



# Gordon's Quill

Vol. XXVi, No. 30

Winter 2015

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## The One That Got Away

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Turhan Tirana

Fishing, you never know what's going to happen.

The setting: Block Island, thirteen miles in the Atlantic Ocean off Rhode Island.

The situation: Hurricane Joaquin's arrival in an as-yet-unknown intensity was imminent; ferry service to the mainland could be halted. At 5:00 A.M., the winds were screaming, and the rain was pelting down. In the past three days of our four-day fishing trip, we'd caught no fish.

"Could we think about leaving?" I asked Patrick Ross, a steelhead fishing guide from upstate New York and a friend. "Yes," he answered, adding vaguely, "We'll see."

I failed, however, to effect a change in our departure plan. At 7:00, we were back on the beach adjacent to a vacant Coast Guard station. Needless to say, no one else was there. But the wind was at our back, helping whip the lines from our 13-foot-long two-handed fly rods into the channel. The water rushes into or out of the channel, depending on the tide, out to the ocean or in to what the locals call the harbor.

Our lures were three-inch-long feathers tied to smallish hooks. In the water, the feathers undulate, lifelike, with a sparkle, even more appealing, I thought, than real bait.

Swarming about in the water at this time of year are tens of thousands of baitfish and, usually, predator fish. One of these predators was our quarry: false albacore, which are small tuna of five to fifteen pounds — albies. We'd seen a few but they didn't linger in the channel to feed as they were supposed to. They zipped in and out at changes of tide.

By afternoon, the weather had cleared somewhat, leaving an eerie light in the sky. Mild wind, no more rain. Three other fishermen with spinning rods appeared, stayed awhile, and, presumably discouraged by no sign of fish, left. We were again alone.

An enveloping light mist settled in, obscuring the sky and hiding us as if in a huge bowl off-limits to the rest of humanity. The current

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## President's Message February 2016



Our Catskill Mountains are almost barren of snow as I write this message. To me, that snow has always been like water in the bank. Or as I have often thought, the mountains' melting snow account will pay out dividends to our rivers in the spring and sometimes even early summer. The late-spring runoff would not only help sustain our spring and summer fishing, but also help to ensure the good and timely insect hatches that Art Flick wrote about in his wonderful, small, but hugely informative book, *Streamside Guide to Naturals and Their Imitations*. The warming trends and weather changes that we saw last year are still taking place.

Theodore Gordon Flyfishers has continued to make changes, too. As of January 1, 2016, one of TGF's founders, David Kramer, stepped down from our board of directors. David has been an active member of the board and a great asset to our organization for many years. He has been a great adviser to the board and to me, as well. David served on our Founders Fund Scholarship Committee and enjoyed doing it. He is still a tremendous supporter of the committee and the work that it does. We will miss David's wisdom and guidance.

As of January 1 of this year, past TGF board member and secretary Sara Low will fill out David's remaining term. We are very lucky to have her back as a director, and as usual, Sara has jumped right back in to help out wherever needed, and we all thank her for that. Even though she was not on the board for most of last year, she still volunteered to help with the Founders Fund Scholarship Committee and remained a very active member of it. Welcome back, Sara.

After completing the removal of two large culvert pipes from Horse Brook and replacing them with an open-bottomed span, over two miles of a major spawning tributary to the lower Beaverkill has been restored. TGF will keep moving forward with these types of stream-improvement projects and with others, as well. Our partnering with Trout Unlimited and their northeastern restoration coordinator, Tracy Brown, will help make this very valuable stream-restoration work happen.

On Tuesday, March 22, this year, TGF will host our Annual Day meeting and dinner at the Anglers' Club in New York City. This is a great event for TGF, with a number of important things happening. We have our election of directors, hold a short business meeting, have a wonderful dinner prepared by the staff at the Anglers' Club, and finish the evening off with some great fund-raising activities. You will be seeing more information about that in the near future. Seating is limited, so make your reservations as soon as you can. I look forward to seeing you there. This will also be a great time to talk about the upcoming fishing season with friends.

Finally, I would like to thank Bud Bynack for doing a great job editing this and our other recent *Quills*. He does a great job as editor, and we have received a lot of very positive feedback about the new look of *Gordon's Quill*.

Bert Darrow, President  
Theodore Gordon Flyfishers

# 2016 TGF Annual Dinner: Save the Date!

The Theodore Gordon Flyfishers Annual Dinner will be held on March 22 at the Anglers' Club of New York, 101 Broad Street, in lower Manhattan. The Anglers' Club is a historical treasure and the home of a remarkable collection of angling art and memorabilia. The bar is well stocked and the club serves an excellent dinner.

