

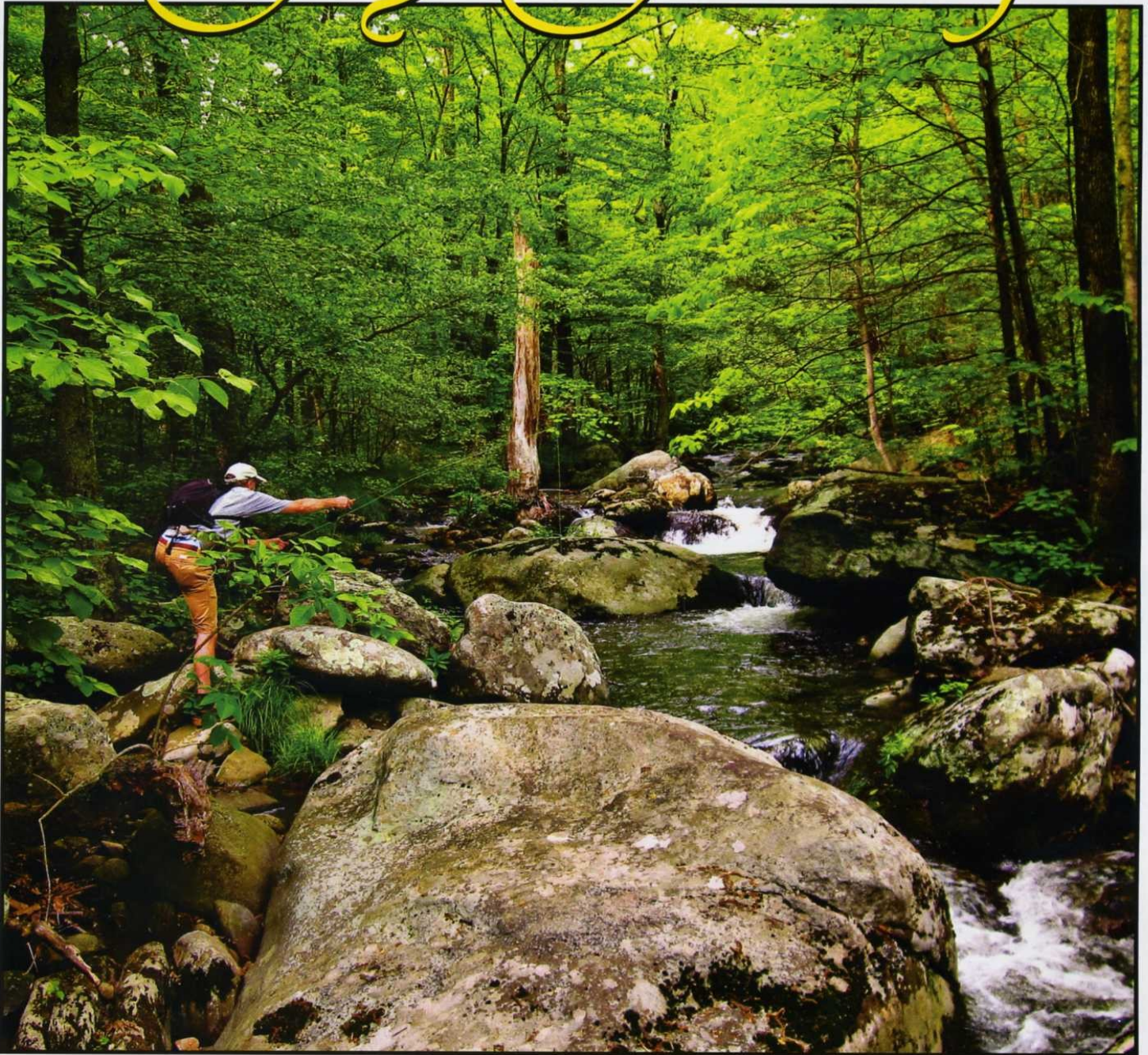
MIDWEST EDITION

EASTERN

Spring 2012

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Fly Fishing



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EASTERN Fly Fishing

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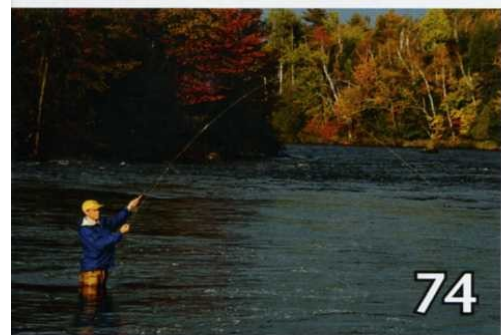
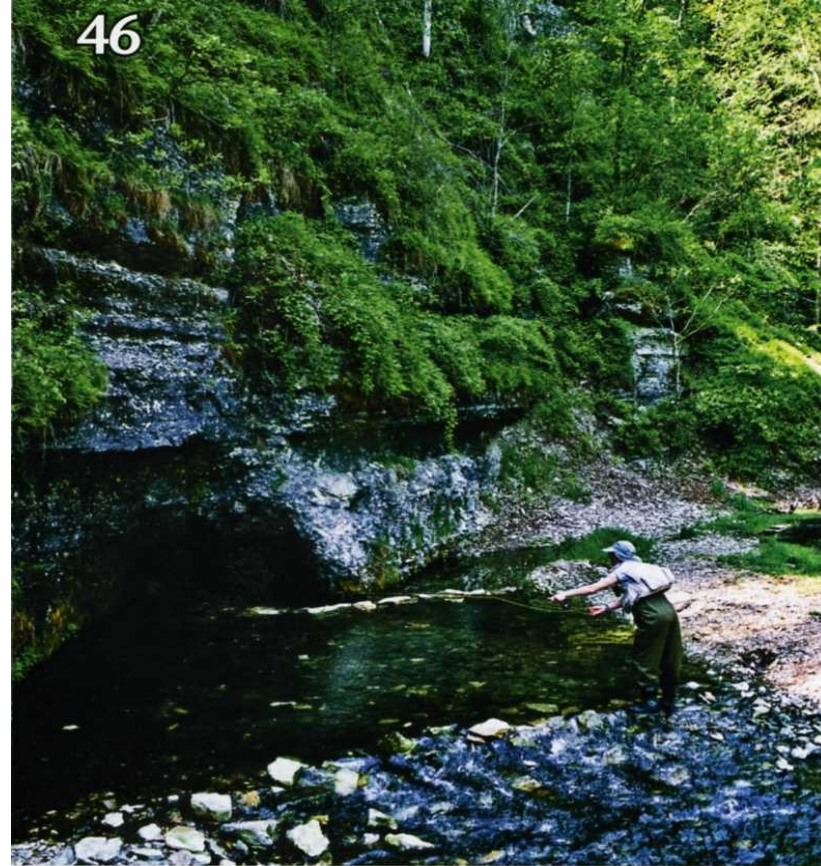
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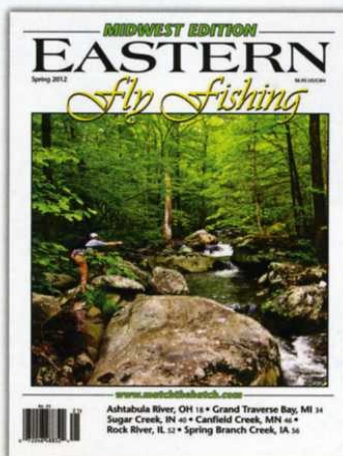
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Cover: An angler stalks wild brook trout in Shenandoah National Park. The vibrant early spring greenery and cold, crisp spring water characterize dozens of streams flowing out of the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia.

Photo by: Jim Rowinski



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ALL PHOTOS BY BRANDON BUTLER

Sugar Creek, IN Double-Dipping on Good Times

By Brandon Butler

Lichen-covered sandstone canyons, long stretches of windswept sandbars, old-growth hardwood forests, a multitude of covered bridges, and a dedication to smallmouth bass as strong as anywhere in the Midwest: Sugar Creek is undoubtedly Indiana's most enchanting water. Highly regarded throughout the state as the pinnacle of natural enjoyment, Sugar Creek is no secret.

