

# RISE RINGS & RHODODENDRON

*Fly fishing the Streams and Tailwaters of Southern Appalachia*

*Written and Photographed by Ian & Charity Rutter*





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# C O N T E N T S

Introduction . . . . .	5
Smoky Mountain Spring . . . . .	8
Hatch on the Hiwassee . . . . .	21
Tiny Flies . . . . .	28
Summer Days . . . . .	33
Clinch River . . . . .	52
Brook Trout . . . . .	61
Drifting . . . . .	75
Fall in the Smokies . . . . .	88
Head Hunting . . . . .	102
South Holston . . . . .	108
Winter Solitude . . . . .	114
About the Authors . . . . .	128





*Fish Camp Prong - Tennessee*

RISE RINGS & RHODODENDRON



## B R O O K   T R O U T



**I**T'S A HOT JULY DAY, or at least it is back in the valley. The local weatherman forecast it to be in the high 80's but I'm walking up a cool, shaded trail. A gentle breeze falls down the creek, urged on by countless plunges of white water infested with brook trout. It's cool enough to give me a few goose bumps in the damp, morning air. Ferns and rhododendron grow thick under tall hardwood forests of hemlock, poplar, hickory, and oaks while moss covers any exposed rock.

All spring my busy schedule of guiding has kept me on the bigger water downstream, pointing out rising browns in long glides for my clients or rowing my drift boat through tailwater hatches of caddis and Sulphur mayflies. There were plenty of times I wished the rod was in my hand instead of a client's, but that's just something you learn to get over after a while. There was that one big rainbow that rose steadily every day and no one ever brought him to the boat. Most would miss him, a few hooked him, but none got him close enough to my long handled net to count him as caught. That one fish probably gave me a few new gray hairs as I watched bad casts put him down or poor drifts skid past without any acknowledgment. I came pretty close to hitching the boat up



*Trail up Sycamore Creek - Tennessee*



*Fish Camp Prong - Tennessee*

today with that one fish in mind, but this just sounded so much better.

The warm summer weather precludes the need for waders. My day pack carries my felt wading boots, a couple of Cliff Bars, and a large bottle of water. I left the thunder stick at home and opted for my eight foot four weight with the soft action. My fly box is devoid of emergers, cripples, transitional duns, or anything with a trailing shuck. Instead I've got a box of bushy dries with big wings. The Thunderhead is a killer on this stream. Nothing more than a Wulff style dry fly, it has a gray body with brown hackle to keep it afloat in the turbulence amid the boulders. The leader is short, barely seven feet long, and tapers to 4X. Back on the tailwaters where tiny midge patterns are common fare, tippet this large would be considered heavy enough to tether a snarling pit bull.

The first roll cast of the day lights easily on the water and before the fly can drift so much as eighteen inches a dark shadow rockets off the bottom to intercept it. Just as there is a small splash at the fly, another fish runs to see if he can get in on the action. I'm hooked into my first brookie of the day, about six inches long. The follower is a bit larger, perhaps seven or eight inches, and is now prowling the edges of the small pool. I take a moment to release the first fish, and quickly sight the other by the white leading edges on his ruby



*Typical Brookie    Lost Bottoms Creek - North Carolina*

B R O O K   T R O U T

red fins. After a couple of quick false casts to dry the fly, I flip the Thunderhead back in the pool. The brookie lunges forward, but the hook set misses and settles in a tangled web of brush. I grin and think back to all the missed hook sets from the boat. I remember what I always tell my customers. "He's not the last fish in the river. You'll get another chance."

This stream could be one of virtually hundreds in western North Carolina or east Tennessee. Brook trout are not only native to the Southern Appalachian region, they thrive high up in creeks and streams which drain dark valleys that time forgot. In an age when anglers can catch large trout in man made tailwaters or fish large Western rivers after a short jet flight, small brookies in the Southeast are often overlooked. Few hard-core anglers even realize that wild trout flourish in thousands of miles of freestones this far south, but conditions can only be described as "trouty" by any dedicated angler. Almost all of the highest points in the Appalachians, including 40 peaks over 6000', are in North Carolina and Tennessee. Some of the most rugged country in the eastern United States makes up the border between the two states. Both upstate South Carolina and north Georgia round out the southern edges of the mountain range.

