

Catch More Trout in the Smokies - Advice From The Guides -



RandRFlyFishing.com



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Most fly fishers feel like there is more to fishing than just catching fish. Beautiful surroundings, glimpses of wildlife, and privacy on the water often mean as much to a successful day on the water as eager fish. More and more fishermen are finding it hard to find all of those ingredients on large, popular rivers. Small streams might lack numbers of large trout but usually more than make up for that with greedy fish in a less crowded environment.

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Trout streams in Great Smoky Mountains National Park offer quality trout fishing in a setting far more peaceful than most large rivers. There are no homes or farms along the streams and no boat traffic. Some streams parallel roads, but even these streams have substantial lengths where forest separates the water from passing cars. The bulk of fishable water in the Smokies is off the beaten track.

Most large trout rivers are fished much harder than these secluded streams which are full of willing fish. Even so, many fly fishers find success harder to find on these streams. Even as Smoky Mountain trout streams offer beauty in abundance, it's still nice to catch some fish!

Many anglers fail to realize that they need to adjust their techniques to take advantage of the opportunity. We often talk with fly fishers visiting our home waters in the Great Smoky Mountains who have a tough time hooking fish. Many of these anglers aren't familiar with small stream techniques and find that their big river tactics fall short. While fishing smaller waters is not particularly difficult, it is substantially different from big water. There are a number of things you can do to improve your success on small streams. These techniques can even improve your game on the big rivers. Every year when we fish large Western rivers such as the Snake, Madison, Yellowstone and others with a number of small, braided channels or stretches of canyon pocket water we find ourselves relying on the skills we've honed back in the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee and North Carolina.

“Why don't I catch many fish?”

“... and why are the fish I do catch so small?”

These are questions we hear all the time, and the reason is simple. The first rule of fishing anywhere is that fish do not want to get caught. Unfortunately many anglers act as if the fish should go out of their way to get caught. The fish don't care what you paid for a fly rod, what flies you're using, or you're if a lifetime member of Trout Unlimited. They don't want to get caught and will do



Big wild brown trout in the Smokies don't get big by being stupid.

whatever it takes not to get caught. Always remember this simple rule when you approach the water.

It's important to recognize that Great Smoky Mountains National Park is managed as a wild trout fishery. Trout are not stocked in these streams so the waters and fish are truly representative of what nature can provide. The fish in these streams reproduce naturally and are usually much more abundant than most people realize. Many of the streams in the Smokies will have well over 1,000 trout per mile and the larger streams may even exceed 3,000 trout per mile. As good as it is to know these streams are prolific, it can hurt your confidence after a tough day of fishing.

We often hear people say that they wish the fish in wild trout streams were larger. Some even go so far as to say that they just quit fishing these streams because there aren't any large fish there. Some of this depends on what your expectations are, but an angler must also remember that they are largely responsible for the quality of fish they catch.



This wild rainbow trout is a quality catch for the streams in the Smokies.

Wild trout, just like any animal, have to struggle everyday to survive. Any fish that has survived far longer than his brothers and sisters did so because he was more cautious and a more savvy individual. No wild fish ever gets large by being stupid.

Some fly fishers get spoiled by fishing streams that are heavily stocked. These fish were raised in a more agricultural setting, protected from predators in a hatchery while raised on a diet far richer than any found in nature. Once dropped in a stream to fend for themselves these fish are completely unaware of the dangers lurking in the world. Furthermore they have a large body that must be sustained with food they must find on their own. Sorry boys, but you don't live on Easy Street anymore!

Any angler who spends considerable time fishing stocked rivers will certainly find wild trout more demanding. Stocked trout lack the fundamental caution that's practically built into a wild fish. People fed these fish in a hatchery so the presence of a person on a stream does not affect them the way it does a wild fish. While wild



*Most brook trout streams are small.
This is a large brook trout for a very small stream.*

fish run away when a person approaches, a stocker might think this person has food. The wild fish and stockers have completely different views of the world, but only one has the correct view of fishermen.

