

Penns Creek

Early

by Vic Attardo photos by the author

The bottom rocks of Penns Creek are a 3-D jigsaw puzzle that no one has been able to assemble. The stones amount to a jumble of pieces still sitting in the box lid of time, and amid these irregular and raised parts, surrounded by pale green water, are the hiding places of trout.

Hedged by towering dark hills, Penns Creek keeps many secrets, and one of its most confidential is the tendency of its trout to hide in places you'd least expect. Good fly anglers have an eye and nose for trout, but you need more than the physical senses on Penns Creek. You need intuition.

As I was learning, my two partners, Andy Wagner and Lance Burris, had honed their abilities. They recognized the regular haunts and had a feeling for the odd and oft unknown places of Penns Creek's brown trout. This awareness extended into a phase preface as well. While many anglers were still at home preparing for the "season," Wagner and Burris had pulled me onto Penns with the promise of some good early fishing. One or the other, or both, had told me the creek was hot long before most anglers realized it.

This was the second week of March in a warm and dry advent to spring. In this era of climate change, these conditions are no longer an anomaly but the cyclical norm. The United States Geological Survey record flow for our trip was 350



A stonefly nymph, part of a dual rig, was used to capture this brown trout.



cubic feet per second (cfs) while the average range at this time of year is 700 to 850 cfs.

Wagner and Burris have learned that “an early spring” presents opportunities. On Penns Creek, it’s a time for the nearly thumb-size stonefly nymphs to crawl wantonly over the jigsaw puzzle. Leaving identification aside, the nymphs have dull yellow bellies, and their topsides are the muddy brown/black of predatory insects. It’s hard to imagine these things taste good, but stoneflies may be the equivalent of jelly beans to trout.

While not the adult version of the large nymphs, a few early black stoneflies, size 16, were in the air. Later that day, the small dries would vivify in a sunny riffle to be gobbled with intensity.

My first trout of the morning was a take-off trout. When I hooked it, it took off out of the dish and sprinted downstream into churning water. There’s a subtle touch to apply to a big trout hooked barbless, and I failed to get my reactions in gear with what experience had taught. As a result, the trout popped off into freedom.

Still, I enjoyed the strike. This had been a good 14-inch trout, or better, and it had hit in early March in a way that showed hunger and meanness. A creek full of mean trout is a fly angler’s dream.

As the day lengthened, we moved along Penns Creek through brightness and shade, thin and heavy water, working nymphs deep and dries on top. The trout were intermittently stubborn and simple. Wagner took a beauty on a dredged woven stonefly, with his preferred double nymph rig.

We checked the rocks, both wet and dry, for signs of life. At one point, Wagner studied a sandy soft bank noting it as the type of bed where Green Drake nymphs exit to the surface.

A fly angler who comes along a piece of water where trout are rising is like a prospector who has found his gold mine. The discovery doesn’t mean he won’t have to work for the gold, but it does mean the precious object is saying loudly, “Look, here I am. Come

A backcast is started in flat but productive water.



Wild brown trout

get me.” For the greater part of a hike down Penns Creek, we saw no gold. Then, we came to a sunny flat at a curve, an odd and unlikely spot to find fish gathered and feeding topside, but the trout were there.

The objects of their affections were little black stoneflies. Though small as pepper flakes, we could see their cellophane wings on the surface. The taking trout were as plain as black on white. We noted that the risings were intermittent but in harmony with the stoneflies’ appearance. For a time, Penns Creek’s surface would be calm, the stream animated only by its flow. Then, a few handfuls of stoneflies would appear, and the trout would raid like Visigoths.

After a bankside conference with his partner, Burris moved into a precarious position above the fish. The water here was thin and smooth in key spots. The majority of feeders had pushed to the inside of the curve, and a few dimplers were further down in even more exposed positions. Wagner and I stayed on the bank and became spectators. There are times when fly fishing can be a spectator’s sport, and this was one of them.

For Burris, the stream glare was ferocious, so we offered directions to the rising fish. Using a size 16 dry stonefly, he studiously picked off a couple of fish, as if they were prisoners caught by a searchlight on a wall. It was beautiful fishing. There wasn’t a green leaf to be seen on the hills, but the oaks buds on the south-facing slopes had begun to balloon orange/red. We felt like we were standing in an unfinished watercolor, the painter having perfected the light but needing to complete the details.

Burris was unavoidably in full sun, but he kept his line away from the trout’s vision. The dry came to them first, as it should. When his pattern rode into their lane and the timing was perfect, a sparkling blast of stream and spirit followed. We cheered Burris on as he worked the best trout to hand.

For several hour, Penns Creek glowed in the sun and the air blew warmer and warmer. Eventually, something didn’t feel right to the stoneflies and the trout, and both abruptly disappeared. A thirst came over the anglers, and it was a sweaty hike back wearing waders. When the rods came apart, Penns Creek still looked healthy and vigorous. It may have recently stirred from a winter’s yawn, but it was hot now and ready to go, early. ☐