

[ BY DAVE WHITLOCK ]

## Trout Profiles: Brook Trout *Salvelinus fontinalis*

THE DISTINCTIVELY MARKED AND spectacularly colored *Salvelinus fontinalis*, or brook trout, is actually not a true trout but a char. Brook trout most likely got their name from the tiny, ice-cold brooks they inhabit throughout most of their native range, from eastern Canada down through the eastern United States—from Maine to Georgia. I've caught them in creeks so tiny you'd hardly believe a trout could exist there, as well as in beaver ponds, larger streams and ponds, big rivers, southern tailwaters and huge northern lakes.

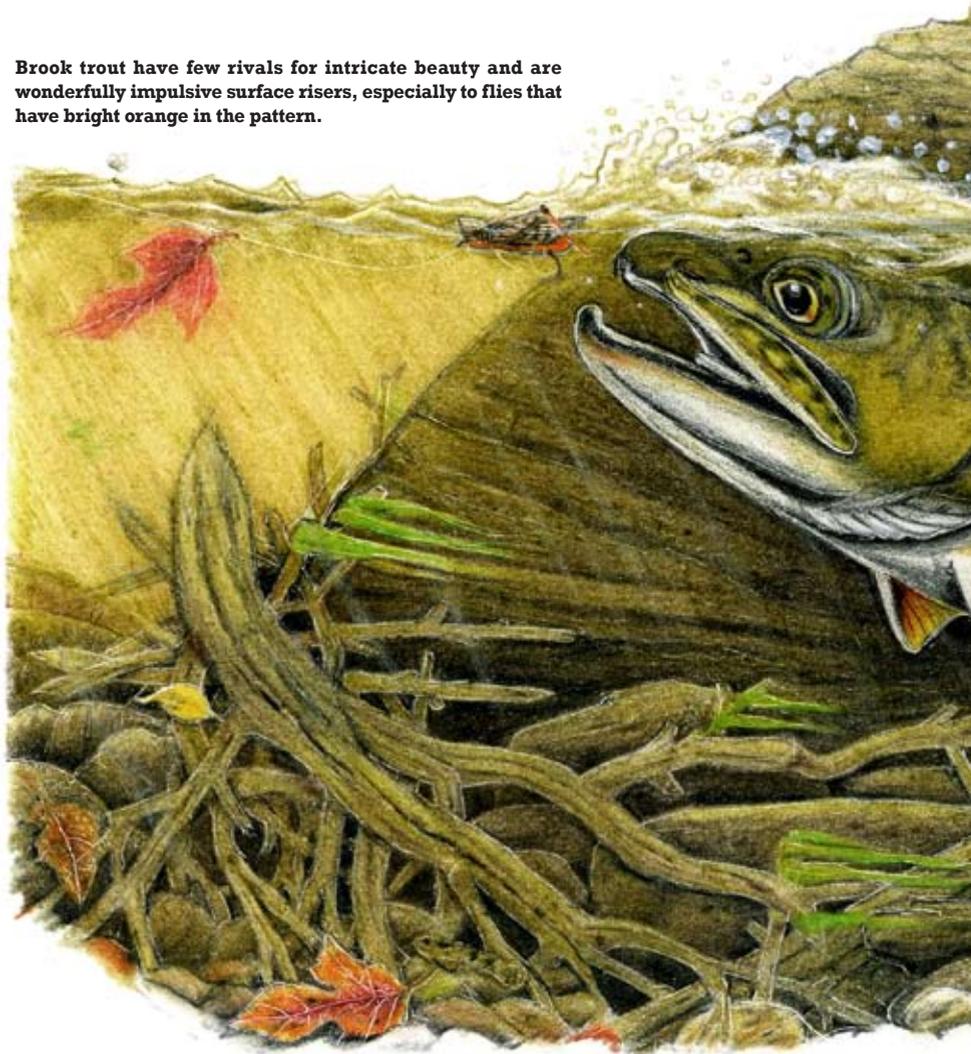
Brooks, being char, do not have black spots but instead lots of yellow or gold spots and numerous jewel-like crimson spots with pale blue or lavender halos that seem to stand out above their skin. Complex veinulations of gold and dark olive, worm-shaped camouflage markings cover their backs. From the side lateral line down to the under belly the colors gradually spill over from blue or purple to yellow, to orange, to black and then to white. If you look closely, you can see the shadows of parr marks beneath this complicated color pattern, especially in brooks under 3 years old. Iridescent white on the leading edges of the pectoral, pelvic and anal fins contrast sharply with the sooty black and orange or red splashed across the majority of the fin rays. Their scales are so small they seem to be almost invisible, but if the sunlight hits them just right they sparkle like tiny stars. To complete this carnival of unique coloration, the dorsal and caudal fins are marked with black stripes over a

background of golden olive to orange. In the fall, when brook trout are spawning, these colors become even more intense. The puzzle of this profusion of colors and markings is always a great challenge for fish artists and taxidermists to duplicate.

