Some backwoods wild trout streams hold wild Brown Trout, particularly warmer ones.

As John Voulker so eloquently observed decades ago, under the pen name Robert Traver, “I fish because I love to. Because I love the environs where trout are found, which are invariably beautiful, and hate the environs where crowds of people are found, which are invariably ugly…”

While Michigan’s Upper Peninsula inspired much of Voulker’s trout-related writings, it could easily have been Penn’s Woods. Fishing for stream-bred trout is just a bonus for those willing to hike back into our plentiful back country.

Planning

Locating potential streams is the first step in putting together a back country wild trout adventure, and it’s never been easier. Much of the groundwork can be accomplished from the comforts of home, using internet resources and continually-updated information from the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission (PFBC).

The PFBC maintains a “Wild Trout Waters” listing of streams where natural reproducing populations of trout have been documented. The list is lengthy and continues to grow as previously unassessed waters are surveyed and, where appropriate, added. Included are the upstream and downstream limits of the wild trout waters (including latitude/longitude coordinates) and the length of the stream section.

The Commission also classifies dozens of streams as Wilderness Trout Waters, based upon “the provision of a wild trout fishing experience in a remote, natural and unspoiled environment where man’s disruptive activities are minimized.”

Documents listing naturally reproducing stream sections and Wilderness Trout Waters are available from PFBC’s website at www.fishandboat.com. From the home page, visit Fish, Pennsylvania Fishes, Trout, Trout Water Classifications.

Hundreds of miles of wild trout waters flow through state forest, state game lands and national forest. These tracts of lands can be researched online by way of Google Maps, PFBC’s Interactive Maps and the Pennsylvania Game Commission’s (PGC’s) mapping center. By utilizing various layers and base maps, you can focus on items such as topography, a watershed’s cover, borders, as well as trails and right-of-ways that can be used to access a stream.

For instance, by choosing the “earth” view on Google Maps, one can determine if heavy forest canopies a stream, which would favor wild trout populations. Or from PGC’s mapping center, you can locate gated roads that can be used to hike in and out of a stream and gauge the steepness of the ordeal by way of topographic base map options.

Determining latitude and longitude from these online maps is generally simple, though the process may differ between programs. These numbers can be transferred to a
Though not common, some Pennsylvania streams have wild Rainbow Trout populations.

hand-held GPS, so you can have a ready-made route in and out of a location before even leaving the house.

My strategy is to find potential streams on a map, ones far removed from roads, and cross check them to see if they are on the Wild Trout Streams list, keeping in mind that many streams have yet to be assessed.

Gearing up

Preparing for a backwoods trout trip differs from one where you drop down to the creek from a roadside turnout. Greater preparations are needed, based on the length, in both distance and time, you expect the adventure to entail.

Consider for instance an outing that involves a hike of a mile or more to reach the stream. You may well fish a couple miles of creek—“what’s around the next bend” has a strong draw—and then have a lengthy hike back out at day’s end. Several hours will be involved, so you’ll need to carry food, water, map and compass, and a minimum of survival gear including fire-starter material and a basic first aid kit. It’s comforting to carry a small flashlight, just in case you underestimate the time needed to hike back out. A hand-held GPS is standard equipment on all my trips.

A backpack is ideal for gear. With the added storage, you can carry extra clothes and have a place to store a jacket once the day warms up. Some fishing-specific backpacks accept add-ons, like small chest packs, that easily hold needed tackle in an accessible location.

I like to carry a good camera and a landing net. Not that the trout—which are mostly small native Brook Trout—require it, but the net makes handling fish for photographs much easier. And, larger wild Brown Trout and Rainbow Trout are a possibility in some waters.

For long hikes over rugged terrain, the backpack makes it feasible to wear good hiking boots in and out of the woods, changing over to wading equipment once streamside. Wet wading is an option, but keep in mind that good backwoods trout waters stay cold, even in the summer. Finally, a wading staff is often helpful and also serves as a walking stick/trekking pole.

Shorter trips require an appropriately scaled-back amount of gear.

Tackle considerations

A relatively small selection of tackle is needed to catch backwoods trout. It’s common for such streams to flow through open hemlock and mature hardwoods bottoms, where there’s room to fly cast. I prefer a 7-foot fiberglass, 3-weight rod, over-lined with a #4 line. It’s a versatile setup capable of fishing a variety of flies. If the water’s up and discolored a bit (prime conditions for streams of this type), it’s capable of casting a weighted Woolly Bugger. Under normal or low flows, it’s fine for fishing a two-fly setup with a Stimulator or Humpy on top and a small nymph or Green Weenie underneath. Brook Trout respond well to brightly colored flies. I always carry pink and salmon-colored Woolly Buggers, and weenies tied with pink (rather than green) yarn.

An ultralight spinning rod is also appropriate, particularly along brush/brush-lined lined streams or ones chocked with timber. Small spinners and spoons are standard fare, though flies like buggers and Green Weenies can be fished with the addition of a splitshot or two for weight.