



Spring Creek Early

by Vic Attardo

photos by the author

*An angler casts
before towering
limestone cliffs.*

I've thought long and hard and have decided it is character that makes a great trout stream.

All things being equal, and the flow having a sound population of wild fish, it's character—the way the stream stands on land, the way it speaks to you when you're fishing and the way it reappears in your mind after you've fished it that marks one stream above others.

Great trout streams are not only talked about with friends, they are dreamed about as well.

You can argue that Spring Creek is the finest trout stream in Pennsylvania or that there are some better streams, but you can't say it lacks character. Spring Creek oozes character. And, along with its sound population of wild Brown Trout and a smattering of reproducing Rainbow Trout, character is what makes it a great trout stream.

Like most interesting figures in a novel or movie, Spring Creek also goes through comparative changes along its 15-mile fishable length. In this case, the changes accompany the surrounding land. Sometimes Spring Creek feels like it's a backyard stream, because it goes through folks' backyards; sometimes it's a woodland stream, because it goes



When the water is thin, it's best to approach trout with some long stretches and high-sticking.

through moderately thick woods. And, sometimes it feels like a stream in the high country, because it passes beneath towering limestone cliffs with gnarled trees and bright flowers leaching from eons of hardened seafloor sediment.

What Spring Creek is never, or only in a few small places, is deep. Nor is it a fat stream. The distance between the banks is strangely uniform, 40 to 50 feet across, except where squeezed by man. I think of Spring Creek as being comfortable in its tight pants and not stretching its stitches. Also, it has a uniformly low gradient.

But, you don't have to take my word for it, at least for numbers of trout.

"Spring Creek has one of the highest densities in the state," said Jason Detar, Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission (PFBC) Area 3 Fisheries Biologist. "It has an outstanding biomass."

Something else Spring Creek rarely is, is alone. Drawing folks from across the state, and further, it's a popular stream. If there's a time that Spring Creek is less fished, it's before the growing season gets a firm grasp in March and early April. Warm Februarys are lightly fished too. Spring Creek certainly attracts dry fly anglers in the hatch season, but it sees fewer pre-hatch masters.

It's this early-season fishing on Spring Creek that interests me. Getting to the stream just after St. Patrick's Day with registered guides Andy Wagner and Jim "The Fish Detective" Spade, we were fortunate to witness one of the least seen high points of the year.

In the shallows, pods of suckers were chasing each other around the rocks. The water was barely over their backs. Their tails whisked the surface, silver sides flashing in the morning light.

Later, they would perform a withering, twisting dance when females dropped their eggs.

"Unfortunately, they're only making and marking their territories now," said Wagner as we stood on the banks. "In a few days, they'll be readily spawning. This is when the trout will be right behind them."

When the water is thin, as Spring Creek can be after a snowless winter, I've found it's best to approach these trout

with stretchy gymnastics and high-sticking. Sitting on the bank with my camera, I focused on Spade as he probed small pieces of dark water in the center of the stream and along the banks.

Spade worked with his fly rod and body to drift light nymphs into Spring Creek's holes. As the day warmed, he rolled up his long sleeves and slid the suspenders of his waders down his shoulder. It was the kind of brief weather you love to encounter on Spring Creek in the early season. His best Brown Trout, coming from one dark pocket, was large enough to drape over his hand. Its broad tail was almost as big as his hand. When Spade worked along the cement walls built around a bridge,

Learn at the chute

The chute below the Benner Spring State Fish Hatchery can serve a practical purpose as well. It's a great place to learn how to "see" trout. For those with untrained eyes, the narrow passage is a place to learn how trout appear in a stream—their shadows, wavy motions and ability to hide in plain sight.

When trout are feeding, you can watch how they open their mouths, a spoon of white suddenly appears, and you can study how they take bugs off the surface and the rings they leave behind. No matter how many trout I've seen, I enjoy spending time at the chute taking a refresher course in the things that trout do.



Out of the shadows, a large Brown Trout fins around the spillway at the Benner Spring State Fish Hatchery. The "chute" is a great place to study fish.

he managed smaller but just as colorful Brown Trout in even shallower water.

Something you're going to see a lot of in Spring Creek is cress bugs. Near a limestone cliff, Wagner reached into the water, pulled up a wad of fresh green weeds, and the grass was literally crawling with cress bugs.

In Spring Creek, there are so many cress naturals that trout can eat them all day. The working of a weighted cress bug fly in places where they naturally occur—thick, thick weeds—is problematic. Wagner notes that some days the trout go crazy for cress bug patterns. Other days, the trout won't touch them at all. But, that doesn't mean Spring Creek is a difficult place to catch fish.