Stocked trout are much more likely to see your fly since they are less likely to be spooked by your presence. Wild trout may see you and leave before you ever cast a fly to them.

Stocker are usually more hungry than wild fish too. After months of heavy feeding in a hatchery their large body craves food and the only way to get it is to eat anything that comes along. Smaller wild trout are certainly willing to eat when the opportunity comes along but they seldom go out of their way. They are much more disciplined about not moving farther than necessary to eat. On some level they understand that they must not burn more energy than they take in. Wild trout are also much more colorful and are stronger for their size.



Notice how this angler uses the natural cover provided by boulders and rough water as he casts to an eddie.

Be Sneaky

Small streams have less room for fish to move about in. The good news is that there are only so many places for the fish to be so your fly should never be far from a fish. The bad news is that the fish are far more sensitive to disturbance. Any trout that is aware of your presence is far less likely to eat than one that is carefree, going about his daily business of watching for food and doesn't know you plan to hook him. The prettiest cast and most innovative fly patterns will not hook any fish that knows you are fishing for them. Remember that fish do not want to get caught! Don't let them know what your intentions are. The less they know about you the better your chances are of catching them.

Move slowly and deliberately so you don't slosh water while wading. Try to step in gravel or sand as you wade. These spots provide stable footing. Large rocks will often be covered with slick algae that makes wading clumsy. Even better, stay out of the water whenever possible. Creeping along the bank is the quietest way to



Moving along the bank is much quieter and safer than wading through rough water.

approach a good casting position. Stay low. This doesn't mean you have to crawl along the bank, but you should avoid climbing up high on rocks. Fish will see you or you may cast a long shadow on the water that alerts the fish to your presence.

We're always amazed at how many fishermen hit the stream in bright clothing. There are many times when a fish will turn to follow your fly downstream. Just as he's coming to eat the fly he will be looking in your direction. Subdued colors that blend into the background will mask your presence far better than bright colors.

Keep Moving

Most strikes will occur on the first or second cast to a particular lie. It's not uncommon for fishermen to want to improve on a bad cast. However, if your first cast hits the water with a smack there is little chance that a fish will still be around to investigate a second offering. It's better to move on to your next good opportunity rather than play a losing hand.



Keep moving to new spots and you will get your hands on more fish.

The same goes for good casts. If you've gotten several excellent drifts with no response, you need to move. Remember that real food only drifts by a trout once. Fish know they don't get a second chance when food drifts to them so they will eat the first time they see a fly. Furthermore, if you see a fish come to your fly but refuse it, do not cast that fly back again. That fish has already decided not to eat it and doesn't expect it to come back. If that same fly comes by again a fish almost never eats it. On the other hand, you can change flies and have a good shot at that fish. You do know that fish is there and he is looking. Your fly was close, but not quite. Change to a similar fly pattern and try again.

Any fish that did eat a fly and was missed by the fishermen will almost never come back, so don't stick around waiting for them to eat what they already know is fake. We often compare this to finding a band-aid in your soup in a restaurant. You won't eat another bite from that bowl and you're not likely to want anything else from that restaurant either! Imagine if you found a hook in your sandwich. You certainly wouldn't take another bite and neither will the fish.



Exceptionally clear water in the Smokies allows fish to see you before you get a chance to cast a fly. Stay out of their line of sight by approaching from downstream.

Even if you're getting strikes, move on when the action starts to lull. Things have probably played out. No matter how good a spot is you will always reach a time when the fish will know what's going on. Always remember that they will not eat if they know they are being fished for and they will not eat anything if they know it isn't food. By moving often you'll continue to put the fly over more fish who aren't aware of what's going on. Staying put keeps you fishing a spot where the fish have left or at least know you are fishing for them. The odds of catching fish here are very low, but much higher in a new spot.

Scale your equipment for use on these streams

Small streams are no place for 12-18' leaders. Many casts might only be ten feet. Use a leader that allows you to cast short while still allowing you to cast some fly line. Seven and one half foot leaders work well in small streams but don't be afraid of going shorter. This is the arena for precise casts. A three foot error might not even hit the water so be sure you have enough fly line to make accurate casts.



