

Warming up for spring casting

Pelham show looks at state's big rivers

By JOHN CORRIGAN
For the Monitor

It was an educated guess, not a forecast. In last week's column, I anticipated that casting lessons during the Fly Fish New Hampshire show would take place in front of huge piles of snow. Seemed like a reasonable idea at the time.

Instead, the anglers who gathered to get advice during the final show of the winter season got a taste of spring. It was the kind of mild day that will encourage insects to emerge and the trout to rise as we move into the coming season. Grass and mud were emerging in places as snow melted almost visibly.

Adult newbies and kids alike heard Tom Jutras explain the time-honored advice that fly casting isn't about muscle mass and strength. The ability to accelerate and then abruptly stop the rod while it's going in the right direction are much more important.

Beginners, especially those used to casting a spinning or bait-cast rod, inevitably put too much wrist action into the cast. Jutras helped cure that bad habit by telling his students to stick the butt end of the rod handle under the end of the shirtsleeve on the casting arm.

Listening to presentations about New Hampshire's various waters, I was reminded of how many different types of fishing our small state offers.

I have already made reservations for a return trip to the Frying Pan River in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado. I'm looking forward to spectacular scenery and fishing for rainbow and brown trout on "gold medal" waters.

The one drawback of the famed waters of the American West is that you would have to travel for hours to reach the ocean.

Seminars at the Pelham show included a description of our largest trout rivers, a description of the brood stock Atlantic salmon fishery on the river that flows through our capital city, and tips on how to fish successfully for striped bass and bluefish where the Merrimack River meets the sea.

Guiding partners Jim Norton and Gerry Crow led an audio-visual tour of the big rivers: the Androscoggin, Connecticut and Merrimack.

The Merrimack, of course, is really three rivers: the Pemigewasset, the Winnepesaukee and the main river itself. The Merrymeeting, which flows into Lake Winnepesaukee, could be added to the list.

Norton focused on the Pemigewasset, which begins as mere trickle of a stream flowing south from Profile Lake in Franconia Notch. That's the West Branch of what is often called the Pemi. In the White Mountains, it offers good brook trout fishing. It's well stocked where hatchery trucks can get close to the water, and the wading can be easy when conditions are good.

Dropping into the foothills, the Pemi grows larger and loses some of the cool water temperatures that keep brookies happy. Below the Ayers Island Dam in Bristol, the river is better known for its rainbow trout and the brood stock salmon. It's also a good bass fishery.

Norton pointed out that anglers who float sections of the water between Franklin and Boscawen will enjoy a riverside landscape with little development.

Shortly after crossing into Concord, paddling anglers will come to Sewalls Falls. The stretch of quickwater and rapids holds the stocked salmon as well as trout and warmwater species.

Like the Pemi, the Connecticut begins as a very small mountain stream in the state's largest and northernmost town, Pittsburg.

Norton prefers the waters closer to Colebrook, which he fishes with a drift boat. Flowing through a valley of farmlands, the Connecticut grows wider and deeper. Its sweet waters produce strong insect hatches and lots of 10- to 14-inch trout.

On the eastern side of Coos County, the Androscoggin is already a big river when it emerges from the Rangeley Lakes watershed in Maine.

Crow and Norton noted that weather conditions have made fishing the Andro a huge challenge.

"We've had four years of major spring flooding," Norton recalled.

Crow described the "grand slam" of Androscoggin River fishing. That's when a skilled or lucky angler catches a landlocked salmon and brook, rainbow and brown trout.

The most productive stretch of the river is fairly short, from Errol to Dummer. Much of it flows through the 13 Mile Woods conservation area.

No description of the Androscoggin River would be complete without a tip of the hat to the sometimes prolific alder fly hatch. It's actually a zebra caddis, but is described as an alder fly because it is often found in alder thickets.

It's the no-brainer test of a fly fisherman's ability to match the hatch. The swarms and individual insects are so big that they can't be missed. When water levels are right and the trout key on the brown insects, the river will boil with rising fish.

The fishing picks up again downstream from Berlin in Gorham and Shelburne. There, practicing catch-and-release is done more for health reasons than conservation. The river is much cleaner these days, but is still affected by decades worth of paper mill effluent.

Norton described the extremely scenic lower river as a woolly-bugger fishery. The fish tend to take the attractor nymphs well below the surface.

The season will be here before you know it. It's time to get out a New Hampshire map and start planning some trips.

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