Elevation is a good start, but one of the wettest climates

in North America provides the most important ingredient any fish needs - water. Nearby Knoxville, Tennessee and Asheville, North Carolina both average about 47" of rain per year compared to soggy Seattle's 39" of rainfall. The high country of Southern Appalachia receives over 80" of rainfall annually which percolates into one of the most elaborate networks of trout streams in the nation.

Brook trout first appeared in what is now the southern end of their range during the last ice age. Vast sheets of ice to the north forced all life south. The New River which originates in North Carolina flows north across southwest Virginia into West Virginia on its way to the Ohio River and eventually the Gulf of Mexico. Glaciers to the north formed a dam on the New River which created a large lake. This lake eventually spilled over ridges on its southern boundary and provided a route for brook trout to enter new drainages. The glaciers receded about 10,000 years ago and the lake reverted back to a river. Brook trout were now left in a warming region. They took refuge by moving upstream to the coolest waters in the rivers and streams they occupied. As time progressed these fish have adapted to the peculiarities of mountain streams in the South.

Our brookies have yet to adapt to warmer waters. They





*Hooked Brookie Middle Prong of the Little Pigeon River - Tennessee*

BROOK TROUT



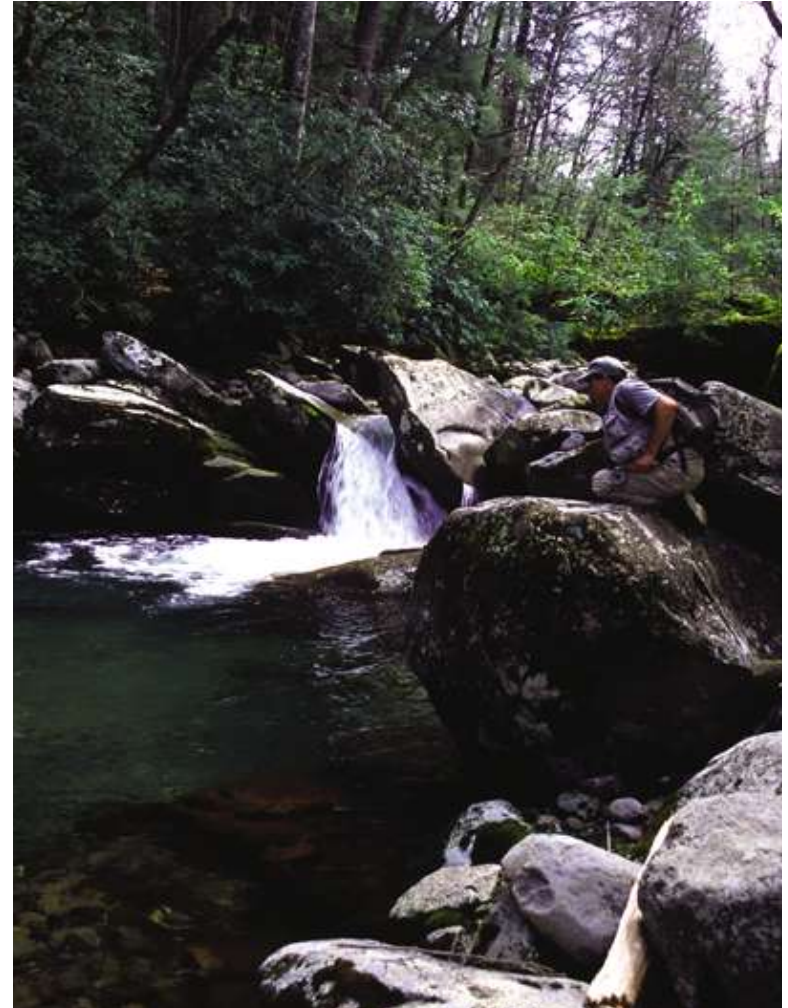
*Beech Flats Prong - North Carolina*

still require water temperatures that rarely if ever venture out of the 60's. However, they have adapted in other ways to differ from their northern cousins. Since only a handful of these streams are very large the fish remain relatively small throughout their life. Southern brookies also seem to be more prolific than the northern clan. Streams in the Southern Appalachians are prone to both floods and droughts with startling regularity. While numbers may temporarily be reduced by a drought or a failed, washed out spawn, survivors will repopulate a stream quickly.

