



BAY STATE BROOKIES

You don't have to look far to find wild, native brook trout in Massachusetts.

BY SPENCER BELSON

If given the choice to live anywhere in the world, without the limitations of work, family, and money, few, if any, trout anglers would choose Massachusetts. As the third most densely populated state (behind New Jersey and Rhode Island), Massachusetts isn't exactly the ideal trout-fishing destination. Even within New England, a region considered the last bastion for wild, native brook trout in the United States, the Bay State doesn't even rank very high. While northern New England states are synonymous with these fish, southern states in the region are typically deemed too developed to support wild-trout fisheries.

However, this narrative is false. Massachusetts supports over 1,000 bodies of water containing wild, native brook trout, from quiet rivulets to raging rivers. Even anglers who live within minutes of such hidden gems often overlook them, opting to try their luck for larger non-native species. That means there are countless little-known streams teeming with these trout.

Brook trout are native to all of Massachusetts, including coastal streams inhabited by a diadromous form of the species known as salters. Brookies are one of just two salmonids native to the Bay State, the other being the now-extirpated Atlantic salmon. Though commonly referred to as a trout, brookies are actually a species of char, more closely

The streams brookies inhabit, as well as the surrounding environments, supply some of the most breathtaking views in Massachusetts.



related to the lake trout and arctic char of northern New England than to rainbow and brown trout. Brookies, like all char, prefer cold, clean, highly oxygenated water. As a result, they are described as “canaries in a coal mine” because their presence (or lack thereof) denotes the quality of an environment. Unlike their char brethren, though, stream brook trout

tend to run quite small. Two to ten inches is the typical size range, with a 12-inch fish considered a trophy.

Before European colonization, brook trout thrived in coldwater fisheries throughout the state. With the construction of dams, many populations were imperiled, especially in the densely populated eastern portion of

Massachusetts. As urban sprawl continued, brook-trout habitat continued to be degraded. Today, a number of major threats continue to face them, including invasive species and continued habitat degradation.

Today, brook trout are confined to a fraction of the territory they used to inhabit; still, anglers can find squaretails throughout much

An advertisement for Buzzards Bay Yacht Sales. On the left is a photograph of a white speedboat with a black outboard motor, moving quickly across the water. The text "FOUNTAIN POWER BOATS" is overlaid on the image. To the right of the image, it says "Offices in Bourne, Falmouth, & Chatham, MA, & Freeport, ME". Below this is a logo of a blue eagle in flight above the text "BUZZARDSBAY yacht sales". At the bottom, the phone number "508.563.7136" and website "BUZZARDSBAYYACHT.COM" are listed.

An advertisement for Blackhawk Party Boat Fishing. At the top, it says "Voted South Eastern Connecticut's Number ONE Party Boat!". Below this is a photograph of a white party boat with a cabin and a mast. Underneath the photo is the logo "BLACKHAWK" in a stylized font, with "Party Boat Fishing at its Finest" written below it. Further down, it says "Visit website for our spring schedule" followed by the website "blackhawksporfishing.com" and social media icons for Facebook and Instagram. At the bottom, it lists the location "Niantic, CT" and phone number "(800) 382-2824".



Because of the low insect biomass found in their habitat, brook trout have evolved to become opportunistic feeders and often eat any fly or lure that comes within sight. This makes big, bushy, attractor dry flies ideal.

of the state. From around the Wachusett Reservoir area west, brookies swim in nearly any tributary stream as well as in some of the larger rivers. In the eastern portion of the state, a few isolated populations still exist. These fisheries, often found in urban or suburban settings, provide some of the most underrated

fishing in the Bay State. On the coast, saltier squaretails are still caught in some of the tidal brooks along the South Shore and the Cape.

