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# WILDLIFE

IN NORTH CAROLINA





**I**n the pursuit of great fly-fishing waters, I have traveled from Alaska to Mexico, all the while dreaming of landing the perfect fish in the perfect location. Little did I realize that perfection could be found much closer to home, right in the temperate rain forests of the North Carolina mountains.

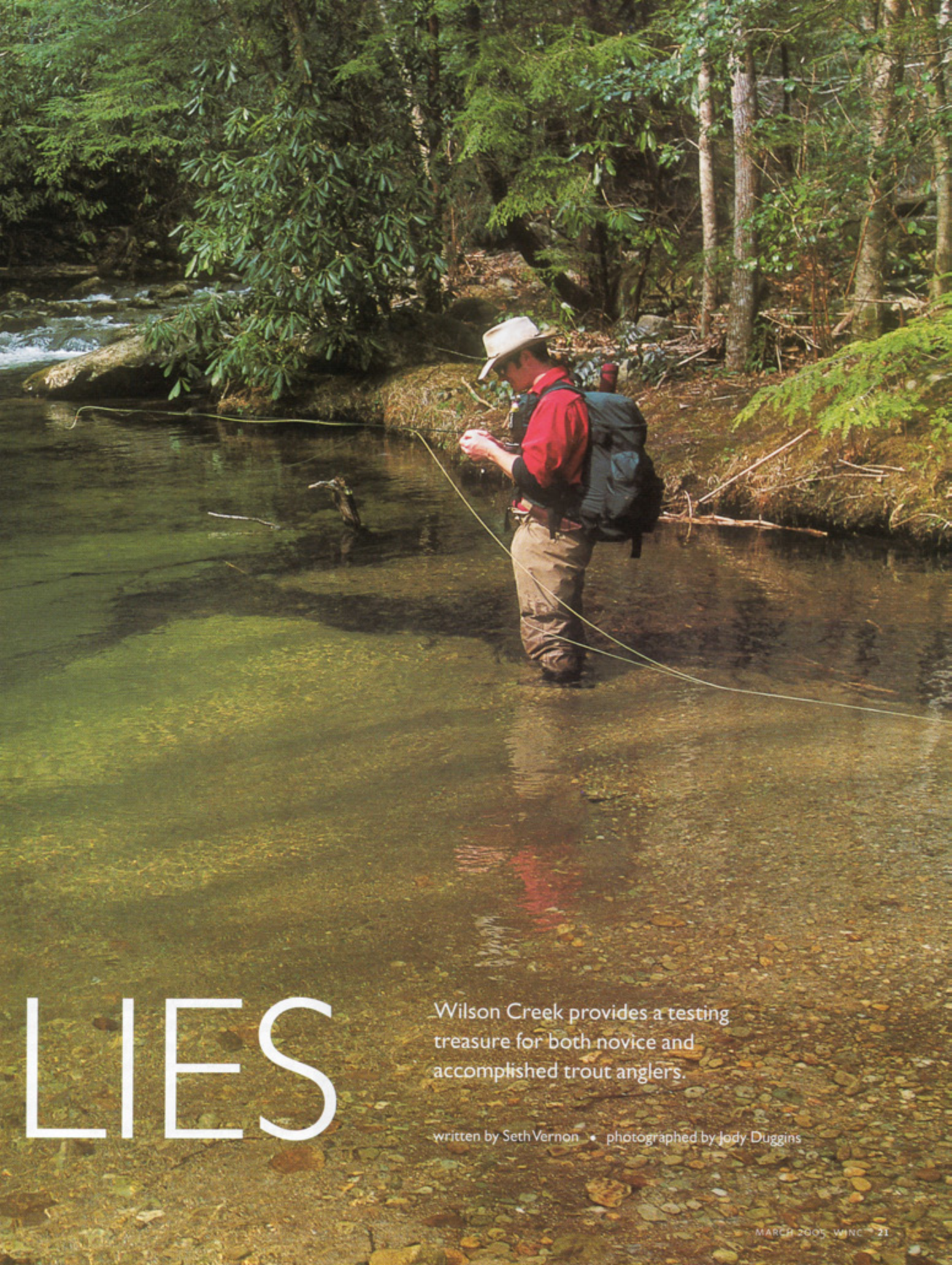
Wilson Creek is an approximately 20-mile-long stretch of freestone stream located in Pisgah National Forest in Avery County. If you have ever dreamed about gin-clear waters and 50-fish days, when brown trout eagerly attack a well-placed Royal Trude, then you will find heaven in this piece of wild trout water. The headwaters of Wilson Creek begin on the backside of Grandfather Mountain, just 100 yards above where the stream intersects the Blue Ridge Parkway. At this point, the creek trickles from a spring in the granite bedrock. As the stream grows, it cascades down the eastern side of the Blue Ridge Mountains, gaining volume and force until it joins the Johns River in Caldwell County.