We will enjoy cocktails and then hear a "State of TGF" report from our president, Bert Darrow. Tracy Brown, the northeastern restoration coordinator for Trout Unlimited, will help us celebrate the success of our joint effort with TU to restore the trout habitat of the Horse Brook area and will talk to us about opportunities for similar efforts. We will announce the winner of the Winston rod-and-reel raffle and have live and silent auctions for trips, fine tackle, and other items that should appeal to anglers.

Cocktails will begin at 5:30 P.M., our Annual Meeting of members will begin at 6:00 P.M., and dinner seating will begin at 6:45 P.M. A printed invitation will have arrived in your mailbox. For more information, contact [events@tgf.org](mailto:events@tgf.org).



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## TGF at Somerset

The Fly Fishing Show in Somerset, New Jersey, always boasts the largest attendance of any of the sport's popular shows from coast to coast, with thousands attending each day, and this year was no exception. TGF's presence provides an opportunity to greet new members, renew old friendships, and educate attendees about TGF's mission and what TGF does for both anglers and conservation of the angling environment. This year, we brought our message to more than thirteen thousand visitors over the show's three days.

Tickets for the raffle of a new 8-1/2-foot 4-weight Winston Boron III SX rod and Hatch 3 Plus reel with a RIO Grand line, a raffle limited to just 200 chances, sold extremely well, the new *TGF Currents* handout went home with many attendees, several new members and renewals signed up, and it was heartening to have kids and their parents stop by the table to learn about TGF's activities.

As always, thanks to Bert Darrow for all he does in making TGF's presence at this show stand out from the crowd of organizations that are present and to all the volunteers who helped us spread the word about the Theodore Gordon Flyfishers: Sara Low, David Berman, John Happersett, Chuck Neuner, Avarm Schlesinger, Karen Kaplan, Jim MacDonall, Pat Key, and Bud Bynack.



The TGF table drew crowds all show long.

# The Good Fight

News from the TGF Conservation Committee

## From the Brickyard to the Acid Factory

Charles Neuner

If you are a fan of motorsports or performance cars in general, you may have noticed that the exhaust pipes exit the engine in what appears to be a tangled mess. There is a reason for this, and it relates to the work currently being done to evaluate the feeder streams along the Beaverkill and Willowemoc.

High-performance automobile engines perform best when the exhaust from each cylinder requires the same time and distance to exit the engine. To facilitate this, engineers began to use mathematical models called “flow models” to calculate the length, shape, and surface condition of each exhaust pipe so that each pipe requires the exhaust to travel the same time and distance. By doing, so the pressure within each is balanced, and the engine runs at optimal performance.

These same flow models are now being applied via computer programs to other applications, and by changing the variables and conditions, they can be used for calculating things as wide ranging as the collective flow of blood in the body, the collective flow of traffic through a city, the collective flow of electrons through a microcircuit, or, in our case, the collective flow of water through a network of springs, feeder creeks, and trout streams.

Until relatively recently, most stream-improvement work was approached in a manner that did not consider the broader effect of a given improvement on the entire system or the broader hydrology that comprises the entire system. As a result, many well-intentioned stream-improvement efforts were soon undone by factors and results never considered when planning the work. Today, by computer modeling interconnected brooks, feeder streams, and rivers, hidden patterns of cause and effect can be revealed to assist in the selection of methods for improving trout streams that address their effect on the entire system, resulting in a balanced ecosystem and hydrology that sustains itself.

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**The One that Got Away** (continued from page 1)

rocked a red and a green buoy, one of which had a bell that clanged every minute or so. A foghorn in the not-far distance complemented the bell with a sonorous, soporific note. Otherwise, all was quiet.

Patrick's shout yanked me back to the here and now. "Come on down! There's a pod of fish, two dozen."

I reeled in fast as I could eighty feet of loose line and hurried to where Patrick stood on a sandy point. A cove was to his left. Whatever fish had been there were no longer there or no longer visible.

"Shall I get on your right or left?" I shouted. "Doesn't matter," he yelled back. Fortunately for me, I chose left. I was standing ankle-deep in the water.

What follows took ninety seconds.

The water seventy feet in front of me erupted into two or three fast-churning circles of carnage. A frenzy of bright silver flanks and backs of fish crashed about the surface, devouring prey they'd trapped in the cove.

I had time for one cast; anxious as I was, it had to be good. I chose as my target one circle of mixed-up life and death.

The line shot out of my rod a bit wobbly, but landed on the edge of the frenzy. One second passed. I did nothing. Another second passed. I did nothing. Then WHAM, something grabbed the hook. Simultaneously, the line jolted my arm. Whatever was at the other end was big. It took off fast.

That's the best part. The rest was bedlam. I'll relate it quickly. The key was those first moments. Time had evaporated. So had any sense of myself or where I was. All my senses concentrated on my prey, that fish. They were at one with a frightening and alien power that few humans experience.

Ninety seconds: that's all, but in a way, it was a time as large as eternity. It left me with a new awe of life, one that I know will affect me until I am no more.