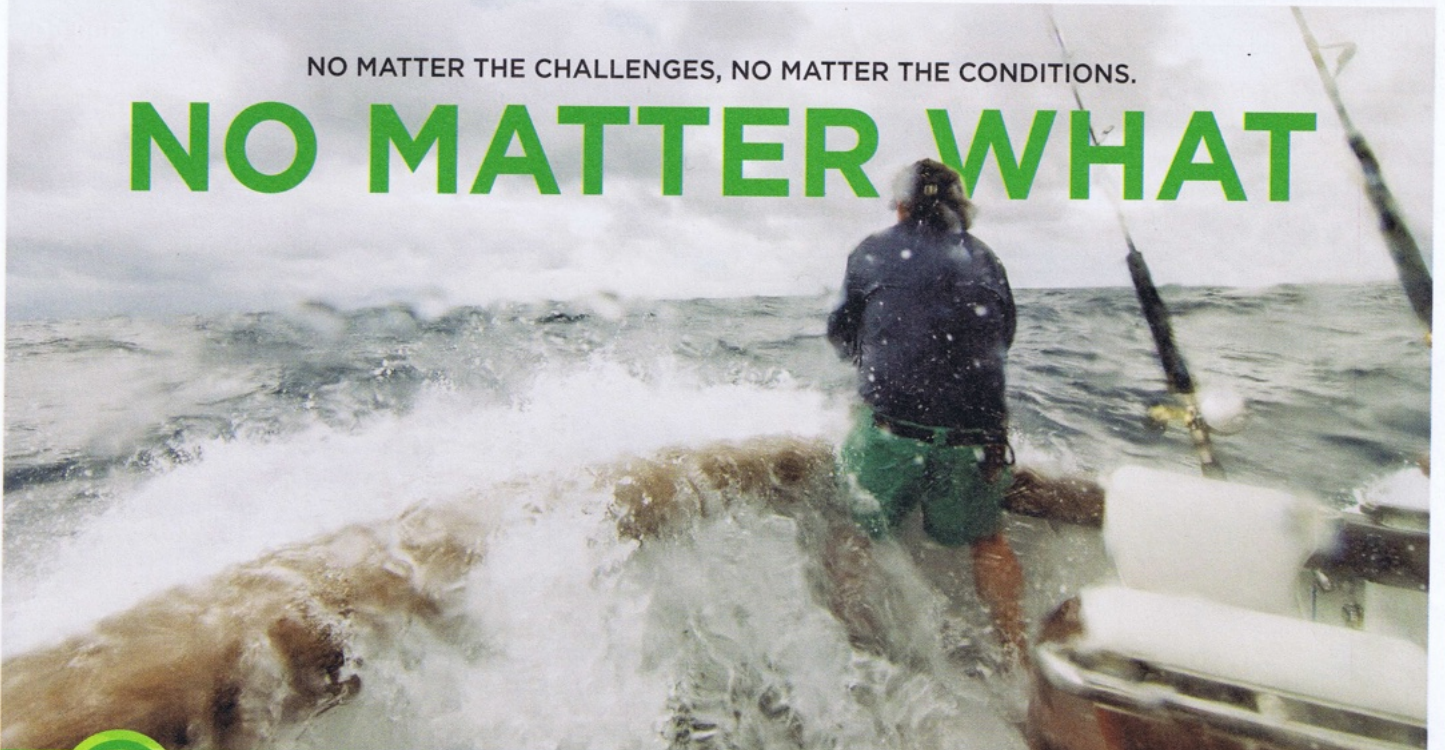
The freestone streams brookies inhabit, as well as the surrounding environment, supply some of the most breathtaking views anywhere in the commonwealth. Along with

dense forests and rolling hills, visitors to these streams may even get the chance to see beavers, black bears, coyotes, fisher cats, moose, otters, white-tailed deer, turkeys, red hawks, and more. From trickling riffles to cascading waterfalls, the variety of water these streams offer is remarkable. Though most of

Like people who would rather eat a blueberry Pop Tart over the real fruit, brookies seem to prefer artificially colored patterns to more realistic imitations.