The section of creek that I prefer to fish is located between Forest Road 192 and the White Rocks access trail off Edgemont Road and is part of the Pisgah Game Land. What makes this section so appealing is that there are no other points for 6 miles at which another human can publicly access the river. Here the stream is accessible only by foot and lends itself to a genuine wilderness experience. The trail that parallels the stream is mostly unmarked and nearly devoid of human traces. At times, I have felt more secluded in this wilderness than I ever did living in the wilds of Alaska on the Togiak River. Be sure to carry necessary survival gear, including a map and compass, when exploring this area.

At least once a year, typically around my birthday, I try to spend some time hiking, fishing and exploring this wild area. In 2004 I was pleased when a good friend accepted the invitation to join me on my annual "souljourn." Having been accustomed to trekking here alone, I was excited about the opportunity to share some secrets about this water and have campfire conversations about the day's events.

Turning out of my place on Love Hollow Road and onto the gravel road early one spring morning, Jody and I spotted a dozen wild turkeys in the horse pasture that belongs to my neighbor. Three of the five gobblers were in full strut, their heads appearing white hot. The turkey closest to us fanned his tail, and we could hear the feathers pop tight like a snare drum. Feeling as though the stars had aligned in our favor, we eased off down the gravel road, leaving the turkeys to their pheromone-crazed displays in the crisp, cool air.

# PRIME



# LIES

Wilson Creek provides a testing treasure for both novice and accomplished trout anglers.

written by Seth Vernon • photographed by Jody Duggins



## Learning the water

My mind turned again to backcountry trout fishing. Five years ago when I first fished this area, I had very little understanding of its topography or the fishery. Since then, I have fished it through every seasonal shift, trying to gain insight into its cycle. From its boulder-strewn headwaters, broken by long silvery pools, to the beautiful wild trout that live there, Wilson Creek provides one stunning scene after another.



Red Humpy

It is in large part due to this creek that I truly learned how to fish and understand the reasons I love to fly-fish. On the occasions when I made a poor presentation with my fly or failed to sneak up to a pool, the fish scattered like a busted covey of quail. However, when I was patient and watched the water as it washed against and around the boulders, I could see that prime lie where a trout makes its home.

Typically the window to the world of these wild trout is the size of a teacup saucer and is separated from the fisherman by a flow of water that looks like a small-scale replica of Niagara Falls. My challenge is to deliver a fly into that window from 20 feet away without breaking the glassy film. Then I must manage my line so that it doesn't get caught by the stream flow, ripping my fly from its resting spot and spitting it out at my feet. When I have been able to execute this feat, the rewards have been trout on the rise.

Now I am visiting this creek to help a friend learn some lessons from this classroom—how to use the fly rod like a bow and arrow to shoot the fly into a tight pocket, or how to set a nymph afloat on a poplar leaf and sail it downstream with the current in order to drop the nymph into a deep pocket. At the other extreme, there are long pools where a good double-haul cast with soft presentation is the only means of enticing wary trout. When it all comes together and you rest that fish in your hand, there is no doubt that this is higher learning.



In addition to solitude and natural beauty, the rewards of fishing Wilson Creek include rainbow (inset), brown and native brook trout.

# Wilson Creek Fishery Undamaged by 2004 Flooding

Like many areas of western North Carolina, the entire run of Wilson Creek sustained flood damage from last year's hurricanes, with the lower stretches of the creek in Caldwell County being the hardest hit. In the upper reaches of the stream, where the major pools tend to have bedrock bottoms, the damage was less severe. Still, visitors will find areas where hillsides have washed away, sometimes taking trails with them. Some boulders have been moved and some banks severely undercut.

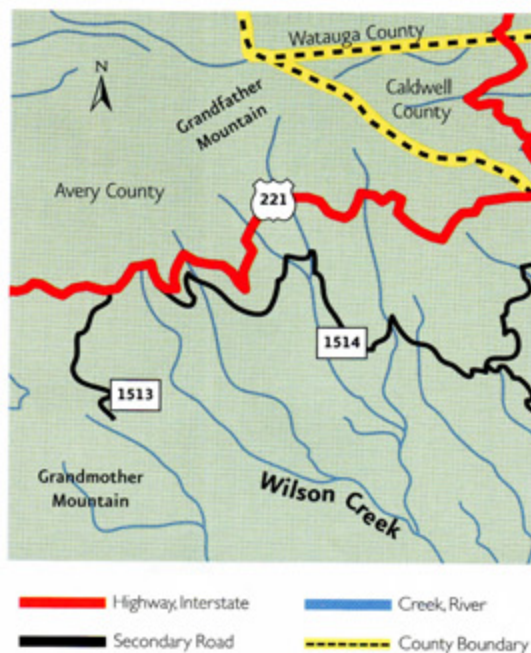
Win Taylor, a biologist with the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, said the floods apparently did not damage the Wilson Creek fishery. "We found good numbers of wild brown trout up there when we were collecting for our hatchery program," Taylor said. "That water also really cleaned up the headwaters, washed away all the sediment."