What followed demanded wits, as well as instinct.

The force of the fish was such that I couldn't hold my rod upright. I had to lower it so that, level with the water, the line could zip out of the reel as quickly as the fish swam. I had never tactically experienced a creature so determined and capable of having its way. Maybe it was not even aware of me as an opposing force.

Four feet of 20-pound-test tippet at the end of which was the fly, then 14 feet of poly leader, weighted so as to bring the fly from the surface down to where the fish could be in the water column, then 23 feet of casting line heavy enough with the spring of the rod to carry out over the water all that was in front of it, and after that 200 feet of backing—all that connected me with the fish—was peeling off my reel.

I had not used this reel in several years. With horror, I noticed that the line seemed sticky; it did not flow smoothly from the reel. The danger was that if it stuck in the spool of the reel, the fish would break off. My remedy: while continuing to clutch the rod in my right hand, with my left, I yanked line out of the reel as quickly as I could, a yard at a time.

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***The Good Fight "From Brickyard to Acid Factory"*** (continued from page 4)

TGF is working closely with Tracy Brown, Trout Unlimited's northeastern restoration coordinator, in an effort to improve access for trout to spawning tributaries along the Beaverkill and Willowemoc. Tracy and her team have gathered extensive data to be used in computer modeling the flows of these streams to determine the best approach and sequence for restoring them as trout-spawning habitat. She will be reporting her findings as part of her presentation as keynote speaker at the TGF Annual Dinner next month.

Tracy and the work of her team are pivotal to enhancing the ability of the Beaverkill and Willowemoc, and by extension the entire connecting watershed, to sustain a naturally reproducing trout population. The TGF Culvert Remediation Initiative is founded on the work being championed by Tracy and her team, and I look forward to seeing Tracy's presentation at our Annual Dinner in March.



***The One that Got Away*** (continued from page 5)

To my greater horror, I saw next that a strand of line in the spool was crimping the outgoing line, blocking its egress. I had no time even to try to free that strand. In the couple of seconds the line needed to reach that point, I knew, the fish would be free. It was. The line went slack.

What followed was reflection, the usual lesson taking and what-ifs that occur after such happenings.

The fish, Patrick told me, were not albies, but juvenile bluefin tuna. He had seen just what I saw, albeit from a little more distance. The difference was that while I thought these fish were fatter and bigger than the one albie I'd seen earlier leaping out of the water, that's all I knew. I was ignorant of the possibility of other species being there. No one else had ever mentioned bluefin tuna. Usually, these fish inhabit the deep ocean.

Patrick estimated the weight of the fish to which I had been casting at twenty-five to thirty-five pounds. They grow to well over one thousand pounds. They swim at speeds up to forty miles an hour.

"One in a million" was the chance Terry Brykczynski, a friend, gave for those fish to be so close to shore and for me to be there at that moment.

They taste good, too. Thus, they're wanted by first-class restaurants, anglers with big boats, big gear, and big money, and by commercial fishermen who use planes to spot them in the ocean. A collapse of the fishery seems inevitable.

Hooking my tuna was a result of Patrick's diligence and quick eye. All day, he'd been pacing up and down the beach, searching for fish-eating birds overhead or commotions of bait below.

Also helping were some casting skills I'd acquired since starting fishing with Spey rods fifteen years ago in Scotland, enhanced with casting tips from Patrick, who can cast twice as far as I can. Scotland is where these rods were designed.

Patrick commented that I never could have brought in that fish. I had guessed so, too. I would have needed a far heavier rod to tire the fish and more than twice the backing for the same purpose. My fish, if anything, had picked up speed. Even without that problem in the reel, the line would have quickly reached the bare spool and snapped.

At dinner, Patrick pointed out on the restaurant wall a photo taken a century ago of a couple of anglers with droopy mustaches on a dock with big tackle and several of those same-sized bluefin tuna—now stiffened gray corpses stacked like planks for display to the camera.

What I'd experienced was these fish's prior state—wild, gorgeous, frightening beyond imagination, manifestations of the glory of God.



# Atlantic Salmon Angling in Connecticut

Warren R. Stern

*Many of our readers may be surprised to learn that fly rodders can pursue Atlantic salmon in Connecticut, only an hour or two drive from New York City. We can think of no one who knows that fishery better than Ben Bilello, an expert angler, guide, two-handed fly-rod caster, and fly tier. TGF Board member Warren Stern recently spent some time with Ben to learn more about this unusual fishery.*

**Warren:** Before turning to Atlantic salmon, let's talk about you. Where do you come from, where do you live now, and what were the important stops in between?

**Ben:** I am from Narragansett, Rhode Island. After graduating from high school, I attended the Hartt School of Music in West Hartford, Connecticut. When I finished college, I decided to stay in Connecticut. I met my wife, Lauren, in 2001. We have one son and live in Durham, Connecticut.