Wild brook trout have a char's personality, which means they tend to be

aggressive, predacious feeders. Brooks actively feed from the top to the bottom of the water column, and this vigorous feeding is often triggered by foods or flies that create some action, are of good size and have bright colors. In their natural range, typical brook trout waters, though transparent, are stained from tannin, peat and iron deposits to

**Brook trout have few rivals for intricate beauty and are wonderfully impulsive surface risers, especially to flies that have bright orange in the pattern.**





a golden, bourbon color. So it makes sense that big, bright and active foods are probably the easiest for wild brooks to detect and capture. Because of their eager feeding habits, some label brook trout as gullible. I see it as a product of their natural char character.

In my opinion, if there's one color to add to flies to almost ensure success in fishing for brook trout it would be fluorescent orange. They simply can't resist a dry fly, wet fly or streamer with a flash of bright orange. A red and white combo would be a second good fly or lure color choice.

Over a four year period in the 1980s, I had an opportunity to study

Roland Reid's Osprey Lake fishery in Labrador, Canada. The fish in Osprey Lake were of the same giant race of brooks you hear so much about on the Minipi River fishery. To help Roland better manage this unique trophy fishery, I spent three years tagging 100 brooks each year in order to trace and record their numbers, growth rate, movements and how often each fish was caught and released.

Most fish were caught in July and August and on large, colorful dry flies like the Royal Wulff. But often I'd get rises to my 1 inch section of fluorescent fly line that I used as a strike indicator on my leader butt. It

eventually became a real problem and I had to remove the indicator. In time I caught on and made a fluorescent orange, fly-line bodied caddis, sizes 6 and 8, and my "Osprey Caddis" became the perfect tool to catch the 100 brooks I had to tag.

In the 1980s I was also involved with the L.L.Bean fly-fishing schools, and one of the most popular brook trout flies for Maine and most other eastern brook trout waters was a Dave's Hopper tied with a fluorescent-orange body and orange kicker legs.

Some of the favorite foods of brook trout are earthworms, sculpins, aquatic insects, leeches, crayfish, minnows and



Dave Whitlock



mice, as well as other brook trout. While doing an advanced Atlantic salmon and brook trout school at Labrador's Eagle Lake, one of the lodge's native guides caught several 2 ½ to 3 pound brooks for our lunch. Some garish looking lumps distorted the stomach of one of the trout. These lumps turned out to be three moles! Where, how and why that trout caught moles is still an amazing mystery to me.

That reminds me of another brook experience on that same trip. I was trying to catch some of the huge pike we often saw stalking the brooks as we brought them in to tag. I was using an 8 inch, yellow and fluorescent-orange bucktail steamer. Unfortunately, I got hung up and had to break it off. Not long afterwards I saw my big streamer swim by me in the mouth of a 3 or 4 pound brookie. He was carrying it crosswise, like a dog carrying a bone!

Although occasional trophy-sized, 4- to 8-pound brook trout are taken

**Above: Brook trout become even more intensely marked and colored in the fall when they spawn. They are very adaptable to a variety of spawning areas, from still waters to tumbling brooks to boggy beaver ponds.**

**Right: This brook spawning pair scene was one of my very first attempts to capture these beautiful fish in the environment beneath the surface of a stream.**



in larger eastern U.S. waters, especially during evening Hex hatches or spring smelt runs, most native brooks are more likely to be 4 to 8 inches long and live in beaver ponds, spring-fed bogs and the tiniest of ice-cold streams. Here, one's day is a success if a 10 or 12 inch brook is taken on a fly.

These awesome little jewels, tucked away in the most remote mountain tributaries and living secretly just on the edge of existence, are special hid-

den treasures. Folks that use 7 foot, 3 weight rods and make short roll casts under thick rhododendron canopies have a real fly-fishing love affair with these wonderful wild trout.

A good friend in Georgia told me about a small population of tiny brook trout that live precariously, high up in the mountains, in the upper last several hundred yards of a tiny, low fertility stream that tumbles through his property. He said that once brookies were

very plentiful throughout the full 10 or 12 miles of the stream, but fishing pressure, as well as stocked brown and rainbow trout, consumed or displaced nearly every brook trout except for this handful of tiny, beautiful natives at the top of the stream, where few of the non-natives ventured.

This, unfortunately, has been a common occurrence in much of the brook trout's natural range, along with the negative impacts of acid rain and global climate change.

