



Posted on Sat, Mar. 27, 2010

Trout guide finds success in out-of-the-way Ozarks streams

By BRENT FRAZEE
The Kansas City Star

ROLLA, Mo. | Norm Crisp was gathering more proof for his theory that trout don't live in ugly places.

On a brilliant spring morning, he was immersed in a world that not many Missouri fishermen have seen. He was wading in the cool waters of Little Piney Creek, one of the state's many hidden jewels that hold healthy populations of trout.

There were no elbow-to-elbow crowds of fishermen here. Crisp practically had the stream to himself. And that's what he found so appealing.

"Don't get me wrong, the trout parks are great," Crisp said as he used his fly rod to whip an offering into the head of a pool. "But I don't like fishing in a crowd."

"I'd much rather be out here on one of these wild streams, off by myself. They're intimate; they're not big, wide streams. And there's something special about that."

Crisp smiled and added, "I travel the world to go fly fishing. But when I get out here, it's like I'm home again."

Crisp, who runs the Stream Side Adventures guide service, has been fishing the small streams of Missouri for almost 30 years. He can relate fish stories about casts placed on blue-ribbon trout streams such as the Little Piney, Mill Creek, the North Fork of the White River and Crane Creek, among others.

No, those small creeks aren't as well-known as Missouri's four trout parks — Bennett Spring, Roaring River, Montauk and Maramec Spring. But for Crisp, they are like home.

"I grew up fishing a mountain stream in New Hampshire," said Crisp, 63, who lives in Prairie Village. "I would come home from school and go fishing for brook trout. I'd just dig up some worms for bait and head to the stream."

"Back then, we needed those fish to eat. We'd eat trout three to four times a week."

Crisp ran into an old-timer on the stream who was fly fishing, and he showed Crisp his fly box. Crisp was fascinated and began trying it.

Many years later, fly fishing has become Crisp's passion. He has taken clients to New Zealand, Chile, the Czech Republic, Scotland, Italy, France and Denmark in search of trout. But he is just as fascinated by Missouri's hidden trout streams: the ones that don't attract a lot of attention but still produce good fishing.

"The thing I love about the Little Piney is that we're fishing for wild trout," he said, referring to the stream southwest of Rolla. "When you fish here, you're catching trout that have been here for a long time."

Moments later, Crisp was trying to catch one of those wild trout.

Wading into a rushing riffle that sparkled in the sunlight, he cast an olive-colored mohair leech fly into a pool at the edge of the current. He followed his bright orange strike indicator downstream until it suddenly went under.

Crisp set the hook and immediately felt the pulsating fight of a powerful rainbow. The fish dug hard, then shot to the surface and made an acrobatic leap. But in seconds, Crisp had the 13-inch trout in a landing net and was unhooking it.

Pausing to admire his catch, he said, "Look at how brilliant that fish's colors are. These wild trout are beautiful."

With that, he eased the trout back into the water and started casting for more.

And there were plenty more. Fishing places where riffles spilled fresh water and food into the upper end of pools, he and I caught 21 trout, including five that were 12 inches or longer.

We used a two-man kayak to paddle through the deeper pools, then got out on gravel bars and waded into the riffles to cast to the current edges.

"These trout like to hang out right at the edge of the current and wait for food to drift by," Crisp said. "An eddy or a little pool right off a riffle can be a good place to look."

The 4 1/2-mile stretch that Crisp and I floated — from Highway 63 to Vida Slab — is a good place to find those spots.

That float features a series of riffles and pools, creating plenty of trout habitat. Plus, it offers stunning scenery — the rugged hillsides, bluffs and clear water that are an Ozarks trademark.

“From Rolla, you’re close to a lot of good trout fishing,” Crisp said. “Mill Creek is just one ridge over, and Roubidoux Creek and Spring Creek aren’t far away.

“They’re little, out-of-the-way trout streams, so they have very restrictive regulations to protect the fisheries. But that’s part of what makes them so good.

“I’ve fished a lot of these streams for 30 years, but I think the fishing now is better than ever, thanks mainly to the management (by the Missouri Department of Conservation).”

Beyond the trout parks

•**WHAT:** That’s the title of one of the talks Norm Crisp, owner of Stream Side Adventures guide service, gives to various groups. He draws awareness to the fact that Missouri has more to offer trout fishermen than the well-stocked and heavily attended trout parks.

•**WHERE:** Missouri has nine streams — Little Piney, Mill, Barren Fork, Blue Springs, Crane and Spring creeks and the Current, Eleven Point and North Fork of the White rivers — that the Department of Conservation has designated as blue ribbon trout streams.

•**POPULATIONS:** The small streams are not stocked; they have populations of wild, self-sustaining trout. The Current, Eleven Point and North Fork of the White are stocked periodically.

•**RESTRICTIONS:** Only lures and flies may be used in the blue ribbon streams. Natural, soft-plastic and scented baits are prohibited. Also, the daily limit is one trout 18 inches or longer.

•**FLIES:** The olive mohair leech is Crisp’s “go-to” fly. It will catch trout on most of the small Ozarks trout streams. He also uses elk-hair caddis flies and a nymph made of a combination of deer and rabbit fur. And on some streams, he has found success with a Clouser minnow fly.

•**MORE INFORMATION:** Call Crisp at 913-645-1994.

To reach Brent Frazee, *The Star’s* outdoors editor, call 816-234-4319 or send e-mail to bfrazee@kcstar.com

© 2010 Kansas City Star and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved. <http://www.kansascity.com>