



A river so fly-fisher friendly that trout almost smile

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LINCOLN -- "In our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly-fishing."



Journal photo / Steve Szydlowski

David Porreca, of West Greenwich, casts a line in the Blackstone River. He recommends two fly-fishing sites in Lincoln that are ideal in the spring and fall when the water is cool.

So begins Norman Maclean's bestselling book, *A River Runs Through It*. But those words could easily have been written by West Greenwich resident David Porreca.

On a recent weeknight, Porreca, 38, pulled on his Gore-Tex chest waders and a baseball cap, grabbed his fishing rod, and headed down the Blackstone bike path. His spiked shoes crunched like he was walking on breakfast cereal.

And let's not forget his vest. It held enough equipment to supply a fisherman in the field for a month: scissors, thermometers, monofilament, a net, a Teflon drying rack for flies.

Then there were, of course, the flies themselves. Five thousand of them, made of beads and feathers and elk hair and rabbit fur, stored neatly in little boxes like rows of earrings.

Porreca knows the Latin names of the insects those flies are meant to imitate. He knows which part of the insects' life cycle they represent; he knows exactly which fish like to eat them, where, and at what times. He guides trips for novices about 10 times a year.

"This is beyond an obsession for me," he said. "My wife thinks I'm nuts."

Porreca cuts down a dirt slope that leads to the Blackstone River. He pulls a thermometer out of his vest, sticks it in the water, and waits.

"Eighty-one degrees," he announces. That's not good. Trout -- Porreca's game -- prefer cooler temperatures, from 55 to 65 degrees. There are trout to be caught here, lurking in deeper pools, but forcing them to fight in such warm water can dangerously stress their bodies.

Porreca wades about 40 feet out, into the faster, more oxygenated water rushing from the nearby Ashton Dam. He fits his line with a tiny wet fly that's meant to sink down in the water. Maybe that will attract the trout hanging low in cooler areas.

He casts his line back and forth -- fwip fwip fwip fwip -- and places it gently on the surface. Porreca leans forward from the waist (he looks like an alert hound dog) and brings in the line in short jerks, so the fly resembles a swimming bug.

Somehow -- in no small part because of writers like Maclean and David James Duncan, who penned the novel *The River Why* -- fly-fishing has become known as a kind of spiritual sport, a form of manly meditation that's part art, part science. When you speak with Porreca, it's not hard to see why.

There's all the natural science to learn: the ecology of the river and the life cycles of the animals and plants that live in it. There's the technique: trout are harder to fool than other fish. "When an insect lands on the water, it doesn't make a splash. Lots of times if you don't put a fly down in a way that looks exactly right, the trout will just lay down," Porreca said.

And there's the conservation aspect. Every time Porreca goes fishing, he writes down the temperature, the weather, the flies he used, the fish he caught. He's in a position to notice small changes caused by human actions.

You wouldn't necessarily think that someone like Porreca, who, like Maclean, describes the sport as a religion, would pick the Blackstone River. This is a place that wasn't too friendly to any form of life for more than a century.

But according to fly-fishers around the state, the Blackstone is now a great place to fish early and late in the season, when water temperatures are cooler. People used to fishing in big rivers out west especially enjoy this waterway, Porreca said.

"We've had experiences here in the spring and fall when everything's right. The trout are so happy, you can almost see the smile on their face," Porreca said.

Awareness of the river's recreation potential -- and the distance it has yet to go -- is growing. At least a dozen groups devoted to protecting the Blackstone River have sprung up in recent years. And local fishermen are opening a northern Rhode Island chapter of Trout Unlimited, a national organization that seeks to protect and restore freshwater fisheries.



Journal photo / Steve Szydowski

Fly-fisherman David Porreca holds a fishing lure that he made resembling a caddis fly.

The state Division of Fish and Wildlife stocks the river with rainbow and brown trout each spring, said John O'Brien, deputy chief of freshwater fisheries for the department. Even though development around the river -- burning-hot parking lots and a lack of shade trees -- increases water temperatures, the Blackstone's many dams create trout-friendly areas of fast-moving, oxygenated water, he said.

"There's sort of a mechanical injection of oxygen into the water, so even at warmer temperatures, trout that require higher levels of oxygen can sustain themselves in these areas," he said.

Not everyone agrees that the dams are a good thing. Lawson Cary, president of the Narragansett chapter of Trout Unlimited, said they create holding ponds where water heats up even further, making the river an uncomfortable place for game fish.

Porreca, a sales executive for a drapery-hardware business in Warwick, says he retreats to the cooler Wood River in Exeter when water temperatures here are high. But starting in late August, he's usually back on the Blackstone, casting his line and thinking about -- what?

"Absolutely nothing," he says, smiling.