Given the fact that the creek passes through two of Indiana's premier state parks, Turkey Run and Shades, and the plethora of pursuits undertaken along its course, Sugar Creek is a shared favorite of campers, paddlers, hikers, and anglers alike—though those of us who fish are by far the minority.

Sugar Creek is heavily used. There is no denying it. An hour from Indianapolis, and roughly three hours from Chicago and Saint Louis, Sugar Creek is an easy-access playground for millions of folks seeking a natural getaway. The amenities of the area, including campgrounds, canoe liveries, cabin rentals, and miles of easy to moderate hiking trails, make it an excellent destination for families.

So with such pressure on the water from sources other than fishing, how do anglers compete? It's easy. You fish at select times and places.

"We did a survey a couple of years back on what activities people were participating in on Sugar Creek. Over the course of a summer, we recorded contact with 3,400 anglers and 27,000 'others.' Most of the others were paddlers," says Rhett Wisener, Indiana District 4 fisheries biologist. "That said, even with those numbers, there is no way around it: Sugar Creek, if not *the* best, is one of the best fishing streams in Indiana."

Tim Holschlag intently watches a strike indicator as he drifts a fly along one of Sugar Creek's steep bluffs. The rock formations along the creek are spectacular (above). The author brings to net a healthy, plump, early-spring Sugar Creek bronzeback (right).

Running 90 miles from its origin in a farm field just outside Kempton, Indiana (a tiny dot on the map a dozen miles southwest of Kokomo), to its confluence with the mighty Wabash River 5 miles north of Montezuma, Sugar Creek does in fact offer anglers a chance to get away from the crowds. First of all, though floatable water really begins at the town of Darlington, most recreational paddling takes place between the parks—meaning more than 25 miles of navigable water are located above the most heavily canoed stretch. Second, the heavy paddling season is rather short, running from Memorial Day to Labor Day. Some of the best fishing occurs in the spring and fall before and after the recreational season. Third, the paddling crowd doesn't shove off until after 9 a.m. and is generally wrapped up by 5 p.m., so when the fishing is best, the creek is void of competition.

An Appreciation of Sugar Creek

Sugar Creek is only about 45 minutes south of Lafayette, Indiana. During my college years at Purdue University, the creek was my proverbial backyard, and became my most frequented fishing hole. Possibly some of you started fly fishing at an early age. I didn't. My formative years were spent mastering spinning and bait-casting outfits. Therefore, my early experiences on Sugar Creek consisted of running Rebel Craws along deep bluffs and zipping Rooster Tails through pools above and below riffles. Although I may not have been fly fishing, I enjoyed countless evenings fishing at dusk, establishing a passion for smallmouth bass. I had no idea at the time, but the knowledge I was banking away would become instrumental later in life when I would return to Sugar Creek as a fly angler.

After living in Montana and Colorado for a number of years, I moved back home to Indiana to begin raising a family. I was fearful my newfound fly-fishing passion would suffer. Fly fishing isn't so common throughout the heartland, yet I remembered having seen fly fishers on Sugar Creek during those many trips in college, and became excited to test the once familiar waters with a fly rod.

Driving through the entrance gate of Shades State Park on a hot, humid evening in June, I was swept by a rush of emotions. In only four short years, I had transformed from a careless, clueless, wide-eyed college kid to a married father of two trying to make ends meet. I popped the hatch of my Jeep and removed a Winston from its long, green tube. While lining the rod, I

reminded on past trips to the park: camping, laughing, dancing campfires, and swimming by moonlight. The path from the parking lot to the creek isn't long, maybe a quarter mile, but is incredibly scenic. The hardwoods have been protected for quite some time and resemble a forest untouched by the hands of man. Beaten paths lead up and down the creek. I turned and headed upstream. Below a shallow riffle running over a fine rock bottom, I waded out into the creek, stripped a good length of line from my reel, and began my cast. Fifty feet out, a deer-hair bass bug landed on the near side of a large eddy. Not halfway through the fly's glide down the stream, a smallmouth shattered the surface, disappearing with my bug stuck in his mouth. Guiding the 14-inch fish into my net, I smiled and thought to myself, "It's good to be home."

