



June 2010

Driftless Days . . .

Every now and then I have an opportunity to fish somewhere a bit off the beaten track. Happily, that probably happens to all of us occasionally. Some fishermen like to explore new water on a regular basis and rather make a habit out of it. Others, for the most part, are usually content to fish fairly familiar water and do their exploring and learning on streams they are accustomed to rather than entirely new locations. Personally, I lean somewhat toward the latter, more out of necessity I sometimes think than anything else. I like to fish quite often, and it's easier to fish any number of streams and rivers within a short drive of my home than it is to travel. I actually have two trout waters I can walk to from my home, and I used to ride a bicycle to a third. One of them is marginal and runs directly through a city campground, but it can be quite interesting in late fall and winter after all the campers have gone home, the stream is buried in snow and no one is fishing there. And traveling can be expensive, too. For those of us who have regular jobs, windshield time is a poor trade-off for actually being on the water, regardless of how great a particular destination might be. I have grown to know northeast Iowa and the Driftless area well enough to generally find unoccupied stretches of water wherever and whenever I manage to get out, a sort of intuition I've managed to cultivate over the years, and I suppose that's at least one reason I'm always delighted to fish somewhere within that same sixty or seventy mile accumulation of favored water. I've learned how to fish around (or in) a crowd as well, if there occasionally happens to be one.

I also am able to fish my favorite reaches throughout all four seasons of the year, and that puts quite a different twist on each river and stream, not to speak of the variety found in hatch progressions on various local waters I frequent. After seventeen years of fly fishing in northeast Iowa, I sometimes think I've only just begun to figure out what's going on in my own backyard. And often I'm not so sure of that, either.

Furthermore, my "home waters" actually cover a three-state area, situated as we are in the extreme northeastern corner of Iowa, the Driftless area's southwestern-most section. Minnesota is only twenty miles away and Wisconsin lies just forty miles east, so it certainly doesn't take long to get to a neighboring state from here. I'm normally licensed in all three states, so it's not like I'm home *all* of the time.

The two exceptions I make nearly every year to fishing my home waters are trips to the Black Hills in South Dakota and the once or twice a year pilgrimage to Altoona Joe's cabin in northern

Wisconsin, both of which are well worth the long drives. The fly fishing at those two destinations is generally incredible, to say the least. Why? Just lucky, I guess.

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A few weeks ago my friend Larry Reis published a new book of nature studies, *Noting Nature*, and I wanted to pick up a copy to take along on a fly fishing excursion to northern Wisconsin less than a week away. I offered to pick it up at Larry's office in a neighboring town, but Larry said he could easily drop it off at the house in Decorah in time for my trip, and by the way, would I be interested in doing some fishing together before going to Wisconsin? Fishing and picking up a new book on the same evening? Yeah, I thought I could make that work. Larry said he'd be over Monday evening at 5:00 PM, and we made a haphazard plan to fish the short evening together. He didn't say "where", and I never thought to ask. I figured I'd find out.

Larry works for the Iowa Department of Natural Resources and gets around quite a bit. Over the years he's gotten to know a lot of landowners in the course of his work, and that's a definitive perk for any DNR employee who happens to hunt or fish, or both. I've known folks from the DNR who have occasionally mentioned hunting or fishing in areas with limited accessibility, though I don't think it's a really big deal with them. If nothing else, they see a lot of property and probably spot up good game or farm pond locations by default. If you work with a landowner for a few weeks or months on a conservation project, you might eventually have the opportunity to ask them whether there's any bass in that pond over the hill, and if you're lucky, you might just finagle a chance to fish there, though that might not be generally allowed. And it's certainly possible no one ever even asks. The same circumstance might occur with the occasional pheasant, turkey or deer hunt.

The spot Larry took me to was sort of like that, but not quite. Of course I am not allowed to disclose our location, though I guess I could say we left Decorah at 5:00 PM and were looking at the water by six. That would cover sixty miles of driving and could include Minnesota and Wisconsin in addition to Iowa.

I think it would be safe to say the stream is located in the midwest and we slept in our own beds Monday night. In seventeen years of living in Decorah, I had never heard of it before. Larry had heard of it, but he had never fished there. We did have official permission to fish, more or less. At least I *think* we did.

We almost cancelled our evening plans because of the impending thunderstorms that were coming our way. The forecast for the afternoon and evening was not good and it seemed to be growing more ominous throughout the day, but Larry said he'd bring his new book over regardless and if it wasn't thundering and lightning too badly, we'd give it a try. The wind was gusting at 30 mph so if we did indeed get out, it would at least be interesting and death-defying. By the time we left, I figured we were only going to fish an hour or two anyway and we couldn't get hurt *that* badly in so short a time, so off we went.