A long flyrod allows you to get a good drift by keeping excess fly line off of swift currents.

Most fishermen will also mistake this to mean that a short rod is also required. This is not the case. It is relatively rare to find water where an eight foot fly rod is too large. Our home waters of the Smokies have some places where an eight foot rod is an inconvenience but there are far more places where that extra length helps mend line or make roll casts with precision. If you're in a tight spot with a long rod you can always break it down and make the cast with the tip section. These are places where you'll never play a trout on a reel. You might even fish with only half a rod in the smallest, tightest streams and keep your reel in your pocket.

A 8'6" or even 9' fly rod will work great on the most popular streams in the Smokies. Most of the water has an abundance of casting room. You may not always be able to cast just the way you want, but you should have plenty of room to cast if you accommodate the conditions.

Tenkara rods are long compared Western fly rods and have started to show up with some regularity in the Smokies. These long, willowy rods originated in Japan and are typically 11' - 13' in



Typical Smoky Mountain pocket water like this is easier to fish with long rods than short rods less than 8' long.

length and don't use a reel. It's no wonder Tenkara is gaining in popularity because it's perfect for fishing rough water where a good drift may be tough to achieve.

Casting across your body or backhand is an important skill to have in the Smokies. Most anglers try to position themselves so they can make a right handed cast if they are right handed. Unfortunately things don't always work out that way and you may end up skipping large lengths of a stream since that ideal situation doesn't always happen.

Use Tough Terminal Tackle

Streams with an abundance of overhanging tree limbs and protruding roots along the banks can take a toll on your fly box. Most trout in these environs are naive and not at all leader shy so leave your 6X at home. Whenever you hang your fly in tree branches you're far more likely to get it back if it's tied on with 3X or 4X. The few large fish you do hook in small streams also have far more opportunities to break you off than their big river cousins.

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Creek/Pocket Water Leader

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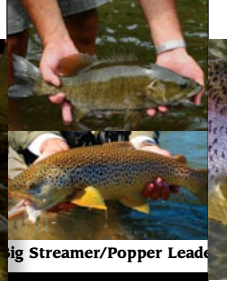


Large Stream/Tailwaters

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Big Streamer/Popper Leader

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Selective Trout Leader

Assorted Leaders and Tippet Available in Our Online Store

Heavy tippet will hold up to snags and abrasions much better. We use 4X tippet on most nymphs and dry flies that are about #12. We use more 5X than anything else since it's perfectly suited to the common #14 - #16 flies. For large nymphs we'll use 3X tippet. It's very rare for us to ever use 6X on streams in the Smokies. Only when we are using tiny flies around #20 or smaller will we use tippet this small, and that's usually because it's hard to get anything larger through the eye of the hook.

Just the way your tippet should be tough, use flies that can stand up to some abuse. Small streams are places where a good fisherman can really rack up some numbers. Catching one fish after another is something we all strive to do, but your flies can really take a beating. Hair wing flies with plenty of hackle recover better than those with only sparse hackle. Flies tied with CDC (Cul de Canard) are revered on spring creeks and tailwaters but not the best choice in streams with rough water and aggressive fish. Those flies will certainly catch trout but they just don't float very well after hooking several fish in a few minutes time. Some of the best fishermen in the Smokies gravitate toward using wet flies because



The best dry flies float well and are easy to see.

they don't constantly have to be dried out after catching a fish.

Assess the situation before you cast

One of the best things a small stream fisherman can do before starting to cast is to assess the situation. Will a roll cast be required because obstructions won't allow a back cast? Does the overhang near your target require a sidearm cast? Every pool, pocket, and run will be different and should be treated as such. This is really the element of small stream fishing that makes it so interesting.

Before you make any cast you should envision how your fly will drift and determine what mending may be required. This is important because mending line should be thought of as a preemptive measure to prevent drag. It is almost impossible to make an effective mend to fix a drift after your fly starts to drag. There are many times when making a backhand cast can help your drift. This is important to recognize because many anglers want to cast from their natural side as much as possible. There are instances when a backhand cast will give you a better drift even when there was no obstruction to casting from your natural side.