In addition to scouring the creek bed, the floods washed away many shrubs that grew alongside the creek, and that should make casting a bit easier in those areas.

This area of Wilson Creek is designated by the Wildlife Commission as catch-and-release only with a single-hook, artificial lure. The bulk of the trout—rainbows, browns and brook trout—will be in the 8- to 12-inch range.

If you decide to fish Wilson Creek in April, you will not need a huge selection of dry flies. In fact, an angler can do very nicely with only five types: Royal Trude, Stimulators in orange and yellow, Red Humpy, Yellow Sally and Blue Wing Olive. In May, add some Sulphurs to the mix.

—Jim Wilson



We set out hiking the Wilson Creek trail to fish a 6-mile section of wild trout water cut off from access between our starting point and our destination at its headwaters. A deep laurel and rhododendron forest surrounded by tulip poplar, white oak, dogwood and hemlock insulates us from any noise other than the sounds of water and wind. The forest floor is littered with trilliums, mushrooms and winter's fallen leaves, making our tracks all but invisible. Our course is entirely uphill, and most of the walking is done in the water.

Wilson Creek is noted for its steep gradient, which contributes to the abundance of stone flies visible here, and for dense forest slopes, making it one of the most scenic mountain streams I have fished in North Carolina. Nothing makes the severity of this hike more evident than the rapid 45-minute serpentine descent on the loose gravel of Edgemont Road from the backside of Grandfather Mountain.

## Hard walk yields rewards

Hiking into Wilson Creek is not for everyone—keep in mind that this is bear country. Most of the trail is overgrown with mountain laurel and impenetrable rhododendron thickets averaging 6 feet in height. I tend to come out on the other side bloodied with minor scrapes and scratches from tumbling through the woods.

The day we set out is warm for spring, and the current is cold and strong from recent rains. The day unfolds perfectly, with plenty of rising trout and a steady hatch of mahogany duns, most of which I found clinging to the undersides of streamside vegetation.

I fish the entire day without changing my fly and land 12 fish before late afternoon. Seeing those trout materialize from a riffle or pool, so poised and intent on eating that fly, I have all I need to be satisfied. Jody also catches some beautiful fish, both rainbows



Blue Wing Olive

and browns, on a Royal Wulff. It is a real thrill to see the first trout of the day dart out from an undercut bank to grab his dry fly. Tomorrow I hope to take us high enough into the watershed to begin catching some native brookies, a species that has thrived in these waters since the last ice age.

The ruins of a century-old homestead provide our resting place for the night. The solitary remaining fireplace and old-growth hemlocks throw shadows in the firelight, and it does not take much imagination to drift back several hundred years in time. Falling asleep next to gurgling waters, I lapse into fitful dreams of large brown trout feeding on mayflies.

The next day, we are near the headwaters, and the stone flies begin to hatch. We watch as the males, most of them golden or black, make their way onto the tops of boulders, each hoping to entice a winged female to come down like a good angel and be his bride and continue the life cycle.

I reach into the dusty leaflets of my dry fly box and resurrect from its dark coffin an old No. 16 Yellow Sally I haven't used since last spring. With one nervous, fumbling hand I tie a clumsy knot to hold the con artist should she become the link between me and a fish. After identifying my target, I cast as precisely as I can and, with one pause, let the little blonde fall gently to the water's surface to be judged by a wary trout.

This time I'm fortunate, and almost as soon as the fly lands, it is attacked with a voracious surface strike. The rod bends hard, and I feel the trout's every head-shake and run. Finally exhausted by the fight, the trout resigns to be cradled in my hand. As I remove the fly and return the fish to the currents, everything is in balance, and the world holds still.

The day ends as well as it began. Jody and I have caught some excellent trout and acquired some new skills for reading this creek. Before the sun sets behind the peaks on the west rim of the gorge, we are quietly making the final hike up to the fire road. We unload our packs and rods into his truck, happy to have the extra weight discarded for now, and talk for a while about the last fish or our favorite pool. As Jody turns the truck onto the fire road to head for home, I look back, needing to catch one last glimpse of Wilson Creek fading into the dusty light. ☺

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