**Warren:** When you're not fishing or tying flies, what do you do?

**Ben:** I am a professional jazz drummer, which means I'm not a good early morning fishing partner! I am home during the daytime with my two-year-old son, Michael. As soon as my wife (or babysitter) arrives, I am usually out the door and on my way to teach or to play at a club, concert hall, or recording studio. It is a lot of late nights and early mornings, but we make it work.

**Warren:** Do music and fishing have anything in common?

**Ben:** Probably, but I think it's the same story with many pursuits. Both music and fishing are best when practiced with a clear and open mind. When I set up my drums before a performance, I don't want any expectations I might have to get in the way of making music in the moment. At any given time, one of my colleagues might stop on a dime and change the direction of a song. I want to be ready for that moment, if and when it happens. It might not happen at all, but I need to assume that it will.

Fishing is similar in that respect. I always "play the odds" first, since proven techniques work for a reason. At some point, however, I might try something radically different. Sometimes, that can be the difference between catching something and catching nothing.

In both cases, confidence is the key to success. Confidence is a product of study, practice, and real-world experience.

**Warren:** OK, let's talk fishing. How did you start, and what brought you to Atlantic salmon fishing?

**Ben:** I have fished virtually all my life, except during college and a period after college when I was building my career as a musician. For my seventh birthday, my

grandfather gave me *The Freshwater Fisherman's Bible*, by Vlad Evanoff. I read it many times over. I still have it. Anyhow, I was always fascinated with the Atlantic salmon chapter. Compared with other types of fishing, it seemed so abstract and unusual. The Miramichi River, in New Brunswick, Canada, was mentioned in the salmon chapter. That name always stuck with me, though I never expected to go there.

I started fly fishing and tying (for trout and bass) at age thirteen and continued until leaving for college at eighteen. I returned to fly fishing and fly tying in my late twenties, mainly as a way to blow off steam. I had been playing with some very prickly musicians at the time. I was learning a lot, but taking a ton of flak in the process. Surfing was my preferred method of relaxing, but when my mother sold our house and left Narragansett, I was less inclined to make the trip. I started trout fishing again, and it was the perfect escape from a stressful work environment.

Around the time I began fly fishing again, I met a great jazz pianist who would become my favorite fishing partner. Doug Schlink has fished for Atlantic salmon just about everywhere they swim. After a year or two of trout fishing together, Doug invited me to join him on a fall salmon fishing trip to the Miramichi River. I was excited finally to travel to the place I had read about when I was seven years old. I had a blast. As soon as the trip was over, I was thinking about my next trip. As Doug likes to say jokingly after someone hooks his or her first Atlantic salmon, "Another life ruined. . . ."

**Warren:** Why have you focused on salmon? What is about that fishery that appeals to you?

**Ben:** Compared with many other types of angling, Atlantic salmon fishing can be very mysterious. Salmon leave their native rivers and head to sea. We don't see them for another one to four years. As far as I'm aware, there isn't even that much video footage of Atlantic salmon at sea, if any. Then, when they return to fresh water, they are caught with flies that look very little like anything that exists in nature.

We can go out and catch a bunch of salmon, but ultimately, all we can do is analyze trends and form hypotheses. We can't draw many concrete conclusions, because there is no way to prove why, for instance, an Atlantic salmon will take a Blue Charm, but will ignore a well-presented Silver Doctor. Or why a fish that is not eating will go out of its way to inhale a large dry fly. There are hundreds of years worth of theories, written in many books, but most will never be proven. As such, Atlantic salmon fishing becomes a very personal thing, based on each angler's unique experience.

Many people try it and discover that it is not for them. It's just too strange, unexplainable, and the brief, but *intense* moments of euphoria are not worth all the time spent casting. While guiding, I have seen successful trout anglers succumb to crippling self-doubt because they can't stop thinking about salmon being large trout instead of respecting them as an individual species.

The people who take to Atlantic salmon fishing can become addicts, often to the confusion of those who aren't salmon anglers. For those of us who are, the stories, the history, and the whole experience can be almost as good as the fishing itself. I've never lost sleep before a trout fishing trip, but I am already losing sleep thinking about my next salmon fishing trip, which is eight months away.

**Warren:** Are there any salmon anglers whom you regard as role models? Any authors?

**Ben:** I can learn something from virtually anyone. Any opportunity to talk salmon with another angler is a chance to learn something new. That said, I do have a couple mentors that I will mention here.

I've already said that Doug Schlink was my entrée into the world of Atlantic salmon fishing. Doug has extensive salmon fishing experience in both North America and Europe. When I have a question for Doug, I can expect an answer that is free

from regional biases. This means a lot to me, because I am not interested in limiting my knowledge to only what is practiced in one country, province, or river.