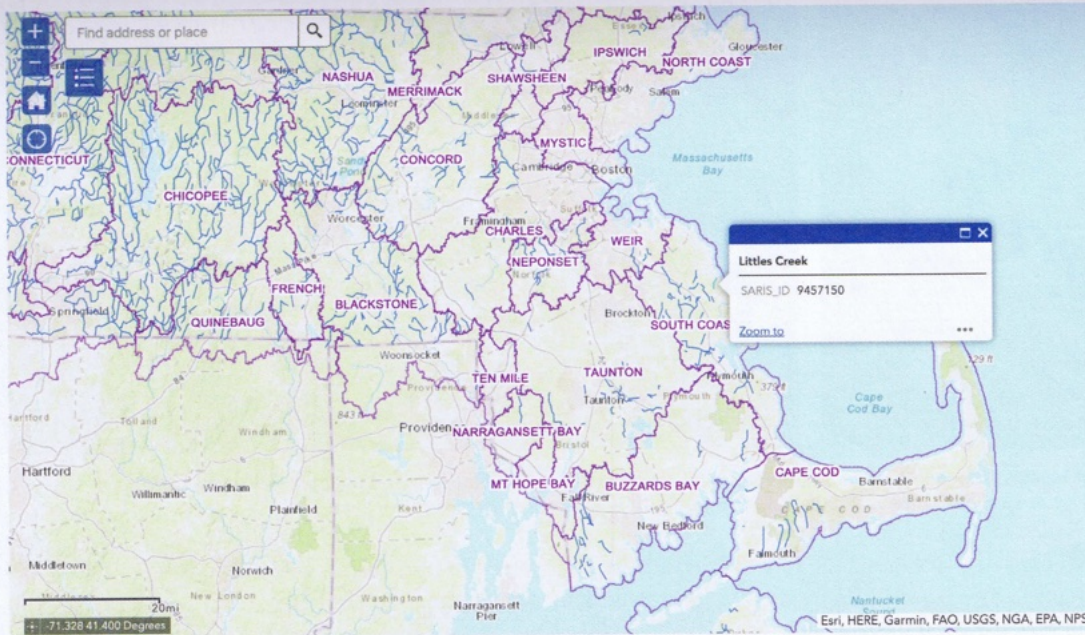
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Finding productive brook trout streams is half the fun. The Massachusetts Coldwater Resources map is a great resource that shows all the state's rivers and tributaries known to support populations of coldwater species.

the brooks are relatively shallow with interspersed pocket water, deep pools and even beaver ponds are not unheard of. They may require some effort to find, but they may have

some of the best fishing, especially when trout seek thermal refuge in the summer and again to escape anchor ice in the winter. However, finding productive small streams is half the

fun. Luckily, anglers looking for them have a number of resources available, especially in the internet-driven society we live in today.

One of the best is Massachusetts' Coldwater Fish Resources (CFR) map, which displays the rivers and tributaries known to support self-sustaining populations of coldwater fish species. While other coldwater fish species exist in these streams, brook trout inhabit 98% of CFRs, whether as the principal fishery or an added bonus.

Another well-known resource for anglers hoping to discover new water is Google Earth. When I scout out streams using it, I search for areas with plenty of in-

stream structure, whether it's man-made (like bridges and dams) or natural (such as boulders and logs) that create current breaks for fish to rest in. A large pool or waterfall makes a river



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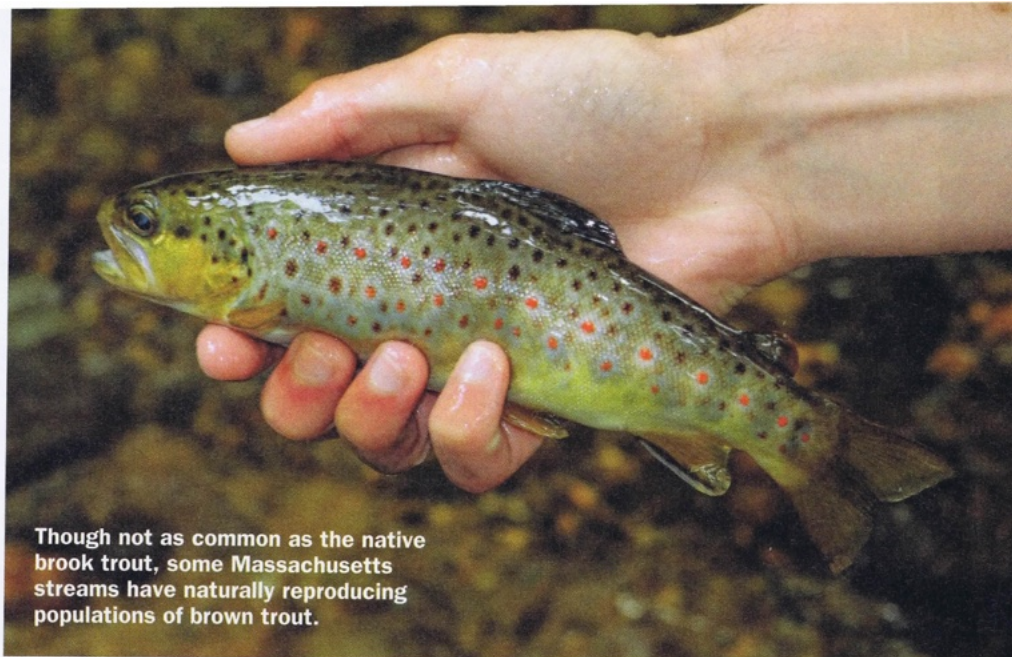




