

Keeping it wild:

Outdoor food and forays

TROUT DEMYSTIFIED

John Motoviloff

On the stream

It's true that trout have been the subject of a lot of printer's ink over the last 400 years — from Izaak Walton's "The Compleat Angler" in 1653 to Norman Maclean's "A River Runs Through It" in 1976 and well into the present. It's also true that these beautiful fish demand cold, clean water to survive.

But this is where the thinking can go wrong. From these fish facts, anglers and writers have often shrouded trout in a mystique that seems to put them beyond the reach of average anglers. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth.

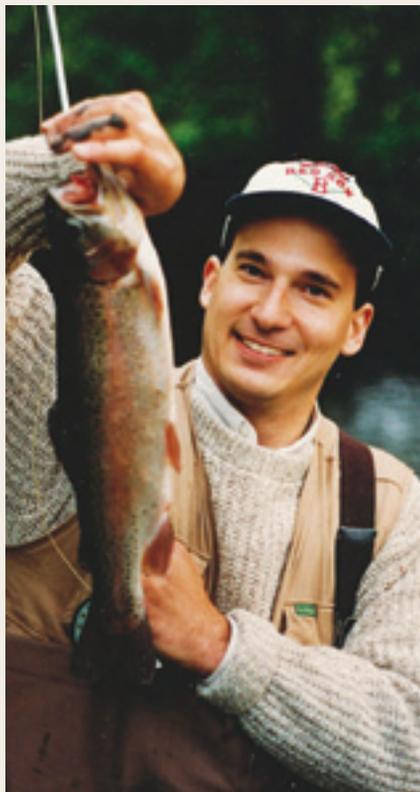
Stream trout fishing in Wisconsin requires only basic gear, a fishing license and a trout stamp. What's more, our state boasts more than 13,000 miles of streams. Translation: You've landed in the right time and place to be a trout angler!

Stealth, stealth and more stealth

Like many old stereotypes, there's truth to the notion that trout can be hard to catch. They live in clear water and have excellent eyesight as well as a very sensitive lateral line — they're experts at sensing movement. But this isn't as daunting as it sounds.

To counteract the trout's wariness, anglers can fish in low light conditions or when the water is slightly off-color, such as after a rain. This helps flip the odds from "advantage trout" to "advantage angler." Mornings, evenings and cloudy days are all productive fishing times. If a gentle rain "colors" the stream, so much the better.

You can, however, catch trout on a sunny day while fishing clear streams. You'll just have to slow your approach and minimize noise and disturbance. Fish upstream instead of downstream, and stay out of the water. Avoid casting your shadow over the creek by keeping a low profile. Use the streamside cover to your advantage.



STEPHEN M. MILLER

Trout may not be the easiest to catch, but the right approach will help land a prize.

Less is more

Light line is also crucial to trout fishing success. Spinning anglers should use 2- or 4-pound test line on an ultralight rod. These short rods are helpful while fishing in the thick tree canopy, and ultralight action helps detect soft strikes. Lures and bait on light line also sink more realistically — there is less resistance in the water. Fly anglers should use a 5x or 6x leader on a 4- or 5-weight rod.

As far as streamside gear, less is definitely more, as you will be moving through dense cover. Lightweight hip boots or waders are musts for crossing creeks or getting within casting range. Tennis shoes and long pants — to protect your legs from skin-irritating streamside plants — do the trick in hot weather.

If you plan on keeping trout, a creel that allows for air circulation and water drainage is a must. Old-fashioned wicker creels fit the bill, but can be cumbersome in the woods. I carry a small burlap bag (which formerly held

Basmati rice) fitted with a shoulder strap. Mesh citrus or onion bags also will work.

Canvas shoulder bags commonly found at military surplus stores make good creels; don't hesitate to make a few small holes in the bottom to allow for drainage. A sharp Rapala or folding knife is all you need to clean trout.

Worms and spinners and flies, oh, my!

Much — perhaps too much — is made of the different methods of trout fishing. These divisions, like many in the outdoors world, are superficial. A limit of ducks can be secured through jump shooting, pass shooting or decoying; one method is no better than another. The trick is to match the approach to your preferences and to the conditions at hand.

With trout, worms and minnows work well early in the season and in slightly roiled water, when the fish are feeding aggressively. Use a size 8 or 10 hook, with one or two split shots clipped above it, and let the current carry the bait in a natural way.

Artificial lures that represent minnows, worms or crawfish perform well in these same conditions. Lures can be worked upstream, across the stream or downstream, depending on cover and conditions. Traditional favorites are small spinners, plugs and jigs.

Flies have the advantage of being able to imitate the entire spectrum of trout prey — from small nymphs and mayflies to large baitfish and crawfish to terrestrial insects. Large streamer patterns such as a Woolly Bugger and Marabou Leech are good during early season or times of high water, when fish are less wary. An excellent go-to fly, especially in the spring creeks of southwest Wisconsin, is a size-16 scud in pink, olive or tan. A Pheasant Tail Nymph of the same size is another standby.

Otherwise, an approach of match-the-hatch is best — observing insects in the air and emerging from the water and matching your fly choices to them. Reliable dry flies include an Elk Hair Caddis, Bluewing Olive and small midge patterns such as a Griffith's Gnat. For the Hexagenia hatch — a large nighttime hatching mayfly that emerges in June and July — a light-color pattern in a size 6 or 8 is about right. Grasshopper and cricket patterns can be deadly in late summer and early fall.

Streams, streams everywhere

Wisconsin has an embarrassment of

trout-stream riches. The spring-fed streams of southwest and western Wisconsin produce both numerous and large trout. Notable here are Castle Rock Creek, the Big Green and Blue rivers in Grant County, as well as the coulee streams of Crawford, Vernon and La Crosse counties. Western Wisconsin standouts are the Rush and Kinnickinnic in Pierce County.