My other big mentor is the former proprietor of New Hartford, Connecticut's, Classic and Custom Fly Shop, Dave Goulet. Dave is a guy who is not afraid to think outside the box or to speak his mind, no matter how unpopular his opinion might be. Locally, he is known as one of the most knowledgeable trout fishermen on the Farmington River, but he knows at least as much about salmon fishing in Canada, and possibly more. When I had enough time between gigs, I would drive out of my way to spend time with Dave. I would pick his brain about salmon fishing, and he would pick my brain about playing music. Sometimes it felt like we were constantly trying to wrestle the topic of conversation away from one another.

I could name at least half a dozen others. Most are people I know fairly well. Some are fishing partners for whom I have the utmost respect.

As far as authors go, I have three favorite Atlantic salmon fishing and fly-tying books. In no particular order: *Atlantic Salmon Flies and Fishing*, by Joseph Bates, *Salmon Fishing: A Practical Guide*, by Hugh Falkus, and *Atlantic Salmon Magic*, by Topher Browne. Honorable mention goes to *Salmon Taking Times*, by R. V. Righyni, though I'm still trying to wrap my brain around much of what he has to say.

**Warren:** Where have you pursued that interest? What is your favorite destination?

**Ben:** I have fished for wild Atlantic salmon in the Canadian provinces of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Quebec. I have also fished for salmon on Russia's Kola Peninsula. I have fished for landlocked salmon in various New York and Vermont rivers. I fish for broodstock Atlantic salmon in Connecticut, which, fortunately, is a short drive from home. I don't have a favorite destination. I am happy to fish for salmon wherever they happen to be. Every river has its quirks, and I like learning about water that is new to me.

**Warren:** Any particular trips that stand out?

**Ben:** I took my dad to the Miramichi River a few years ago. He isn't much of a fly fisherman. Sometimes I'm not sure if he knows which end of the rod to hold, but he is a good sport and a funny companion. He is one of these guys that lady luck seems to have in her sights whenever he fishes. The year before our salmon trip, on his first day ever fly fishing, he landed a five-pound rainbow trout on a dry fly. At the Miramichi, he landed a six-pound grilse, which is a small adult salmon, on his first morning of Atlantic salmon fishing, which was only his second time fly fishing. I wasn't with him at the time, and I asked if he got a picture of it. He said, "No, the fish was marginal, at best." I cracked up and shook my head. He was waiting for his twenty-pounder, which never turned up. He may be lucky, but he's not that lucky.

**Warren:** Are there any places that are on your bucket list?

**Ben:** Norway's Alta River is on every Atlantic salmon angler's bucket list. It is the world's premier salmon river and has the world's largest Atlantic salmon stocks. Access is extremely limited, however, so I'm not counting on going anytime soon.

Realistically speaking, I would love to fish in Iceland someday. Long before I ever caught an Atlantic salmon, I wanted to travel to Iceland. It looks like such a beautiful and unique place.

I love catching fish on big, noisy surface flies such as Gurglers. I will fish a Gurgler for just about any species, including trout. Amazon basin peacock bass are on my bucket list for that reason. I have no experience with the species, but I have seen enough videos of violent peacock bass surface takes to know that I want to try it sometime in my life.

**Warren:** Let's talk about guiding. Where do you take your clients?

**Ben:** I take my clients to the lower Naugatuck River. It is a stretch that is fished between Naugatuck and Beacon Falls, Connecticut, though we occasionally travel outside of the broodstock salmon areas to find fish that have moved.

**Warren:** Is it seasonal?

**Ben:** Yes. It is mainly a fall fishery, but salmon can be caught in the winter and spring if the weather cooperates. My favorite time to fish it is between mid-October and mid-November.

**Warren:** Tell me a little more about the broodstock program. Who runs it, when did it begin, and how has it fared?

**Ben:** I believe the program started in the early 1990s. Until a couple years ago, the broodstock salmon were used primarily to produce eggs, fry, and parrs for stocking in Connecticut River tributaries. Salmon that were no longer needed for breeding were stocked into two rivers, the Naugatuck and the Shetucket, as well as several lakes and ponds. Restoring the Connecticut River salmon run never worked out, at least not in numbers great enough to continue the program. In 2011, Hurricane Irene damaged Vermont's White River National Fish Hatchery, the hatchery that was key in the effort to restore salmon to the Connecticut River. When the hatchery decided to stop producing salmon, Vermont, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire ended their efforts to restore Atlantic salmon to their respective Connecticut River tributaries.

In addition to using "federal salmon" grown at the White River Hatchery, Connecticut produced salmon at the Kensington Fish Hatchery. When the other states pulled out of the program, most people expected Connecticut to follow. Because the broodstock salmon fishing program was so popular, Connecticut decided to shift its focus from a restoration program to the "legacy program" that is currently in place. Now, salmon are still bred at the Kensington hatchery, but many fewer are stocked into Connecticut River tributaries. As part of the "Salmon in the Schools" program, kids raise salmon fry from fertilized eggs and stock them into various tributaries. The leftover broodstock salmon are still stocked every fall for anglers to pursue.