The primeval forests of the Great Smoky Mountains saw drastic changes at the dawn of the last century. Logging operations moved into the region in the late 1800's and were in full swing throughout the southern highlands by the 1920's. Equipment of the day was primitive at best and the trees were far larger than what present day timber cruisers might find. Poplars, chestnuts, and hemlocks over eight feet in diameter were not uncommon. These tremendous pieces of lumber were cut then dragged off the slopes by a team of mules. Stripped bare and covered with little more than scoured soil, the mountain slopes no longer gave shade to the streams. Instead they contributed heavy loads of silt. The combination of warmer water and spawning gravel buried in mud spelled

the end for brook trout wherever large scale clear cutting took place. Also known as "specs" by the mountaineers who inhabited the region, brookies became refugees confined to only the highest and steepest locations. Trees and shrubs grew back and eventually kept the slopes from washing out, once again shading the streams.

Rainbow trout were the hip, happening fish of the 1920's sporting scene and local fishermen were eager to have them stocked since the "specs" were hard to come by. Most expected the brookies to rebound along with the forests. However, the brookies were essentially replaced by the stocked rainbows. It has long been believed that rainbows out-compete brook trout in Southern Appalachian streams, but long term studies by biologists suggest otherwise. In many instances rainbows were stocked intensively and repeatedly over decades. In some cases this continues today. The advantage enjoyed by rainbow trout was in numbers provided by a stocking truck. There are few conclusions, but cold water fisheries biologists in the region seem confident that a healthy population of brook trout can hold its ground against a few rainbows that might infiltrate their way upstream. It seems unlikely, however, that a remnant population of brookies could displace a well entrenched population of rainbows.



*Middle Prong of the Little Pigeon River - Tennessee*



Brookies are still very common throughout the southern high country, only harder to reach than they were 100 years ago. Historically present as low as 1,600 feet in a few streams, native brook trout are rarely found below 3,000 feet today. The most prolific populations are now found in areas that were too rugged for timber operations and stocking trucks to drop rainbows and browns. Nearly all of the best brook trout streams are found in the most remote reaches of Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Tennessee's Cherokee National Forest, and North Carolina's Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests.

After stinging a few more brookies, I climb back up onto the trail and move further upstream. This water receives no real fishing pressure, but the worn path to the water tells of other anglers. Moving right along I pause when I hear the slow shuffle of feet in the dry leaves. Two small black bear cubs amble down the trail toward me and stop in response to a sharp huff. Mama isn't far behind and stands tall in the trail. With another huff the cubs scurry off the trail and up the mountainside. Mama follows after, but keeps a watchful eye on me.

By the time I feel enough hunger pangs to dig out my snacks I've lost track of how many fish have been caught, lost,



*Sycamore Creek - Tennessee*



*Middle Prong of the Little Pigeon River - Tennessee*

BROOK TROUT

and missed. Even the smallest swirling eddy provides a strike. A couple of small fish frantically circle about searching for the fly after I miss them. A completely different sense of scale has taken over and I'm excited about a nine inch brookie who slowly slides up under my fly. After a long look he sips it in slower and prettier than any river fish I've seen. The size of this fish would be unremarkable in the bigger water downstream and it would be a downright joke in one of the tailwaters, but here it's something to get excited about. The real thrill of fishing this water doesn't come from the size of the fish, but the wild surroundings and the strikes which come with reckless abandon.

At the end of the day I have to back track several miles and the sunlight diminishes. Past experience tells me to watch each step as the copperheads and timber rattlers begin their nightly hunt. Not once during the day was there any question of what fly to use or a selective trout which could recognize the brand of tippet tied to the fly. Instead there were plentiful wild trout in the middle of wild country. Innocent fish to restore a childlike enthusiasm in fly fishing.



*Last Bottoms Creek - North Carolina*





*Middle Prong of the Little Pigeon River- Tennessee*





*West Prong of the Little Pigeon River, - Tennessee*

RISE RINGS & RHODODENDRON



*Most brookies are now found in areas which were too rugged for timber cutting. As a result, fly fishers must be willing to cover some rough terrain. The best waters are usually in the steep headwaters of streams. Sometimes originating only a short distance from the top of a mountain, these streams can descend the slopes at an alarming rate, often more than 300' per mile. Brook trout are at ease in such rough waters and can even negotiate surprisingly high waterfalls.*