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even more appealing.

A more traditional New Englander may make use of the *Delorme Atlas & Gazetteer*. While the *Gazetteer* is more famous in rural Maine, where a vast network of logging roads and spotty cell service make using online mapping systems nearly impossible, it has its place here in Massachusetts. Small creeks, nicknamed "blue lines" for their appearance on maps, with steep elevation drops usually have some of the best brook trout habitat. Larger rivers with tributaries known to hold wild trout can also be productive during certain times of the year. If the river or its tributaries are (or have been) stocked with other species of trout, it is always possible to find wild populations of these fish if conditions are favorable. While not native, wild



Though not as common as the native brook trout, some Massachusetts streams have naturally reproducing populations of brown trout.

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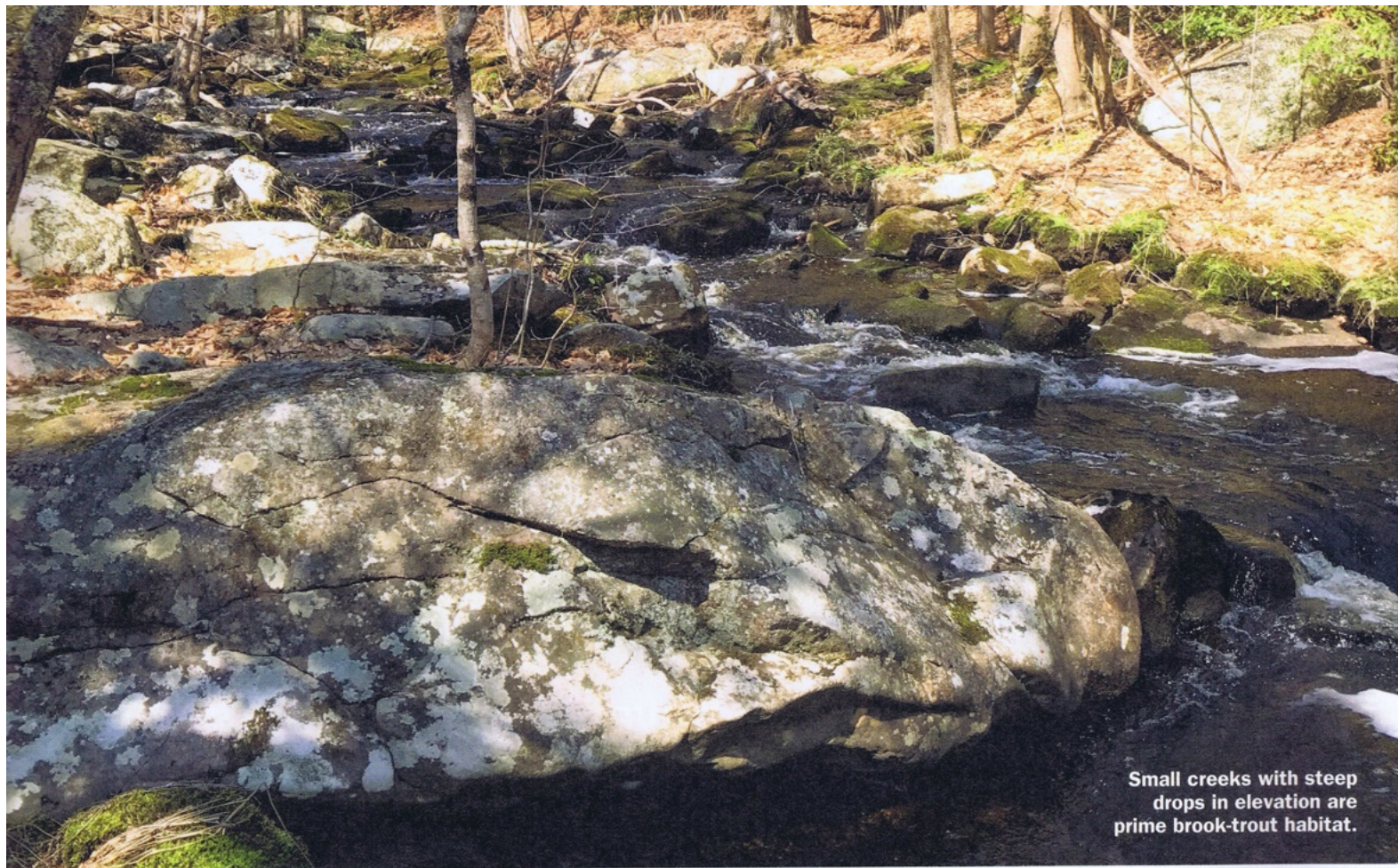
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brown and rainbow trout can be an enjoyable challenge to catch and occasionally grow larger than brookies.