Brooks prefer water temperatures between 45 and 60 degrees Fahrenheit and seem equally comfortable in still, flowing and fast pocket waters and, amazingly, are able to spawn well in all of these locations. They like to hang close to shady water structures, much like browns do when lying low in bright light, and feed mainly during lower light hours. They can be spooked but can soon forget why and return to their feeding territory. They seldom jump when hooked, though they rise to the surface freely for floating and flying foods. In fact, I've had small ones catch my fly before it hit the water. They are strong and dogged fighters. By all means use a catch-and-release net on them as they have a mouth loaded with needle-sharp teeth and an extra-slick, smooth body that's almost impossible to hold on to when they are alive and wet.

My favorite brook trout flies are the black, yellow and orange marabou muddler; Osprey caddis; orange-bodied Dave's Hopper; paradun Hex; olive, black or brown marabou leech or woolly bugger; mouse rat; orange NearNuff Crayfish and damsel and dragon fly nymph.

I always jump at the chance to try for these beautiful, aggressive trout because they are always exciting to experience with my fly rod, my eyes and my paintbrush. 

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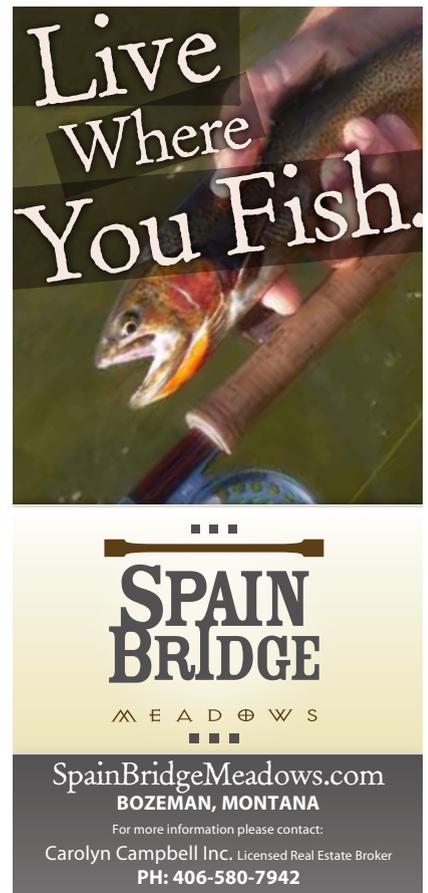
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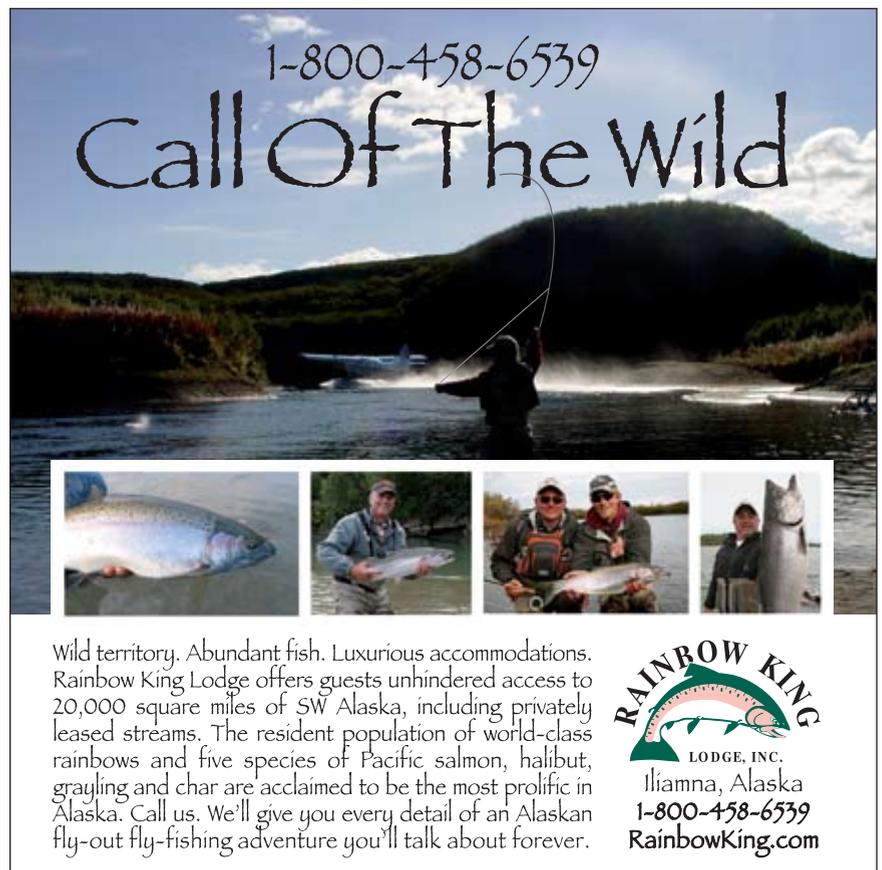


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