

# Back Trails

Perspectives on People and Nature

John Bulmer

## Headwaters

by Paul F. Noel

I follow the old trail more by instinct than familiarity, guided by memories of the heart rather than landmarks that have long grown up, rotted, or blown over.

It is a warm, calm day in early June with a white sky overhead offering promise of neither sun nor rain. Young leaves on spindly white birches barely move, acting unsure and tentative after their recent emergence. Birdsong fills the heavily scented air and the growing green of witch hobble frames the road. It is a good day to be out if one has fishing on the mind.

My year-old German short-haired pointer runs along my side with seemingly purposeless abandon. He lives strictly for the moment, unaware of the concept of time, and I wonder what that might feel like.

My reason for this trip: brook trout; my destination: a northern Adirondack stream. Not any brook trout, but wild fish whose ancestors were caught by my father, my brothers and me. And not just any stream, but one that has come to symbolize my growing years. That wild watershed provided a shy, thin boy an education to the natural world and a place to find peace and competence during a time when such things were not easily found.

The stream's headwaters are small, surrounded by grassy banks choked with speckled alders. Downstream, the brook meanders, widening and deepening, allowing trout to hold in pools and fly fishermen to cast. My brothers and I would set the hook to an ancient pulse until called off by my father, telling us it was time to quit. I still hear that voice in other forms when I listen silently and honestly.

The upper reaches drain though expansive, fragrant conifer stands where years ago we hunted hare, trapped bobcats and fisher, and tracked mystical whitetail bucks into impenetrable havens. The surrounding land rises higher into classic maple, beech, birch and ash hardwoods where spooked deer could occasionally be seen.

I make my way downstream from the slower currents of the headwaters. Here the brook accelerates over copper-colored rocks; gurgling and popping, ever-changing, ever the same. The riffles, glides and pockets hold hungry brook trout whose lives revolve around grabbing something to eat while avoiding being eaten. It's a common theme in this natural world and I sometimes envy the simplicity. But as a hunter or angler, I become part of that theme and reduce my world to the bones and roots of human

evolution. These experiences are needed to sustain me through the rest of my work days spent in an unnatural world.

The sun is passing behind the balsams, that in-between time when all creatures nocturnal and diurnal stir. Peepers start calling from a still backwater in concert with a hermit thrush and the yipping of coyote pups. The brook is playing her music. It yields different songs to different souls.

A hatch of moth-like caddis starts and the water slowly percolates with the sips, plops and splashes of feeding trout. I stand in the current and feel it wash over and through me. I start casting, the arc and swish of my rod and line in perfect harmony with the stage around me.

The leader lands gently in the shimmering, silver water. A brook trout grabs my fly with a familiar primitive aggressiveness. I instinctively set the hook and feel the head shake to and fro, a million years of selective survival transmitted through line and rod.

The red spots with blue halos, the white-edged fins, the yellow and green vermiculations along the back, make this creature a symbol of all things wild and beautiful. I gently back out the hook and the freed trout slowly fins suspended in the current, suspending me along with it. Then in a subdued flash it disappears into a deeper unknown. My gaze shifts downstream, watching the water tumble away... away from the headwaters.

A lifelong sportsman, **Paul F. Noel** was raised in the Chateaugay Lake area of northern NY. He now lives in Vermont and is a graduate of the fisheries and wildlife program at SUNY Cobleskill.



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