Always be sure to know the location of all tree limbs before making your cast. Also be sure to anticipate any mends ahead of time.

Prioritize the water

There are many situations where you can pat yourself on the back for catching a fish. But did you ever stop and think about whether or not you could have caught more than one fish? We'll often see anglers shoot a cast to the head of the run and immediately get a strike. However, it may have been more effective to have made a short cast at the tail of the pool, then make a second cast to a good lie off to the side. Working your way up the run may give you shots at several fish while making one cast to the head might have gotten one fish but spooked all the rest.

Trout are situated in the stream with their face into the current. Most of the time this means they are looking upstream. If you start at the tail of the pool you may catch a fish and still have all the fish upstream of that point for future casts. On the other hand, if you launch a fly all the way to the head of the pool your fly line is very likely to spook any number of fish that it covers. Even worse, the spooked fish may run for cover toward the head of the pool and tip off fish who didn't realize you were there.



This angler made his first cast just upstream of the whitewater. Each successive cast is about two feet further than the previous so he is sure to cover all the fish without spooking them with his fly line.

This is something we refer to as the “Two Foot Rule”. You can start at the tail of the pool and add about two feet to each successive cast. This also allows you to cover a maximum number of fish with the fly several times before your fly line comes down on his head. Fish may spook anyway, but fish that spook off of a fly usually move off uneasily. They sense something is wrong but they just aren’t sure what it is so they will move to cover. This almost casual motion is rarely noticed by other fish. On the other hand, a fish that spooks from a sloppy cast or hears you sloshing in the stream will swim away as fast as possible. It’s that panicked sprint toward cover that makes other fish take notice to see what’s going on. Those fish will also become alerted to your presence and are no longer realistic opportunities.



Charity had to make a short cast to keep her fly line out of the swift whitewater in order to get a good drift.

Shorten your cast

This is one thing that anyone should be able to do. Most fishermen are striving to add yards to their cast but as guides we often find ourselves begging for our anglers to shorten up a bit. While we are talking about fishing in streams, this is also the case when we're guiding anglers from a drift boat on big water. Short, accurate casts are better than long casts any day.

Many anglers have a real knack for casting well beyond the target. There are a number of practical reasons for scaling down your cast. The most obvious reason to shorten your cast in a small stream is because you're very likely to snag your fly in overhanging brush with too much line.

The most important reason to shorten your cast has nothing to do with forests. In fact, this translates to fishing swift water no matter where you are. Shorter casts keep your line from crossing a number of conflicting currents. You can mend to get a drift when your fly is in one current and your fly line is in a different current. Unfortunately, you can't make very effective mends when your



Small pockets like this are more likely to produce than a big deep pool.

line is across many different currents. Even worse, it's extremely difficult to successfully set a hook on a fish with several yards of slack from a series of mends. You will always get better drifts and miss fewer fish if you move closer to your target and have a manageable drift.

Don't ignore "unlikely" water

It's easy to spot a prime pool and charge ahead to cast into it. Unfortunately, you're likely to blow out some nice fish in your haste. It's common for large fish to reside in a large pools, but regularly feed just upstream or downstream of that location. We've stepped on more big fish than we care to remember by dismissing riffles or pockets just upstream or downstream of a big pool.



Big long pools like this are most productive when the water is a little high and insects are hatching.

Plenty of fishermen unfamiliar with small streams might focus all of their attention on a few good size pools, but this is rarely a good plan. Most of the trout caught in small streams will come out of pocket water so never ignore it. Large pools on streams are typically the most difficult places to hook fish most of the year. These attractive spots will fish well when flows are perfect and bugs are on the water. Unfortunately that's not a typical day. Fish in these long, slick pools will often notice you before you even get the chance to cast your fly. Trout in pocket water are far more likely to take your fly than those in the bottom of a quiet pool.

