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Don't breathe a word!

On a small stream, in a tangle of branches and skeeters, a trout finds his oasis.

Roger Drayna

One angler's secret heaven, populated by hungry, crafty brook trout.
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I will tell you only this much. My secret fishing place is a brook trout creek 130 miles northeast of Wausau. It's not all that secret, of course, very few places are these days. But, I fish it at a hard to reach place and only midweek when the fish have had a few days to quiet down.

The limit is five, not much of a reward for a 260-mile round trip. That's why I almost always make the jaunt alone. My fishing pals don't care to travel that far for five small brook trout, not even when I promise to spring for breakfast. My wife will go along if it's late enough in the season for her to pick a couple of quarts of blueberries.

For the most part, this is a solitary venture. Since I'm out to capture a sense of wilderness as much as to catch pan-sized brookies, I rather like it that way.

Seven-inch fish are keepers. Eight inches is about average. Nine-inchers are whoppers. I did catch a 10-incher once, and, in these tight quarters, it seemed like a whale. They are always thick and firm fish, and red-meated-genuine, native, wild trout.

My trips begin in the gray of first light. By mid-morning my Little Red Truck has labored the last few miles across what locals refer to as the "Plains" and is tucked into the shade of a picture book stand of Norway pine.

I don't exactly look like a page out of the L. L. Bean catalog. I'm wearing barn boots, Levis, and a long-sleeved shirt. I reek of insect repellent. The pack of cheap cigars in my shirt pocket is a defense against deer flies. When I light up one of these stogies, I can hardly stand it myself.

I follow a game trail to the creek which is gin-clear, icy cold, crisscrossed with logs, and shaded by a tangle of tag alders. It burbles along, almost inaudibly.

This is trout fishing as I learned it growing up along Lake Superior. It has the look of places I haven't visited in decades--State Line Creek, the Little Black, the Little Amnicon, the Silver. It's a quiet business of dapping worms into dark pockets or working patiently to get them under mossy logs. Get it right, and the leader starts twitching almost immediately. Tread carelessly or jostle an overhanging branch, and swift forms dart for cover; I might as well move on.

On a bite, I lift the tip of the six-foot rod just enough to feel resistance. A quick flip and the trout is out of the water. Sometimes, it will get hung up on some brush, flip furiously, come off the hook, drop back into the creek, and vanish in the blink of an eye.

It rarely takes much more than an hour to fill my limit. By then I'll have lost a half dozen hooks under logs or solidly embedded a few in stumps. I'll be running low on worms--these wild brookies are clever thieves. I'll have done some swearing, not always under my breath. Understand that this is not clean, genteel fly casting. This is a sweaty, brush in the face, mosquitoes in the ears kind of fishing.

And these solitary pilgrimages are about much more than limit catches. First of all, there is the country itself, still wearing the look of wilderness. There are the lichen-splotched rock ledges, ragged pine tops against the horizon, and, always, there is solitude.

Warblers make buzzing little sounds and flit around me. There is otter scat on logs. Sometimes there will be a rustling in the underbrush, and I'll be rewarded with a close-up look at a mink. I see deer and there is the special joy of watching a doe slip away with her spotted fawn. Grouse always manage to sit tight and explode into thunderous, heart-stopping flight at the very last instant. Once, I got to watch a bear foraging in a rotted stump.

I take time to admire the cedars, the black spruce, and the tamarack -- gnarled and twisted and lovely to my eye. There is a dampness and spiciness in the air. The world, viewed from deep in these woods, seems completely all right.

When I have creeded the five fish, it's back to the Little Red Truck. I'll pop a can of something cold and inhale a thick meat sandwich. I've always got time to wander through the stand of Norways I call Neil's Grove and remember the good man who once owned them. In the remembering, I'll think of the trout we caught, the rivers we paddled, and the grouse we sometimes tumbled out of swift flight.

Then, I'll aim the truck toward home, comfortable in knowing Wisconsin still has places like this.

Roger Drayna writes from Wausau.