Equipment for small-stream wild-trout fishing is about as simple as it comes. Early in the season, when chilly water still nips at exposed extremities, a pair of waders is often nice, though they don't need to be fancier than some old hip waders. When the water warms sufficiently, exchange them for wet wading attire. Although it may seem natural to ditch long sleeves and pants in favor of short sleeves and shorts while wading wet, don't make this mistake. Poison ivy, ticks, and relentless mosquitoes await those who bare even the smallest sliver of skin.

Gear carried along while on small-stream fishing missions should not exceed what can fit in pockets and a lanyard (or small bag). A pair of forceps, some clippers, a couple of tins or pill bottles filled with flies or lures, and a snack are all that's needed for a day of brookie fishing. To cut down on weight and bulk, I often bring a LifeStraw rather than tote around a water bottle.

Nets are another piece of gear to consider, and whether or not you use one is a matter of



The constellations and colors on wild brook trout are unique to each fish, so no two look alike.

personal preference. A net can reduce fighting and handling time, two factors that may mean the difference between life and death for small brook trout during periods of thermal stress. On the flip side, a net is prone to getting caught on streamside brush. I opt to bring a net with fine enough mesh to prevent small fish from slipping through the gaps and use magnets to attach it to my pack for easy access.

Rods are perhaps the piece of gear most focused upon by small-stream anglers. While fly fishers can get away with their fast action 9-foot 5-weights, as I have for years, a shorter, slower 7½-foot 3-weight constructed of fiberglass, bamboo, or soft graphite is typically considered the ideal small-stream rod. Any click-and-pawl reel will do since it is merely a line holder. Since casts under 20 feet are the rule, not the exception, both weight-forward and double-taper floating lines work, usually accompanied by a 6- to 8-foot tapered leader. Spin anglers should opt for an ultralight to light rod in the 4½- to 6-foot range. Use thin line from 2- to 6-pound test for the best presentations.

Though wild brook trout can be caught year-round in small streams, the best time to target them is from mid-March through early October. The season varies based on a stream's location in the state, with action in the north and west heating up later and cooling down earlier than in the south and east.

Sparse insect activity early in the season renders topwater offerings less effective than during warmer months. From March

through April, one of my favorite rigs to use is a dry-dropper. For the dry fly, I use big attractor patterns that are nearly impossible to sink. Some of my favorites include Chubby Chernobyls and stimulators in a wide range of colors. Although there are many methods,

I typically tie anywhere between 16 to 36 inches of 4x or 5x tippet to the bend of the dry fly, then attach a standard nymph pattern such as a Flashback Pheasant Tail, Hare's Ear, Prince Nymph, or small Pat's Rubber Legs. Spin anglers will have success using