Pick your fights

Fishing should be about fun and enjoying the outdoors. All too often I hear fly fishermen say that they stay away from small streams because they always get hung up. There are times when we'll advise a novice client to skip a cast where they are likely to get hung up. If hanging in brush is something that bothers you and just ruins your day, don't feel obligated to cast under every difficult overhang. There are plenty of spots for you to cast that will be negotiable so pass on the toughest ones. However, don't get



*Some casting situations will be more difficult than others.
Don't hesitate to skip one spot in favor of an easier one.*

frustrated when you do hang up. Making the attempt might result in failure, but you'll never progress if you don't challenge yourself.

Don't dwell on the fly pattern

It never fails. Have a good day on the water and everyone wants to know, "What'd you catch 'em on?" The more important questions should be "What kind of water did you catch them in? Rough or smooth? Deep or shallow?"

Small stream fish are not particular about fly patterns. They may have fleeting moments of selectivity during a hatch but they will rarely look beyond a fly's size and color. If you're not getting any looks you should first evaluate how quiet you've been. Spooked trout have no reason to eat. If you're reasonably sure that you have not spooked fish it's a good idea to make a drastic change in your fly selection. Change from a dry fly to a nymph or small fly to a large fly. Small stream fish are usually willing takers so only big changes in your fly selection will make a big difference.

The time to make subtle pattern changes is after a series of hard



There are many fly patterns that will work on any given day.

looks and refusals from fish. There are moments when trout have been drawn to the fly but something just wasn't right. The best move is to go to a smaller size. Other changes in the pattern such as parachute style over Catskill ties are secondary considerations on these streams but may be important.

There are days when we've spoken to anglers who swore the fish wouldn't take anything but a Parachute Adams while others proclaimed that a Pheasant Tail Nymph was the best choice. In the end the fish eat what's on the end of your line. Mountain stream trout are very opportunistic and will consider a wide array of flies. You can be sure that some fly patterns will outperform others on many days, but in the end, a fly that has a perfect drift over a willing fish is rarely ignored.

Flies

Now that the most important issues have been addressed we will now turn to the topic of fly selection. While it is absolutely true that the angler's method is more important than the fly, the fly is the critical link between the angler and the trout. Now, more than



*Quill Gordon mayflies are common in the Smokies.
They hatch in early spring.*

ever, there are many, many flies for fishermen to choose from but we tend to keep coming back to the same batch again and again.

Trout in the Smokies are opportunists. There are some pretty good hatches in the spring and again in the autumn, but most of the time fish in the Smokies can't expect food to come along at regular intervals. There are enough bugs in the streams to feed the fish but there is not a surplus by any means. In spite of this fact there is a tremendous diversity of aquatic insects in these streams. There are over 900 species of different aquatic insects in these trout streams. Couple an incredible diversity with a limited density and you'll find that trout in the Smokies can't afford to be picky. In a single day they may eat several different species of mayflies, caddis, and stonefly. Given the tremendous differences in shape size and color of these different food sources, a fly fisher has plenty of latitude when it comes to fly selection.

Our main criteria for selecting a fly is that should be durable and fool fish. If it's a dry fly it should float well. Nymph patterns should sink quickly. General fly patterns often excel because they can



*Smoky Mountain trout will eat a variety of nymphs and dry flies.
This hefty brown trout ate a Copper John nymph.*

be taken for a wide array of insects by a hungry trout. Add swift, choppy water and fish rarely get more than a fleeting glimpse of a fly before they take it.

Here are our most basic fly choices for Smoky Mountain streams. We also rely on these patterns when fishing similar waters across the country: Parachute Adams, Stimulator, Elk Caddis, Thunderhead, Haystack, Beadhead Pheasant Tail, Zelon Nymph, Tellico Nymph, Pat's Nymph, just to mention a few.

You will find all of these patterns as well as many others in our online store.