Before the switch to the legacy program, the average broodstock salmon caught was around eight pounds. Larger salmon were not uncommon, the largest being over thirty pounds. Now the salmon are stocked a year earlier and are a little smaller, around four to six pounds. There are still larger salmon stocked every year, but not as many as before. In my opinion, pound for pound, the four-to-six-pound fish fight harder than all but the largest males, so I am not disappointed by the switch to smaller salmon.

The program is very popular among both local and out-of-state anglers. For river fishing, there are three areas one can fish for broodstock Atlantic salmon: the upper Naugatuck River, the lower Naugatuck River, and the Shetucket River. The two areas on the Naugatuck serve the western part of the state, and the Shetucket serves the eastern part of the state. Each of the three broodstock salmon areas has its own unique characteristics.

**Warren:** Let's focus on the Naugatuck. What appeals to you about the river? Any special features?

**Ben:** The fact that I can fish for Atlantic salmon forty-five minutes from home is what appeals most to me, even if the fish aren't wild. The Naugatuck is a river that was used and abused for too long. It has its fair share of trash on the banks, but is infinitely better off than it was a generation ago. I talk to old-timers who say they weren't allowed to go anywhere near the river when they were kids. The water

used to be different colors, depending on which color textiles were being dyed that day. It's certainly not going to get "Wild and Scenic" status anytime soon, but wildlife is returning to the river and, at its core, it is a beautiful place. Most of my fishing takes place in urban areas, so access is fairly easy. There are even Metro-North stations adjacent to a short walk from some of the best pools.

**Warren:** How does it compare with your adventures in Canada or Russia?

**Ben:** It doesn't compete. Canada and Russia have it beat in every respect but two . . . proximity and cost.

I had fished for wild Atlantic salmon in Canada before I tried fishing for broodstock salmon in Connecticut. After I returned from my first Canada trip, I thought, "How can I possibly get better at this when I do it for only one or two weeks per year?" I decided to try fishing for broodstock salmon. It took me two or three seasons to find water that somewhat resembled what I fished in Canada. When I found it, I knew I was onto something.

Since then, I have been able to work on techniques and presentation for three or four months per year. Since most of my fishing trips for wild salmon are now unguided, I have to know what I am doing to make it worth going. After several years of broodstock salmon fishing, with trips for wild salmon in between, I was able to build enough confidence and experience to travel to new rivers, deduce where the salmon should be, and catch them.

I'm addicted to a "sport of kings," but I'm living on a musician's budget. I had to find a way to make it work without my wife killing me. The Naugatuck River broodstock salmon fishery allowed me to hone my skills for only the cost of a Connecticut fishing license. When I embark on a new salmon fishing adventure, I feel confident in my abilities and judgment, even when fishing all alone.

**Warren:** Are most of your clients experienced salmon anglers?

**Ben:** No, most of my clients fish with me because they are interested in learning about techniques specific to Atlantic salmon fishing. Some of them go on to book trips to Canada or Europe and apply there what they have learned and practiced here.

A small percentage of my clients have had prior salmon fishing experience. In those cases, I do not have to explain the routine. On a recent group outing, the only one of three anglers with prior salmon fishing experience was the only one who didn't hook up. I was apologetic, but he stopped me and said, "Don't worry. This isn't the first time I've played this game!" Prior salmon fishing experience makes my job easier, but honestly, I'd rather teach those who are new to it. The more salmon anglers there are, the more advocates there will be for the species.

**Warren:** I know you use the two-handed rod quite effectively. When did you start, and why do you use it?

**Ben:** I started fishing with two-handed rods in the spring of 2010. I got really lucky and found a decent 13-foot rod for only \$20. I took a lesson that spring, but didn't use the rod until that fall, when the river was high enough to make a two-handed rod a viable option.

In my opinion, the best reason to use a two-handed rod is the ability to cast with minimal wading and/or back-cast room. I have seen many fish caught that would have been very difficult to reach with a single-handed rod, mainly due to limited back-cast room. There are a few pools on the Naugatuck that I won't bring a client to if he or she can't use a two-handed rod or at least throw some basic single-handed Spey casts.

Also, when it is necessary to fish deep, I find it easier to use sinking or sink-tip lines with a two-handed rod. The long rod pulls the head out of the water easier

when preparing to make the next cast. And since Spey lines are thicker and heavier than comparable single-handed lines, it can be easier to throw large and/or heavy flies with a two-handed rod.

**Warren:** Are there particular methods that work best for you?

**Ben:** On the lower Naugatuck River, I like to use two-handed rods on the smaller end of the spectrum. I prefer switch rods or short Spey rods between 11 and 12 feet long, rated for 6-weight or 7-weight Spey lines. When I need to cover a lot of water, I use a longer rod, but never anything longer than 13 feet.