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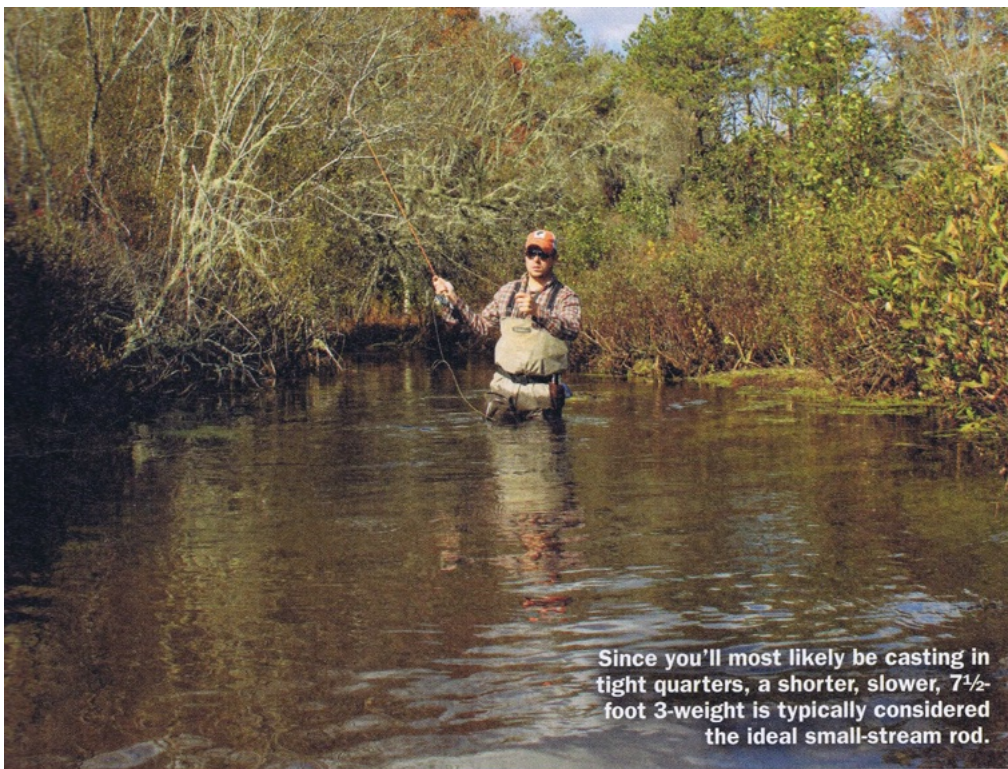




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Since you'll most likely be casting in tight quarters, a shorter, slower, 7½-foot 3-weight is typically considered the ideal small-stream rod.

earthworm imitations this time of year since they are frequently washed into streams with snowmelt and heavy rains. Some fruitful options are Trout Magnet Worms and PowerBait Floating Mice Tails.

As waters begin to warm in late spring and early summer, fishing can be lights-out. Though small streams, especially here in the east, are relatively infertile and have little insect activity, dry-fly fishing can be spectacu-

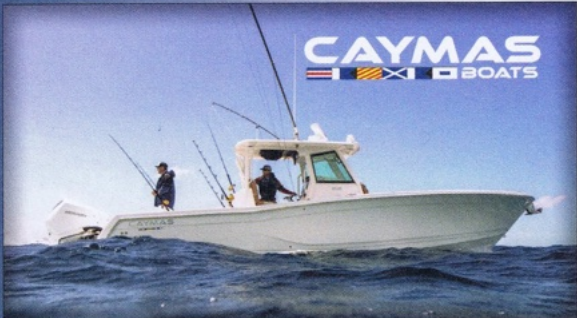
lar. Because of the low insect biomass found in their habitat, brook trout have evolved to become opportunistic feeders and often eat any fly or lure that comes into their sight. This makes big, bushy attractor dry flies that hold up to the tumbling crosscurrents in these streams ideal. My all-time favorite small-stream brookie fly is a Parachute Purple Haze in size 14, but Klinkhammers, Royal Wulffs, Parachute Adams, Elk Hair Caddis, and many other general-imitation dries also work. Tiny floating plugs and poppers fished with gentle twitches can bring similarly explosive topwater eats, but small brook trout often miss these comparatively large lures.