Dry Flies



Parachute Adams



Royal Stimulator



Mr. Brownstone



Thunderhead



Haystack



Parachute Light Cahill

Nymphs



Zelon Nymph



Beadhead Tellico Nymph



Pat's Nymph



Copper John

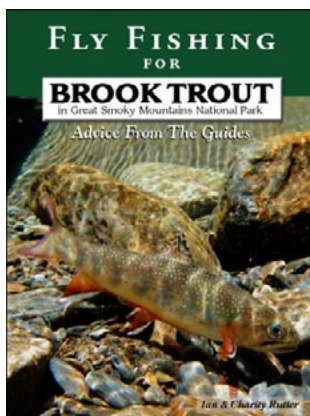


Light Zelon Nymph



Speck Wet Fly

Check out the Books, Videos and Maps by Ian & Charity Rutter.

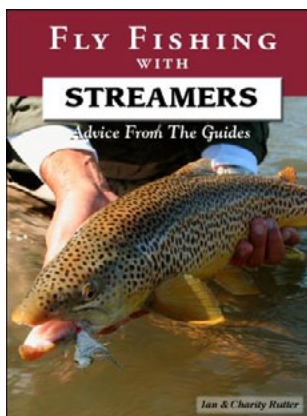


Fly Fishing for Brook Trout in Great Smoky Mountains National Park - Advice from the Guides

The Smokies are a haven for wild trout. Native brook trout still flourish here and fly fishers can find them in pristine streams.

Fly fishing guides Ian & Charity Rutter have spent years exploring the Smoky Mountain backcountry to compile the information in this book. The book provides stream descriptions, directions to the streams, and recommendations on which fly rods and leaders are best for each stream.

The book also covers the natural history of the brook trout in the Smoky Mountains and you'll learn little known facts about these colorful fish. Current updates are given about brook trout restoration efforts in the Smokies. Ian & Charity also give professional advice on techniques critical to catch trout on these tight, tumbling streams.

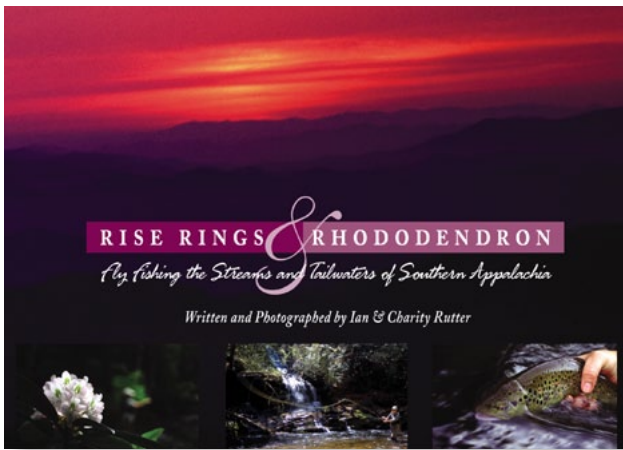


Fly Fishing with Streamers - Advice from the Guides

Fishing with streamers is not only the best way to hook a big trout on a fly rod, it's the most exciting way. This book eliminates any confusion with clear instruction and numerous diagrams to help you understand the strategy behind catching trout with streamers. Big rivers, meadow streams, and tumbling creeks are all included in this book. Drift boat strategies are covered as well as what to do when wading.

The best rods, fly lines, and leaders are all covered as well as various fly patterns. You'll learn when trout hit streamers best and the best spots to cast your fly.

This book tells you how to present your fly and fish it with a lifelike quality that consistently fools big trout. You'll even learn how to handle the fish once they're hooked.

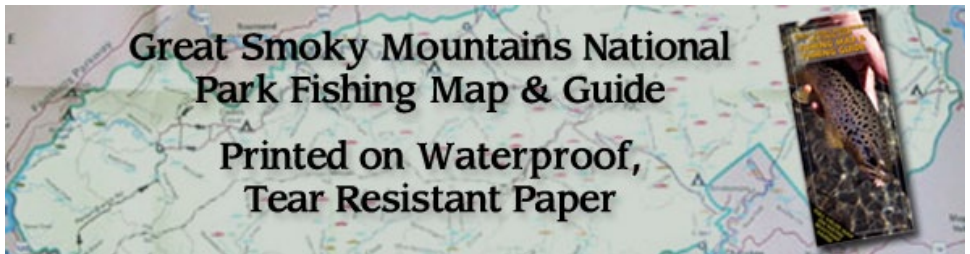


Rise Rings & Rhododendron
Fly Fishing the Streams of Southern Appalachia

Filled with beautiful photos and essays that put you in the moment. Essays and stories take you high in the Smokies for native brookies and put you on the bow of a drift boat casting big streamers for big browns. The perfect book for when you can't get to the water. 128 pgs, Full Color, 7"x 10"