For beginners, outfitting a two-handed rod can be tricky. There are many different types of lines and heads, and it is easy to pick one that is not appropriate for the necessary application. Traditional Spey casting uses long-bellied lines. The benefit is the ability to throw long casts without having to shoot much, if any, running line. Traditional Spey casting requires enough room behind the angler to handle long lengths of fly line. Plus, these type of lines work better with long rods (13 feet and longer). Because of this, the angler must leave ample room behind him or her to accommodate the long rod and the long length of fly line used to make the Spey cast. Aside from perhaps the Connecticut River, our local rivers are too narrow to get the most out of traditional Spey-casting techniques.

For our purposes, a shooting-head system is more valuable to us in this fishery. There are two types of shooting-head systems we can use, Skagit and Scandinavian (often referred to simply as "Scandi"). Both require far less room to maneuver than traditional Spey casting. Scandi, in particular, uses very little room, which is helpful when fishing near tree-lined banks.

A Skagit setup shines when fishing large, heavy flies. It is ideal for steelheading, but we typically fish smaller flies, higher in the water column, for Atlantic salmon. As such, I prefer to use Scandinavian-style heads and long leaders. With the Scandi system, back-cast room can be minimal to nonexistent, and the long leaders make for a delicate presentation.

**Warren:** How should someone go about learning these methods?

**Ben:** By all means, take a lesson with a qualified casting instructor before buying any gear. The two-handed game can be a money pit until one learns exactly what he or she needs to do a particular job.

After learning the basics, it is important to practice. By "practice," I don't mean practice while fishing. Casting practice should happen independent of fishing. Some two-handed techniques can be practiced on grass, but most require moving water. A good time to practice is during the dog days of summer, when fishing is best at sunrise and sunset. Fish early, practice casting in the middle of the day, then fish again at the end of the day.

When learning to use a two-handed rod, it is important to be able to fish with either hand on top. For right-handers, this means learning how to cast with the left hand above the right. It is awkward at first, but much less awkward than learning to cast a single-handed rod with the weak hand. The lower Naugatuck River is an equal spilt of left-bank and right-bank pools and runs. Especially on windy days, it is important to be able to have a cast that will work in any situation or location.

**Warren:** Is it necessary to use the two-handed rod? Are there any drawbacks to using a two-handed rod?

**Ben:** It is not necessary to use a two-handed rod, though it can be a big asset at times. During periods of high water, anglers get pushed back into the trees. Without a two-handed rod, the best lies cannot be covered easily. Also, two-handed rods are easier to use when flies must be fished deep.

That said, some anglers misuse two-handed rods, fishing them when they are not necessary. When the water is very low, as it has been most of the past three autumns, a single-handed rod is a better, more efficient option. It is easier to strip flies and to manipulate line with a single-handed rod. Because it is more accurate than a two-handed rod, dry-fly fishing is much easier with a single-handed rod. Also, it is much easier to land a fish with a single-handed rod than with a long switch or Spey rod, whose extended length make landing salmon a challenge in some pools.

I don't prefer one type of rod to the other. In a perfect season, I will use both single-handed and two-handed rods as the conditions and fishing tactics dictate. Sometimes I bring one of each with me, if I think the conditions may be right for either. Some spots fish better with a two-handed rod. In spots with ample back-cast room, a single-hander is fine. After awhile, an angler will learn when to use one or the other.

**Warren:** If you stick with the single-handed rod, what setup do you recommend?

**Ben:** My main single-handed rod is a 9-foot 7-weight. It does everything I need it to do. When smaller fish are around, a 6-weight is sufficient. An 8-weight is a good option on windy days or when throwing larger flies. Anything heavier than an 8-weight is overkill.

A 9-foot rod is fine, though 9.5-foot or 10-foot rods can make distance casting and line control easier. Any rod longer than 10 feet might as well be a two-handed rod.

**Warren:** Are there single-handed casting techniques that should be mastered?

**Ben:** Yes. An angler should be able to throw his or her line and leader and make it land as straight as possible. It is important that the fly swims from the moment it hits the water. A good double haul is an asset on windy days or when casting heavy tips or flies. The reach cast is handy for mending line in the air. Single-handed Spey casts can be used when fishing near tree-lined banks. If single-handed Spey casts are not possible, the angler should be able to cast across his or her body (aka "cackhanded").

Long casts aren't always necessary, but they don't hurt. I often see anglers who just can't reach the seam where a salmon might be holding. This is a low-numbers game, so every cast counts. Consistency is very important.