Like people who would rather eat a blueberry Pop Tart over the real fruit, brookies seem to prefer artificially colored patterns to more realistic imitations. Purple, red, chartreuse, and orange have proven themselves to be fish-catching colors throughout time. That said, there are still fussy fish in slow, clear pools. In such a situation, have some more naturally colored offerings. Low-floating, hackle-less flies usually get the job done here, including Craig Matthew's Sparkle Dun and X-Caddis. Lures like Berkley Pre-Rigged Atomic Tubes and Trout Magnets in natural tones excel in these and countless other small-stream scenarios as well.


During the summer, water temperatures frequently exceed a brook trout's preference of about 68 degrees. For this reason, I consider a water thermometer to be of equal importance to my rod and reel when fishing for these wild, native fish. When streams are dangerously warm, either stop fishing for them and target the plethora of other species found in the state, or find high-elevation or spring-fed waters that stay cool during warmer months.

If you find cool water, terrestrials can also tempt fish this time of year. Despite how aggressive they may appear, large bugs in the sizes 10 to 6 may keep small fish away and attract larger specimens. Some of my preferred terrestrials are Chubby Chernobyls, Foam Ants, and Parachute Hoppers. Rebel Crickhoppers are far-and-away my favorite lure imitation of grasshoppers and crickets.

Fall is the spawning season for char. During pre-spawn in late-September through mid-October, brook trout readily attack just about any lure or fly in front of them. They also exhibit awe-inspiring colors not found during any other times of the year. While streamers and reaction lures work year-round, this is arguably the best time to throw them,



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ARTIFICIALS FOR SMALL-STREAM TROUT

Ultralight spinning tackle is a great alternative to a fly rod for fishing small streams. Below is a selection of the author's favorite offerings.



Berkley Pre-Rigged Atomic Tube



Trout Magnet



PowerBait Floating Mice Tail



Rebel Crickhopper

and unquestionably the best time to catch big fish. Small bead-head Woolly Buggers, Mickey Finns, and Blacknose Dace are all great options, as are small spinners, spoons, and plugs for the spin folks.

From around mid-October through December, brook trout nests (called redds) begin appearing in most coldwater streams. They are easily identifiable by a light patch in an otherwise dark streambed. During this time, it's best to stay away and allow the fish to do


their thing.

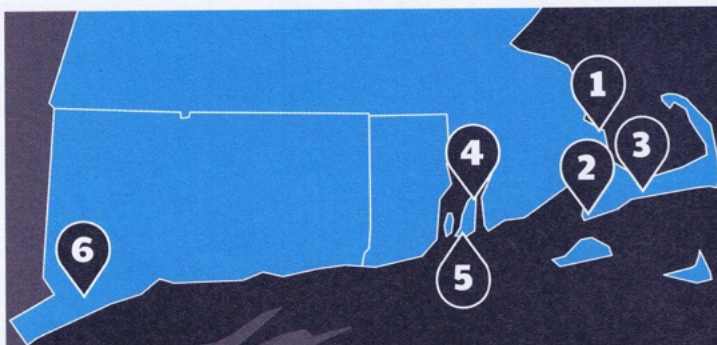
In winter, after the completion of the spawn, brook trout can still be caught in small streams, though they tend to congregate in deep runs and pools. I have even seen wild brook trout caught through the ice in beaver ponds in the Berkshires. Through most of these months, however, I give squaretails a break and fish for other species, especially when hard water begins to set in.

As with any species of fish, there are numer-

ous practices we as anglers and conservationists should employ to ensure brook trout stick around for future generations to enjoy. Use single, barbless hooks (regardless of whether it is on a lure or a fly) and minimize fish-handling times to reduce mortality. If you do choose to take a picture of your catch, make sure the fish remains in the water up until the shot is taken, then quickly return it afterwards.

Anglers who care deeply about the health of Massachusetts' fisheries should look into joining conservation organizations such as Trout Unlimited, Native Fish Coalition, and Sea Run Brook Trout Coalition. These groups do incredible boots-on-the-ground, legislative, and scientific work to protect brook trout and other fish.

Wild brook trout streams are an underutilized resource in the state, and one that nearly anyone can find within 30 minutes of their home. While many folks complain of crowding on their favorite stocked streams during the peak of the season and a lack of fish in the shoulder months, savvy anglers can find secluded, productive fishing for wild, native salmonids year-round in small streams throughout Massachusetts. 



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