When we finally arrived and saw the stream, it didn't look like much to write home about to me. I don't generally write home about my fishing experiences, as my extended family is somewhat indifferent to them, but if I *did* write home about them, I wouldn't have. I've seen or crossed over hundreds of streams that looked like this one, often tributaries to tributaries to tributaries that eventually find their way to the Upper Iowa River, the Turkey, the Little Turkey, the Cedar, the Yellow, the Mississippi and who knows where all else. Some of these little streams and creeks may occasionally have game fish in them, though rough fish like carp, shiners, suckers, chubs and bullheads generally prevail. Sometimes I hear of a big northern pike that's been caught on a little creek meandering through a dairy farm, probably a spawner from some larger river and always an amazement to the surrounding community, and some lucky sixteen-year old boy becomes a famous fisherman for a time. Most of these streams are warmer waters and would not contain trout, though if a good cold spring or two feeds into them, the possibility remains. The spot Larry took me to winds through CRP ground that is going to "forest", so a number of trees are beginning to take hold in rough ground and the landowner is not bringing in bush-hogs or other machinery to periodically clear the brush. It's all basically going to seed, and that's nice to see now and then. It reminded me of the streams I used to crawl around when I was a grade-school kid, fully equipped with a stringer, a Zebco rod and a fresh container of night crawlers.

We decided to walk downstream to the end of the landowner's property and fish back upstream. The little creek clearly had some depth to it here and there, and we found a handful of pools that looked like they might hold a good fish or two, or perhaps a lot of small ones. A few of the channels connecting the better pools looked deep and marginally promising, but other than that, it actually looked rather bleak. There definitely were beavers working the area. That can either be interesting or not, depending on the situation.

But Larry caught a six-inch brook trout on his second or third cast, so at least we knew there was one trout in the stream, always a good sign. He then caught six or seven chubs, not necessarily always a *bad* sign. It's just a bit weird. I didn't catch anything at all.



Eventually we moved up into the first of the better pools. I covered it thoroughly with a dry fly and got absolutely no response. There was no hatch occurring and we never saw a rise on the water all evening, so I was confused as to what to do and was constantly changing fly patterns. Larry was fishing his "Red Badger", which is sort of like a wooly worm, though not quite. I thought Larry should throw the critter up into the head of the pool for the heck of it, but I don't think either of us expected anything to happen. The wind was blowing so hard we could hardly make a decent cast, but Larry deftly managed to chuck the thing up there, even though he's left handed. He let his fly sink just a bit and then began stripping it back in short jerks when *Bam!* And there he was, suddenly into a *very* good fish.

After what seemed like forever he landed a beautiful fourteen-inch brook trout, and I calmly suggested he make another cast while I frantically changed to a streamer pattern. Larry hooked his second fish on the next cast, and that turned out to be a fifteen-inch brookie. My first cast

with a streamer brought in another brookie of fourteen-and-a-half inches, and then Larry caught a wonderful brown trout of over fourteen inches. Just about the time we figured we'd done about all the damage we could in that particular pool, Larry hooked yet another trout and when *that* fish finally came to hand it turned out to be an incredible seventeen-inch male brookie, the largest I had ever seen caught and the largest Larry had ever landed. By that point we were both pretty much screaming into the wind and generally going nuts, and the thunder and occasional lightning flashes went by unremarked.

Larry caught a couple of small browns further upstream, but we didn't have the same good luck in any of the promising upstream pools or connecting channels we fished through, though both of us were thinking about how the stream might fish during the hopper season later in the summer. At the last fishable pool, Larry broke off on yet another good fish. I had maneuvered to the downstream end of the same pool, and I put on the ugliest #8 Beaded Olive Wooly Bugger I had in my streamer box and let it sink to the bottom. I missed my first strike, but hooked up on the second and landed a fat and sassy twelve-inch brookie. On my next cast I hooked up with a beautiful fourteen-inch brown, and those two last fish were a delight along with the earlier plus-fourteen inch brookie I'd managed in the first good pool. Larry had an incredible evening of big fish, and I came out with at least a solid measure of respectability.



But of course I didn't have any "Red Badgers" with me. I do now, that's for certain. The rain was beginning to pelt down with authority as we took off our gear and packed up to leave in the near-darkness. Larry hadn't brought a camera along, and damned if I didn't forget mine on the kitchen table when we left town, which was most unfortunate. So we certainly have no official "proof" of what happened on our adventure.

But of course, both being writers, neither Larry nor I need that. That's what stories are for.

Be Vigilant!



"Red" Canoe
Trout Unlimited
Iowa Driftless Chapter

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