



ON THE *Fly*

ANGLING WITH A FLY ROD CAN BE
MEDITATIVE OR SOCIALE, A WAY TO
ENJOY THE BEAUTY OF NATURE.

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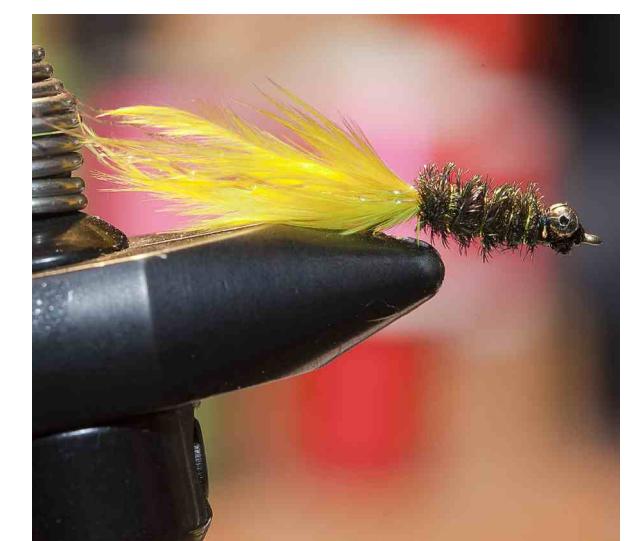
*e*very year visitors from as far away as Europe and Australia clamber down the rocky, wooded banks of the Black Warrior River's Sipsey Fork. It's an idyllic waterway, but Alabama has lots of those. The draw here is what's in the water. "This is the only place in the state where you can catch trout year-round," says Brandon Jackson, fishing guide and proprietor of Riverside Fly Shop. Wade far enough upstream and you'll gaze up at the 300-foot-tall dam that created Lewis Smith Lake. Water from the lake's depths passes through the dam's turbines, generating power and ensuring the chilly temperatures that trout require. Every month the Alabama Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries releases hundreds of rainbow trout into the upper Sipsey Fork. And where there are trout, there are anglers — especially fly fishermen.

Most Southerners — indeed, most Americans — fish with the tried-and-true spinning reel and rod, casting bait or artificial lures with one easy motion. But an avid minority prefers the oldest form of fishing with artificial bait: the fly rod. The lightweight tackle and lures, called flies because they often resemble insects that fish feed on, demand a different kind of casting. Instead of reeling in the line between casts, fly fishermen use the rod to spring the line on and off the water, whipping it back and forth in graceful arcs, building momentum, placing the fly just so, and letting it drift with





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the current, naturally and (they hope) irresistibly.

As with a golf or tennis swing, fly casting done well has an economy of elegant motion: it's what remains when you eliminate wasted effort. (Done poorly, it can result in a sore arm and snarled line.) You can learn basic fly casting with a few hours of practice, then spend the rest of your angling days improving your technique and knowledge. It helps to start with a guide/instructor like Brandon.

"Spin fishermen get such a grin on their faces when they get the hang of fly casting," he says. "Women actually pick it up faster than men, because it's about timing and rhythm, not strength."

"Women are often better casters," agrees Mary Carol, Brandon's wife. "And more of us are taking to fly-fishing." (It doesn't hurt, she notes, that Brad Pitt was the poster boy for the sport in the 1992 film *A River Runs Through It*.) "You can do it alone or with your family," she says. "It's a great way to get kids outdoors. I've gone fly fishing with our younger daughter in a backpack on my back. Our five-year-old has her own fly rod."

On an overcast morning, I wade into the Sipsey Fork with Brandon. He corrects my rusty casting technique (with considerable tact) and soon, I'm pulling in trout whose scrappiness belies their modest size. "A trout is all muscle," Brandon says. "For their size, there's no better fighting fish." They're also good eating fish, but we release all we catch. The state allows you to keep up to five a day, but catch-and-release (a.k.a. fishing for fun) lets the fish live to fight another day.

When water is released to generate power, the Sipsey Fork rises a dozen or more feet and the fishing is less than ideal. Fortunately, the state has a wealth of waterways and plenty of other fish — notably bass, America's primary game fish.

"If you only fish for trout, you're missing out," Brandon says. "And if it swims, you can catch it on a fly rod." If you have any doubts, just ask the saltwater fly fishermen on Alabama's Gulf coast.

Gadsden-based guide Shannon McCurley is another major fly rod fan. "It's a more active kind of fishing," he says. "You end up with a better understanding of fish and how



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to get them to strike. You can even tie your own flies." Shannon is an expert at fishing Little River Canyon and Lake Guntersville. "Guntersville has a lot of shallow flats and coves that are perfect for fly fishing," he says. "It's a great spot for large-mouth bass." That's the official

state fish, but for bragging rights consider angling for striped bass, found in many Alabama rivers and lakes. You'll need heavier tackle, as stripers range up to 40 pounds. (A 55-pounder holds the state record). On the other end of the scale, the bream found in almost any rural pond will take all kinds of flies.

There may be no better way to go with the flow than fly fishing. No wonder Izaak Walton titled his 1653 classic *The Compleat Angler, or the Contemplative Man's Recreation*. As Norman Maclean wrote in *A River Runs Through It*, "One great thing about fly fishing is that after a while nothing exists

of the world but thoughts of fly fishing." Angling with a fly rod can be meditative or sociable, a way to share the beauty of nature with friends and family. "You can do it close to home or wherever you travel," says Mary Carol. "And you can enjoy it as you get older — fly fishing keeps you young."

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