that close to bagging some rising trout last year on the Schoharie, and thought if I could find a spot out of the sun, I might do better this time. I pull over into a different place, but in the familiar farmland setting, the bolder-strewn water clear and shallow. Not a smattering of tree shade on the water. But I spy a bunch of large boulders and rashly decide to work the cool aqua edges of the big rocks. My first drift, from upstream, brings a trout up from under a boulder, but he turns away. By 1:00 it's 80 some-odd degrees and I haven't seen another trout. Drat. I strip out of my waders and shirt, getting set for the 'long haul.' Trout 2, Marathoner 1. Iced teas and two Slim Jims.

Long Haul, New York to Massachusetts, Half-Time Report: Route 23 to the Rip Van Winkle Bridge over the Hudson, across the Taconic Parkway, and into Massachusetts. I begin to doubt the wisdom of hitting so many unfamiliar spots, that in the future I should include at least two

old haunts to give me a fighting chance. One thing is for sure: the Schoharie, with no shade at midday, is one tough nut. Next year's plan begins to formulate: Stay overnight farther up river, get up earlier, fish the Delaware River, maybe around Hankins. Then I could race over to the Upper Susquehanna, backtrack on 17 to 28 and the Esopus. Then make the Long Haul. I'd probably still be hitting the Esopus at High Noon, but at least I have shade and the confidence factor in my favor.

3:30 PM, Housatonic River,
Long Island Sound Drainage:

Like the East Branch, I haven't fished this stream afoot either, and in fact, I haven't fished this far north. At Great Barrington I make a right and head down stream, looking for a pull over. I finally find one across from a car dealership. I hack through the bushes down a muddy bank to a murky river. Not



promising. I saddle up and head back north, hanging a left towards the town of Housatonic on Route 183. Zooming into the first parking spot on the right, I find a boisterous, rocky river with long, deepish pockets of tannin brown water. To hell with the waders; it's 85 degrees. I switch to wide-brimmed straw hat and felt-sole sneakers. I quickly find a fish that pops out from under a boulder for a stimulator, though I was fumbling with my reel and missed him. Sure is hot, and I'm beginning to fray. Flogging the water a bit now, I suddenly hook a fish. I'm grateful to the benevolent powers of fate, but also come to appreciate kismet's sense of humor. It's a river chub. Nothing wrong with that. But does it count? I see a blue wing olive float by and decide it's time for the tough to get going, tying on a size 18. Bang! I hook - and loose on the second jump - a nice trout. Time: 4:30 PM. It's Sunday, I have to drive north through Pittsfield and I have to pick up gas before stations close. I don't recall if it's two hours or three to the next and last stop, but

am parched for another iced tea. Dragging my fly I slosh to shore. Bonk! A parr nabs the BWO drifting wet. Hey, that's a trout, isn't it? Trout 2, Angler 2, I decide.

Marathon



A Long Winding Trail through The Berkshires: I gird myself for the home stretch with a cigar, a cola and a Beethoven Symphony or two, blazing hairpin turns of the Mohawk Trail and three-state views.

6:30PM, Deerfield River, Route 2: I take the second parking spot below Charlemont, which I hadn't fished before. I was unhappy with the picnic grounds to the north I'd fished previously where kids are apt to appear and use your trout pool as a swimmin' hole. This locale is long and a bit too shallow for my tastes, but a ways up river I spy a riffle that looks promising. The water is crystal and the bottom stones radiant in the late day sun. I'm intimidated by the stark clarity of blue draws below the riffle and my waning energy. Just by looking at the layout of the rocks and eddies, you know for a fact that the fish are there, and also by close proximity to the road, that they must see a lot of flies. Welcome to 6X City. Do I still have the finesse and patience after a full day in the sun and racing across hill and dale to fish small flies on light leaders? I splash the cool water over my sun-blazed face, stationing myself on a rock to wait for the sun to leave the

water and to carefully scope my targets as they start to rise. I I'm determine to conserve my mental strength for selective casts to pinpointed rises. No flailing, I tell myself.



It takes a long time for the fish to start to rise, and it isn't until 8:30 PM that I've got a couple targets locked in. No discernable bugs are flying, so my first guess is that the trout are taking spinners. I have to cast across some fast water, and the good drift over the fish will be short. I start to lay out some line well below the target, taking a few practice casts to get help develop the right distancing. My eye is still on the rising fish, so when one of my practice casts – a submerged rusty spinner - gets mugged, I fail to respond quickly and miss the fish. That would have been a nice bit of luck, but I force that from my mind as I stalk my primary

target. At least now I know they'll go for a rusty spinner. I get a splashy rise on the first cast, then a bulge on the second. I tie on a smaller fly, false cast, and just as I bring the rod forward to place the fly, the trout rises, silver ripples radiating in the purple twilight. Perfect timing. The fly will waft down right onto the rise and the trout will gulp my spinner. Well, he might have, if my rod tip hadn't sailed after my fly. Do harpooned trout count? How about a half point.

That let all the air out of my tires. I waded back to the car.

Crest fallen? It was a vibrant summer evening filled with the sounds of peepers, crickets and whippoorwills, the scent fresh mown grass on the air. My face was warm from sun, my eyes bloodshot from the glare, and I was exhausted. Trout 3, Angler 2. I'd failed not only to get all five trout, but even to win against the fish by decision. But I have to say I was exhilarated from the trial, my weary mind filled with the distinctive scent and feel of five notable trout streams. I'd traveled over three hundred miles, explored four new stream locations, and crossed five drainages and two mountain ranges all in one day. Yeah, the trout won that day, but I endured the test, crossed the finish line, made all my targets. And I'll do so again next year. Assuming, that is, I'm not casting from a dugout on the mighty Zambezi.