On that recent trip to the river, Porreca's rod jerked high before he'd made his first cast in deep water. A wriggling little fish, attracted to the fly hanging limply from the rod, dangled at the end of the line. Porreca examined it for a half-second and quickly let it go.

"Sunfish," he said. "That's cheating."

How to get there

Trout, salmon, and char fishing is permitted on the Blackstone River until the last day of February next year. The season resumes on the second Saturday in April. Check the state Department of Environmental Management's Web page for specific regulations and catch limits: www.dem.ri.gov

The state Department of Health recommends that children and women who are nursing and pregnant avoid

eating fish caught in the state's freshwater fisheries. For everyone else, one meal of freshwater fish weekly is safe, according to a department spokeswoman.

David Porreca has picked out two spots on the Blackstone River, both in Lincoln, that are particularly good for trout fishing in the spring and fall:

The waters below the Ashton Dam. Take Route 146 north or south to the exit for Route 116. Turn left at the traffic light at the end of the ramp. Follow Route 116 to the second light and take a right and an immediate left onto Old River Road. Turn left onto Cullen Hill Road. Turn left onto Lower River Road. Follow Lower River Road to the end, turn right, and park underneath the Route 116 overpass.

The waters below the Albion Dam. Take Route 146 north or south to the exit for Route 116. Turn left at the traffic light at the end of the ramp. Follow Route 116 to the second light and turn left onto Old River Road. Drive past Kirkbrae Country Club and turn right on School Street. Go down a hill and through one stop sign. Park near the train tracks by the Albion Dam, using caution.

This week along the Blackstone

TOMORROW

7 to 9 p.m. Concert and Campfire Beneath the Stars. Bring lounge chairs and marshmallows for a campfire and performance by Radio Ranch, at West Hill Park, 518 East Hartford Ave., Uxbridge. For information, call the Army Corps of Engineers, (978) 318-8417

THURSDAY

6:30 p.m. Thursday Night Walkabouts. Park Rangers and volunteers of the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor explore Woonsocket, starting at the Woonsocket Falls on River Street. Call the Heritage Corridor at (401) 762-0440.

FRIDAY

1 to 2:30 p.m. Fridays Timeline Trekkers. Children ages 5 to 10 learn about local wildlife and history through stories, arts, crafts and exploration. Blackstone River & Canal Heritage State Park, River Bend Farm Visitor Center, 287 Oak St., Uxbridge, Mass. Call (508) 278-7604 to register.

7 to 9 p.m. Astronomy Night Hike. Bring a blanket, lie down and learn about the stars in the night sky. Fee is \$8 for nonmembers, \$6 for members. At the Broad Meadow Brook Wildlife Sanctuary, 414 Massasoit Ave., Worcester. Call (508) 753-6087 for information.

SATURDAY

11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Puerto Rican Festival. Events will include an 11 a.m. parade on Broad Street and the festival grounds at Jenks Park, next to City Hall on Broad Street, Central Falls.

1 to 5 p.m. Peach Party. Offerings will include homemade peach shortcake and locally grown native peaches. Keown Orchards, 9 McClellan Road, Sutton, Mass.

7 p.m. Free summer movie. The Star Wars spoof Spaceballs, directed by Mel Brooks and starring John Candy and Rick Moranis. At the Stadium Theater, at Monument Square, Woonsocket.

SUNDAY

1 p.m. and 3 p.m. British Tea Tour along the Blackstone River aboard British Canal Boat, leaving from Central Falls Landing, Broad Street at Madeira Avenue, Central Falls. All seats \$17.50. Reservations required. Call the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council, (401) 724-2200.

1 to 3 p.m. Free Sunday Concert Series. Jenks Park, Broad Street, Central Falls. (401) 727-7425.

1 to 4 p.m. Blackstone Valley Explorer Thundermist Tour. Cruise the river aboard 49-passenger tour boat. Public tours leaving from Thundermist Dam at Market Square, Woonsocket, to the Massachusetts line. Leaving at 1, 2, 3, 4 p.m. \$7/adults, \$6/seniors and children. Call (401) 724-2200.

3:30 to 5 p.m. Sunday Concerts on the Canal. Bring lawn chair or blanket. Picnic area with grills available. River Bend Farm Visitor Center, Blackstone River & Canal Heritage State Park, 287 Oak St., Uxbridge, Mass. (508) 278-7604.

5 to 6 p.m. Sunday Concerts on the Common. Slatersville Town Common, Route 102, North Smithfield. (401) 767-2200.

SOURCES: Blackstone Valley Tourism Council Web site www.tourblackstone.com and Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation, Division of State Parks and Recreation.

Keep up with the Summer on the Blackstone series, at:

<http://projo.com/blackstonesummer>

Online at: http://www.projo.com/news/content/projo_20050822_river22.8ae8063.html