Important patterns for Wagner and Spade are dark tan Muskrat Nymphs and Walt Worms, sizes 14 to 18, Blue-winged Olives including a CDC Emerger, Pheasant Tail Nymph and Beadhead Pheasant Tail, and a Zebra Midge. Also, there are some Tan Caddis and good numbers of Grannoms at this time of the year, particularly from Milesburg to Bellefonte.

Before Spring Creek went to Catch and Release regulations, and attained its current popularity, the trout were often bigger. Though, these days the stream still has fish in the upper teens.

"What Spring Creek lacks in the size of fish, it makes up for in numbers," said Wagner.

Unfortunately, Spring Creek is not without its problems.

While Detar understands that the stream's water quality is "as good as it has been in the last century," he noted it suffers from an overwithdrawal from the aquifer and from too much unfiltered storm water flowing into the stream. While 80 percent of its base flow is from the aquifer, storm water rushes into the stream to the point where United States Geological Survey stream gauges record "big spikes" following storms. The stream is what biologists term, "flashy."

Two issues of vital importance on Spring Creek are storm water management and riparian buffers.

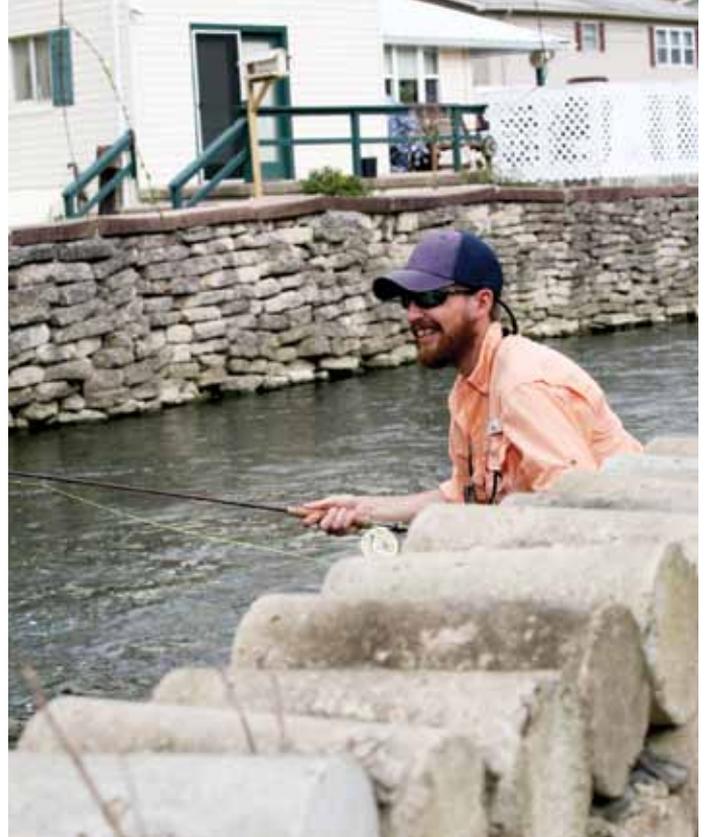
"There is concern within the conservation community how long Spring Creek can sustain itself," said Detar. "Spring Creek is under stress."

"A collective management approach is critical to the health of Spring Creek," said Detar noting the need for local government to recognize and improve the stream's critical issues.

To add to Spring Creek's problems, Detar is also concerned about Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) that have appeared in the stream namely the Rusty Crayfish and just this year, the New Zealand Mudsail. "AIS can ruin a fishery." ☐



You'll find cress bugs in green weeds under the water at Spring Creek.



Sometimes Spring Creek feels like it's a backyard stream, because it goes through folk's backyards.

AIS discovered in Spring Creek

Scientific discoveries are often fun and enlightening but not when they involve the discovery of AIS in a great trout stream. New Zealand mudsnails were confirmed in Spring Creek during fall 2013.

"New Zealand mudsnails were probably brought in by an angler having fished in the West," said Detar.

New Zealand mudsnails are tiny but can form a high-density population that will filter out nutrients needed by other macroinvertebrates, possibly causing the loss of those species.

New Zealand mudsnails can live a considerable period in even "marginally moist" conditions.

"It's important that anglers clean their gear to prevent the spread of AIS," said Detar.

Spring Creek already hosts the uninvited Rusty Crayfish, which has been in the stream for some years.

For more information, visit www.paseagrant.org/fact_sheet_group/invasive-species/ and click on "New Zealand mudsnail."

