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2009-2010



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Stephen Thomason casts for native trout in the wild waters on the Cherokee Reservation.

FLY FISHING IN THE SMOKIES

NORTH CAROLINA LEADS WITH A GREAT NEW TRAIL

By Doc Lawrence

SYLVA, N.C. – It's the sport introduced by Ernest Hemingway to countless Americans through his Nick Adams stories. Trout fishing with a fly rod is a connection with ancients who fished to eat and survive. Today, it's more catch and release. Wading down into the Tuckasegee River in Jackson County, North Carolina was a new baptism, an up to the hips immersion in Smoky Mountain holy water, a ritual to cleanse a troubled soul and quench a city dweller's thirst for adventure.

*"If fishing is like religion,
then fly fishing is
high church."*

~Tom Brokaw

The Western North Carolina Fly Fishing Trail features some of the best trout waters in the South encompassing portions of four wild rivers, the Tuckasegee, Chattooga, Whitewater and Horsepasture, with 15 prime spots for hooking brook, brown and rainbow trout. While the experience is for beginners as well as grizzled veterans, it helps to have a guide.

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Alex Bell is a noted professional guide and was instrumental in creating the Western North Carolina Fly Fishing Trail.

PEERLESS GUIDE AND TEACHER

Alex Bell (*pictured left*) recently retired as a high school principal and heads heralded AB’s Fly Fishing Guide Service. He helped to choose the fly fishing trail’s streams from wide-open rivers like the Tuckasegee for beginners to more remote and challenging waters like Scott and Panthertown creeks. The Fly Fishing Trail map incorporates his expertise. “The map,” said Bell, “is bringing in tourists.”

A former coach, Bell is the consummate fly fishing instructor and is the best go-to guy in the region for learning trout fishing skills. Bell emphasizes that fly-fishing is just as enjoyable for women and teenagers. “All you need is a desire to learn,” he says. Bell provides guide services and private instructions and also teaches classes at High Hampton Inn & Country Club that

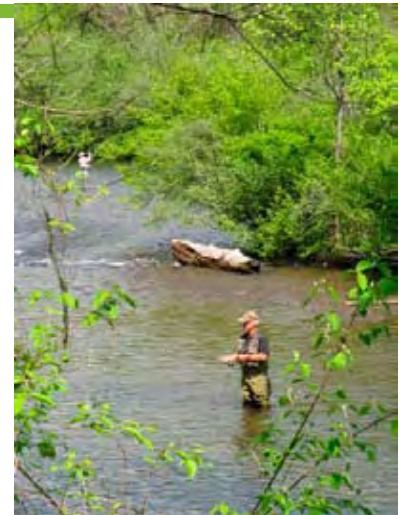
includes a 3-night, 4-day fly fishing school, he describes as “the experience of a lifetime.” Located at a 3,600-foot elevation, High Hampton Inn is at the heart of the Western North Carolina Fly Fishing Trail, www.flyfishingtrail.com. The fly fishing school includes accommodations, all meals, and three nights lodging. Bell’s instruction is geared to any level and includes guided excursions to some of North Carolina finest trout waters and even fly tying instruction. More information is available at www.abfish.org.

CHEROKEE’S TROPHY STREAMS

The recent addition to the trail of the 2.2-mile stretch of the Raven Fork trophy water on the Cherokee Indian Reservation includes waters stocked with rainbow, brown and golden trout, and is designated as catch-and-release fly fishing only. Raven Fork is a 2.2-mile stretch of water northward from the Blue Ridge Parkway bridge outside Cherokee and is regularly stocked with large rainbow, brown and golden trout. It’s not uncommon to catch trout 20 inches or longer, and many exceed 30 inches.

“Cherokee wants to be a destination east of the Mississippi River that every fly fisherman knows,” observes Alex Bell. “They have different strains of trout coming in and great vision for their fishing program. I think it’s going to keep getting better and better.”

The trail also features several smaller streams. Tanasee Creek and Greens Creek cut through scenic areas of the Nantahala National Forest, while Panthertown Creek bisects Panthertown Valley, which, according to Bell, is often referred to as the “Yosemite of the East.”



“No person is too young or too old to learn how to fly fish.”

NATURAL THERAPY

Stephen Thomason, a photojournalist from Atlanta, joined other writers fishing under Bell’s command. “You don’t need pills,” he said, “to feel better when you’re in the water fly fishing.” Now 32, Thomason was stricken with crippling vasculitis three years ago

and taught himself fly fishing skills and how to tie his own trout lures, universally called flies. Carl Davis retired after a career with a North Carolina utility but after being slowed by painful arthritis, learned to make flies at home, selling to fly fishing enthusiasts. His products are in great demand and I caught a trout with one of his masterpieces. Davis can be contacted at (828) 586.8570; davishouse@mchsi.com.

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Both men are examples of fly fishing as an attractive, often healing option for those who suffer health problems or are infirmed or limited in their physical abilities. Thomason is quite skilled, fishing regularly in lakes and streams near his Atlanta home, but prefers the cool, clean mountain waters of Western North Carolina and North Georgia, he says.

A PLEDGE BEFORE THE CATCH

Fly fishing here is an up and coming tourism trove and after just one year, the results are apparent. According to Bell, trout licenses are increasing with a measurable boost in restaurant receipts and lodging bookings, “and I get to see them casting in some of the most popular places.” Bell sees the trail’s tourism potential as part of an economic turnaround for Sylva and the Jackson County area. “We are just two and a half hours from Atlanta. The appeal is broad and the environment is as good as you’ll find this side of Montana.”

There are many good restaurants here. I ate delicious local trout at the Sylva landmark Bogart’s, enjoyed pizza and local craft beer at nearby Nick & Nates and feasted on good barbeque at the famous Dillsboro Smokehouse. Accommodations range from motels to numerous B and B’s, and there are outstanding cabins along river banks available through Smoky Mountain Getaways, www.smokymtngetaways.net.

Prior to plunging in the mountain waters, you are asked to take an oath: “As a true sportsman, I pledge to never litter and to avoid trespassing on private lands. I will respect the rights of property owners, and always leave the streams in better condition than I found them.”

Life takes a turn upward as you get into these mountain waters. Alex Bell teaches by example: no person is too young or old to learn. The Western North Carolina Fly Fishing Trail is an impressive example of how vision combined with well-executed cooperative energy created a new and growing tourism industry, helping the economy of a beautiful part of America that welcomes city folks with open arms.

The website has more helpful information: www.flyfishingtrail.com.



It's a woman's sport as well!



Chattooga