Tim Holschlag Visits Sugar Creek

That first night of wet-wading Sugar Creek with a fly rod sparked an angling passion like none I've known before. Bronzbacks have become my favorite fish. From the tiny limestone creeks of south-central Indiana to the vast reaches of northern Lake Michigan, on the fertile rivers of the Ozarks and through the shadows of the Shenandoah Valley, I have chased and caught smallmouth bass with a dedication often reserved for the most finicky of trout fishers.



As I have crisscrossed this country in pursuit of these hard-fighting footballs of a fish, I have kept Sugar Creek close to my heart. It truly is the crown jewel of my home state's smallmouth fisheries. Therefore, when I was charged with the task of planning and organizing a portion of the 2011 Hoosier Outdoor Writers (HOW) conference, I decided to host the event at Turkey Run State Park late in April and invite Tim Holschlag to serve as our keynote speaker. Holschlag is a professional smallmouth bass fisherman. I know that may sound like an oxymoron, but Holschlag truly makes his living fishing for and communicating about smallmouth bass. He is the author of the books *River Smallmouth Fishing* and *Smallmouth Fly Fishing*. He's published hundreds of magazine articles on the subject, has produced a DVD titled *Stream Smallmouth Fishing*, commercially ties smallmouth flies, hosts on-stream smallmouth fishing schools, and guides smallmouth fishing trips. If that doesn't qualify someone as a professional smallmouth fisherman, I don't know what could.

Holschlag graciously accepted my invitation to speak to the HOW conference. He had fished Sugar Creek before, and told me he looked forward to returning, further stating that the creek's combination of scenery and fishing had left an indelible mark on his memory. He arrived early and made himself comfortable amongst the group, answering question after question as to how smallmouth may be best plucked from the creek's waters. When giving his keynote address, he fully captured the attention of 50 or so outdoor journalists. All were aware of the smallmouth in Sugar Creek, but few understood just how great the fishery truly is.

"Sugar Creek, especially in the state parks, is one of the most scenic streams I know of, and the smallmouth fishing is right up there with the best I've encountered in the lower Midwest," Holschlag told the crowd. "It can be fished year-round, but the spring, during the pre-spawn,

maybe the best time to catch a fish of impressive size."

Sugar Creek is home to fish Holschlag considers of "impressive size." In 2007, the Indiana Department of Natural Resources (DNR) implemented a law limiting kept smallmouth bass to one fish per day, and that one fish must exceed 20 inches. Under such strict regulations, Sugar Creek has become an unofficial catch-and-release smallmouth water. Very few fish eaters are willing to spend

their time trying to catch one trophy-size bass for the frying pan, especially when Cecil M. Harden Lake (aka Raccoon Lake) and Lake Waveland, both of which are full of crappies, are only miles away. The only bass being kept these days are the occasional trophies for the wall and the unfortunate monster that might fall victim to a catfish angler.

Jeff Conrad, a fly-fishing guide on Sugar Creek, says, "Sugar is the best-protected smallmouth river in Indiana, partly due to the 'over-20' regulation and partly due to the relentless patrolling of the river by conservation officers Ron Johnson and Blaine Gillan, who patrol the river by kayak and respond quickly to any notification of poaching."

Wisener acknowledges the DNR trophy smallmouth regulations have made an impact, saying, "Catch-and-release has caught on and is now wide-

spread. We very rarely see, and almost never even hear of, someone keeping a smallmouth from Sugar Creek anymore."

During his presentation at the HOW meeting, Holschlag went into detail about catching smallmouth bass on Sugar Creek in the spring. "Smallmouth bass spawn in the spring when the water temperature approaches 60 degrees," he said. "During the few weeks before the spawn, when the water is hovering around 55 degrees, smallmouth will move into areas where they plan to build their nests. Look for slow, deep pools with hard bottoms. That's where the fish will be stacked up this time of the year."