Central Wisconsin streams worthy of mention include the Mecan River in Marquette County, the White River in Waushara County and the Tomorrow River in Waupaca County. Leading the pack in the state's Northeast are the Wolf, Prairie and Plover rivers. The storied Bois Brule in Douglas County and Namekagon in Sawyer County are tops in the Northwest.

Thanks to streambank ownership and easements throughout the state secured by the Department of Natural Resources, there is easy public access to many streams. However, the vast majority of streams are found on private land.

Always secure landowner permission before entering private land, and never hesitate to thank landowners. However, as trout streams are navigable waters, they are open to fishing and other forms of outdoor recreation. Anglers seeking to fish streams where they don't have permission from the owner of lands adjacent to the stream must keep their feet wet and enter at bridge crossings or other legal access points.

In the pan

Just as trout are challenging quarry on the stream, they make for unparalleled eating on the table. The pink flesh tastes like a delicate version of salmon — a change from the usual white-fleshed suspects like panfish and walleye.

Bathed in poaching liquid, rolled in cornmeal and crisped in bacon drippings, or grilled Teriyaki style, they are equally good. To do them justice, however, a few points need to be kept in mind.

Keep it cool

While most gamefish and panfish to be eaten are kept in ice chests or livewells, this isn't practical on the tight, brushy quarters of a trout stream. To ensure good eating, trout you plan to keep should be quickly dispatched by a quick strike to the back of the head on a rock or with a stout stick.

The trout should then be gutted as soon as possible by running the knife from the anal fin to the gills and pulling

out the offal and gills. Rinse the fish in the stream, using your thumbnail to remove any blood matter from the cavity. Keep in a cool and breathable creel.

Eyes on the prize

You are now in the enviable position of choosing what to do with your trout. Ask yourself the following questions: Will the fish serve as an appetizer or main course? Are they large or small? Hatchery or wild? This will help guide your meal choices.

The culinary gold standard, in this angler's opinion, is one medium-sized, pink-fleshed trout per diner. These will likely be brown or brook trout; there's little natural reproduction among rainbow trout in Wisconsin streams. Select fish in the 9- to 12-inch range. Smaller and they seem scant; larger and they don't crisp properly.

Inspect your catch inside and out and remove any stray blood or debris. Run the fish under cold water, blot dry and set it on a clean platter.

Rub them inside and out with a cut lemon. Season with sea salt and fresh-ground black pepper. Let these flavors sink in for a half hour, then dredge the fish in your breading of choice, shaking off any excess.

A mixture of half cornmeal and half flour — seasoned with Old Bay Seasoning — is my favorite. The variety of breading and seasoning is limited only by your imagination: panko, flour, breadcrumbs, savory herbs, paprika, Cajun seasoning or a pinch of cayenne. Just bear in mind that you want to enhance the taste of the fish, not overpower it.

Before heating your skillet, consider the ratio of cooking space to fish. A 10-inch skillet will comfortably fry three pan-sized trout. If you have fewer fish, use a smaller skillet. If you have more fish, heat two skillets or cook in batches, removing the cooked fish to a warm (250-degree) oven.

As with seasonings and breading, there is a universe of shortening out there for cooking. I've settled on a mixture of peanut oil and butter. Bacon drippings, canola oil and sunflower oil also work well. Add your choice of cooking grease to the skillet and heat to medium.

Place the fish in the bubbling drippings. Cook until golden brown and about to flake, then flip. Repeat for the other side. Depending on your skillet, stove and fish, this will take anywhere from 4 to 8 minutes per side.

Have your sides — cornbread and

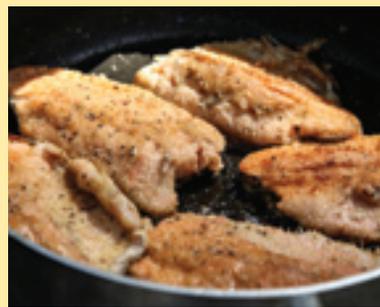
greens, fried potatoes and salad, wild rice and asparagus — ready, and serve hot trout right from the pan. To debone, gently grasp the spine just below the gills, with the inside cavity facing up. "Comb" the meat away from the bones using a fork or fingers.

There are plenty of other ways to cook trout. The oilier flesh of larger trout takes well to slow smoking or poaching in an herbed broth. Trout this size — 14 inches or larger — can also be filleted, then baked or grilled.

When appetizers are desired, the sweet flesh of trout can be substituted for crab in any crab cake recipe. Simmered with bacon, corn and potatoes, trout also makes first-rate chowder. ❧

John Motoviloff is a hunter, fisher, forager and proud Wisconsin transplant. He also wrote "Wild Rice Goose and Other Dishes of the Upper Midwest" (University of Wisconsin Press, 2014).

PAN-FRIED TROUT



SHUTTERSTOCK

Three 9- to 12-inch brown or brook trout, gutted

Salt and fresh-ground black pepper to taste

½ cup white flour and ½ cup yellow cornmeal or breading of choice

1 tablespoon Old Bay Seasoning, or seasoning of choice

2 tablespoons peanut oil and 2 tablespoons butter

Lemon wedges

- 1. Clean fish well, season with salt, pepper and lemon and allow to marinate at room temperature for 30 minutes.**
- 2. Combine flours and seasoning; dredge fish, shaking off extra breading.**
- 3. Heat a 10-inch skillet over medium heat, about 5 minutes. Add oil and butter.**
- 4. Cook fish until brown and nearly flaking from bone — about 5 minutes per side.**
- 5. Serve hot with lemon wedges.**