

VOLUNTEER OWNERSHIP

Stocking Brown Trout

By Jeff Holland

As a novice fly fisherman — defined as one still in the *flailing* stage — and a new member of the Free State Flyfishers Club, I was eager to make myself useful and discover a new waterway to fish. So I volunteered for Jay Sheppard and a group from the Potomac-Patuxent Chapter of Trout Unlimited to help DNR stock Brown Trout in the Middle Patuxent River. It sounded like fun until I realized it was scheduled for early March — still winter in most parts of Maryland.

“Greetings!” said Jay, in an e-mail to the volunteers, “You will be pulling four boxes downstream from Eden Brook this Friday morning with (about) 500 Brown Trout... the rain and snow today will raise the flows a little more tonight, but in 36 hours it should be just fine and clear.”

He was right, if you call *fine* an air temperature of not quite 40 degrees and a water temperature hovering just above freezing. And if *clear* meant that you could almost see your kneecaps in thigh-deep water, but not the slippery boulders at your feet. I’d never been to that stretch of the river before, but at first sight, it seemed higher and faster than it should be for an intelligent person of a certain age and girth to go wading down for a mile and a half.

But a truckload of fish needed to be released, and the only way to get them there was to walk boxfuls downstream and let them go where they would thrive — until they’re caught. And releasing fish in the river just to be caught was the reason I was there.

Release and catch

According to Mark Staley, DNR’s Central Region Inland Fisheries Manager, that day’s effort to release 500 Trout in the Middle Patuxent was one small part of the total stocking endeavor. All said and done, 334,500 Trout were to be released into rivers and streams across five counties in central Maryland to benefit recreational fishermen.

“When we stock adult Trout, it’s not to establish population; it’s to provide fishing recreation,” Mark explained later. “And many, if not all of the places where we stock, are places where Trout do not naturally occur.”

The stretch we stocked is in Howard County about two miles from Murray Hill Road. It’s designated as a *Delayed Harvest Trout Fishing Area*, which means it’s strictly catch-and-release with artificial lures between October 1 and May 31; but from June through September, you can catch up to five Trout per day with no tackle restrictions. “When we put Trout in the Middle Patuxent,” Mark went on, “the fish stay there until June when the water gets too warm. Then fishermen can start catching them.”



Photos by Jeff Holland



Pulling the fish behind in boxes, they are almost ready to be released.

Other areas are designated as traditional *Put-and-Take*, where fishermen can come and catch fish as soon as the streams are open. These are streams where Trout can’t survive because the water temperature rises too high due to land development and diminished forest buffer.

“We’re not changing the biology of the stream,” Mark continued, “we are providing fish for fishermen, giving our constituents Trout and providing recreation where there wouldn’t be otherwise. Stocking allows anglers to catch Trout in a rural setting that’s close to urban areas — close to where people live and work. Fishermen have a good time and they can keep a few Trout for dinner.”

Filling the stream

Larry Choate served as the head of the volunteer party that included Arnie Strand, Larry Coburn, Mark Gay, Brian Sirotkin, Bill Richkus and myself. Most of the others were veteran stockers of this particular stream and ardent fly fishermen. I was packed into my chest waders with layers of long underwear

and polar fleece. Surrounded by dense oak-and-holly woods, we were sheltered from the wind and comfortable despite the cold. It was a delight to realize there was beautiful nature so close to the city of Columbia.

We formed a fireman’s brigade between the truck and the riverbank, filling 5-gallon buckets with Trout and hauling them down to the water. The fish, all Brown Trout, were about the size of my hand.

At the bank, Brian stood knee-deep in the swirling water and held a large, grey box steady in the current. We dumped the buckets into the box. Once filled, we grabbed our walking sticks and carefully stepped into the river, towing the boxes behind us.

We spent the next several hours wading downstream, letting a dozen or more fish swim out of the boxes at each spot where Larry, in his experience, felt they would flourish — in the deep pools at the bends, at the foot of rocky cliffs, among jumbles of boulders or underneath fallen logs — making sure we had enough to cover the whole stretch of river.

Taking ownership

Since that day in early March, I’ve been back to the Middle Patuxent River several times and found not just Brown Trout, but also Rainbow Trout that had been stocked earlier. So I achieved one of my goals: I had found a great fishing hole 35 minutes from my house in Annapolis, in a stream surrounded by beautiful woods that I’ve shared with deer, beaver and birds, but few other humans. Paradise.

“Our Trout stocking program builds advocates for natural resources,” said Mark. “If you like to fish the Middle Patuxent, you become concerned about the health of the river. Hopefully people take a little ownership of these streams.”

That was the unexpected achievement. I now feel like a little part of the Middle Patuxent is mine. ■

Jeff Holland is a volunteer with DNR.



The author releasing Trout.



Brian Sirotkin steadies boxes for fish transfer and begins transport.



Moving Trout from the truck into buckets