Soft Cover \$20

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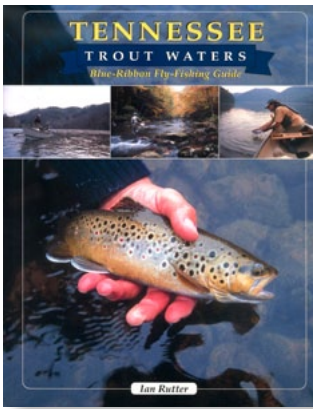


Great Smoky Mountains National Park
Fishing Map and Fishing Guide

This stream map of the Smokies was made by fishermen for fishermen. At a glance you can find roads, campgrounds, trails, and access for your fishing adventure. Streams are marked with each fish species you can expect to catch. The back side of the map has important Smoky Mtn fishing info: Fishing different seasons, hatch chart, effective flies, tips for fly fishing, and tips for spin fishing. Printed on water resistant paper so you can take it on the stream.

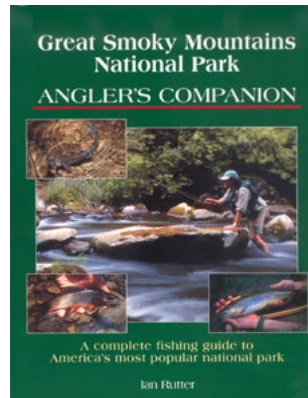
Full Color, 18"x 24"

\$8.00



***Tennessee Trout Waters:
Blue Ribbon Fly Fishing Guide***

The first guide book to cover all of Tennessee's varied trout waters - mountain streams, tailwater rivers, & lakes. Filled with useful information to help you make the most of your time on the water. Includes maps for all tailwaters & streams. Wading accesses and boat ramps are shown on the tailwater maps. Just the maps are worth the price of the book! Page after page of great fly fishing photography from Tennessee's best trout waters. Full color, 88 pages **\$22.00**



***Great Smoky Mountains
National Park
Angler's Companion***

The most informative guide book to fly fishing in the Smokies. We constantly hear how this book has helped so many fishermen catch fish in the park. Features fishing methods, stream descriptions, flies, maps, area fly shops, & more. Beautiful photography takes you there. Full color, 67 pages **\$16.95**



**Fly Fishing Eastern Freestone
Streams DVD Series**
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Trout In Mountain Streams**

Catching the Grand Slam

The perfect primer for fly fishing anywhere in the Appalachians. Rainbows, Browns, & Brookies are all covered. Come along as Ian catches all three in one day in the Smokies. Charity also shows off some of her tricks. 60 minutes DVD **\$20.00**

Successful Strategies

This video is for the angler who wants to learn more about fishing nymph & streamer patterns. Ian intentionally chose crummy weather to shoot this video to show the conditions when these methods are necessary. 60 minutes DVD **\$20.00**

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It's All About The Experience!



IAN & CHARITY RUTTER

Ian & Charity live in Townsend, Tennessee where their guide service, R&R Fly Fishing is based. Together they log hundreds of days on the water each year guiding anglers inside Great Smoky Mountains National Park and on tailwater rivers in East Tennessee. They are avid anglers who travel extensively outside of the Southern Appalachians to fly fish. They regularly host groups of fly fishers on the legendary Henry's Fork in Idaho and Montana's Madison River, as well as the Turneffe Atoll in Belize.

Ian & Charity keep a busy schedule speaking at fly fishing expos and groups around the country. They have appeared in New Jersey, Michigan, Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio, North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Tennessee. Anyone can keep up with their fishing report and weblog on their website:

www.RandRFlyFishing.com