**Warren:** Are there any books or videos that you can recommend for learning these techniques?

**Ben:** My favorite videos are the Fly Fishing Academy DVD series, by Henrik Mortensen. Their titles make them sound like Spey-casting instructional videos, but that is not an accurate description. Mortensen's DVDs are a blend of casting instruction and fishing strategy. Some of the videos lean more heavily in one direction than the other. My favorites are *The Scandinavian Spey Cast* (volumes 1 and 2) and *Cracking the Code*. The latter is particularly helpful when it comes to salmon fishing strategy.

A good overview of the different styles of two-handed casting is the DVD *Spey to Z*, by Topher Browne, Greg Pearson, and Way Yin. Books can be useful, though I find it easier to learn from books once I understand the basics. My favorites are *Fly Casting Scandinavian Style*, by Henrik Mortensen, and *Spey Casting*, by Simon Gavesworth.

**Warren:** Let's wrap up with a few words about fly tying. How did your interest in that evolve?

**Ben:** I started tying shortly after I started fly fishing, at age thirteen. From early on, I tried to tie flies I wasn't technically ready for. I still have many of my early attempts, and I fish them every now and then.

After taking a break from fishing and tying, I went right back to biting off more than I could chew. I started tying full-dress classic salmon flies about six months after tying my first hairwing salmon flies. Since then, I've put in a lot of time and have improved a great deal. Some of my classic salmon flies can be seen in Michael Radencich's book *Classic Salmon Fly Patterns*, as well as in other publications.

More than any one style of fly, I like tying flies that are new to me. I like learning how flies were tied by their creators, then repeating the process until it becomes second nature, and then ultimately finding my own way to do it. I approach learning music in a similar fashion. Innovation doesn't happen in a vacuum, and I believe that intense study is the key to blazing our own paths as tiers.

**Warren:** What flies do you tie, and what methods do you use?

**Ben:** As far as Atlantic salmon flies go, I tie the entire gamut, from fully dressed, Victorian-era classics (which I fish), to modern hairwings and tube flies. I don't limit myself to flies used only in one river, province, or country. I routinely use flies from all Atlantic salmon nations, including the United States, Canada, Scotland, Ireland, Norway, Russia, Iceland, and so on.

**Warren:** What are your favorites for the Naugatuck?

**Ben:** I carry around a ton of flies, but I could probably manage with a handful of flies and tubes. The essential wet flies would be the Sugerman Shrimp, Same Thing Murray, Green Machine, and Ally's Shrimp. Also, I'd include a couple of small wet flies, such as the M1 Killer and the Almost. Every once in awhile, the opportunity to catch a salmon on a dry fly presents itself, so I always have a few Bombers with me.

Especially in the cooler months, I fish with a lot of tube flies. Tube flies are flies that are tied onto hollow plastic or metal tubes instead of hooks. The hook, which is not permanently attached to the fly, is added before the tube fly is fished. Tube flies have many benefits. Unlike a conventional fly, if a tube fly hook is damaged, it can be easily replaced. An angler can have hundreds of tube flies, but he or she needs only a handful of hooks. The hooks are short-shanked, and they detach from the tube when a fish shakes its head. The tube fly slides up the leader and away from the fish's teeth. When I need to use a large fly, I most often choose a tube fly. My favorites for the Naugatuck are the Sunray Shadow, Snaelda, Willie Gunn, and Temple Dog.

If I had to pick just one, without a doubt, it would be the Mickey Finn. Year in and year out, it is a top producer. Best of all, it's a fly that is easy to tie and readily available.

**Warren:** Some of the patterns you mentioned may be unfamiliar to our readers. Where can they find the recipes?

**Ben:** A Google or YouTube search can bring up the recipes for most of these flies. A good resource for a variety of salmon flies and tube flies is Topher Browne's book *100 Best Flies for Atlantic Salmon*, though that doesn't have all the flies I listed above. There are other good recipe books, though most do not provide tying instruction.

I wrote an ebook called *Flies for Connecticut Atlantic Salmon: How to Tie and Fish Them* that provides recipes for all of my favorites and step-by-step instructions on how to tie over a dozen styles of wet flies, dry flies, and tube flies. The tube fly chapters are very helpful for those who have yet to delve into tying them, including where to find the necessary materials and tools. The book features flies I use on Atlantic salmon rivers in North America and Europe, not just on the Naugatuck and

Shetucket Rivers. Also, for tiers and nontiers alike, there is a healthy dose of fishing strategy, plus fishing stories and an appendix with lots of useful information.

**Warren:** Thank you for taking time out to talk to us. How can our readers learn more about you?

**Ben:** My flies, book, and other fishing information can be found at [www.benbillello.com/salmonflies](http://www.benbillello.com/salmonflies). Also, I have a blog that I update as often as possible. It is a good place to find more specific information on fly tying, river conditions, product reviews, and so on. It can be found at [www.theleaper.blogspot.com](http://www.theleaper.blogspot.com).

For any music fans out there, you can check out my music and my performance calendar at [www.benbillello.com](http://www.benbillello.com).