Listening to a presentation from an authority on any



Noted author and all-around smallmouth guru Tim Holschlag admires a fine Sugar Creek smallie that fell victim to a Holschlag Hackle Fly.

subject is a nice way to learn, but actually taking part in an activity under the watchful eye of an expert is much better. I was fortunate to fish Sugar Creek with Holschlag the following day, from his custom-rigged, totally tricked-out canoe.

It was an overcast day, with intermittent spurts of drizzling rain. The air temperature was in the upper 40s, but the water was pushing 55 degrees. The smallmouth were in the pre-spawn stage, and Holschlag knew exactly how he wanted to target them. "Go ahead and take that off," he said, pointing at my Clouser Minnow. "Slow, slow, slow. That's how we have to fish them today. If we're going to catch fish under these conditions, we have to be on the bottom of the deepest holes to float a fly right in front of their faces."

With that, I was introduced to the Holschlag float-and-fly method.

In *Smallmouth Fly Fishing*, Holschlag describes the technique, saying, "Its essence is simply suspending a fly below a strike indicator buoyant enough to support the fly, and moving the fly extremely slow."

He rigged me up and we got to it. I laid out a cast next to a large boulder at the head of a long eddy and started to strip it back in.

"No, no, no," Holschlag said. "Just let it float. If you do any more than occasionally twitch the fly, you're going to pull it off the bottom, out of the strike zone."

Again from his book, "Precise depth control and the ability to work the fly extremely slowly are the key components of the float-and-fly concept. When the fish are suspended at specific depths, when they are sluggish and holding tight to the bottom or even when you want to fish subsurface in very shallow water, being able to keep your fly at an exact depth comes in mighty handy. This is possible with a fly suspended directly below a large indicator."

I'll admit, the float-and-fly method wasn't too exciting. It reminded me of jigging for walleye with my grandpa in Minnesota years ago. Sitting in the boat, raising and lowering my rod tip for hours, I wanted to crawl out of my skin. I prefer action, ripping streamers and hopping poppers, but you

can't argue with positive results. Holschlag caught fish during a time when most might not.

During our outing Holschlag pointed out spots along the creek that would be prime for targeting at different times of the year. He pointed out seams, boulders, back channels, and bluffs like a kid pointing out a wish list in a toy aisle: left side, right side, down a ways, behind us. In spending only a few hours with him, I was captivated as much by his passion for smallmouth and their waters as by his expertise.

Sugar Creek Sections

Above Darlington, Sugar Creek is considered a wading stream. This stretch holds plenty of smallmouth bass, but the water is fairly small and lacks the scenic appeal it gains downstream. Brent Wheat, an outdoor writer from Lebanon,

Indiana, swears by this section.

"I rarely fish below Darlington," he says. "Up here, I have the creek all to myself. The fish may not be as big on average, but there are plenty of them and I enjoy wading the shallow water."

Access is limited in this stretch, with no official DNR points. Knocking on doors, though, and politely asking for permission to access the creek for some catch-and-release fishing, will yield more positive results than you might expect.

Paddling water officially begins at the Darlington Covered Bridge Access, which is located at the west end of town. From here down to Crawfordsville, the creek begins to take shape. The average drop per mile is greatest in this section, so the water is generally faster than in any other stretch of the creek. On warm summer evenings, smallmouth stack up in the highly oxygenated riffles. Stripping a streamer through the fast water or twitching a popper across the eddies can result in quite a bit of action.

Crawfordsville is the gateway to Sugar Creek. A small city of about 15,000 residents, and home to

Wabash College, Crawfordsville offers most amenities. If you're heading to the creek from the north, Crawfordsville is your best bet for restaurants, groceries, gas, and other essentials. Sugar Creek skirts the north side of town. The best access point in town is at Elston Park on Lafayette

Blockhead Popper



Hook: Mustad 3366, size 4
Tail: Yellow marabou
Skirt: Red hackle
Body: Yellow hard foam
Eyes: White/black hollow plastic eyes

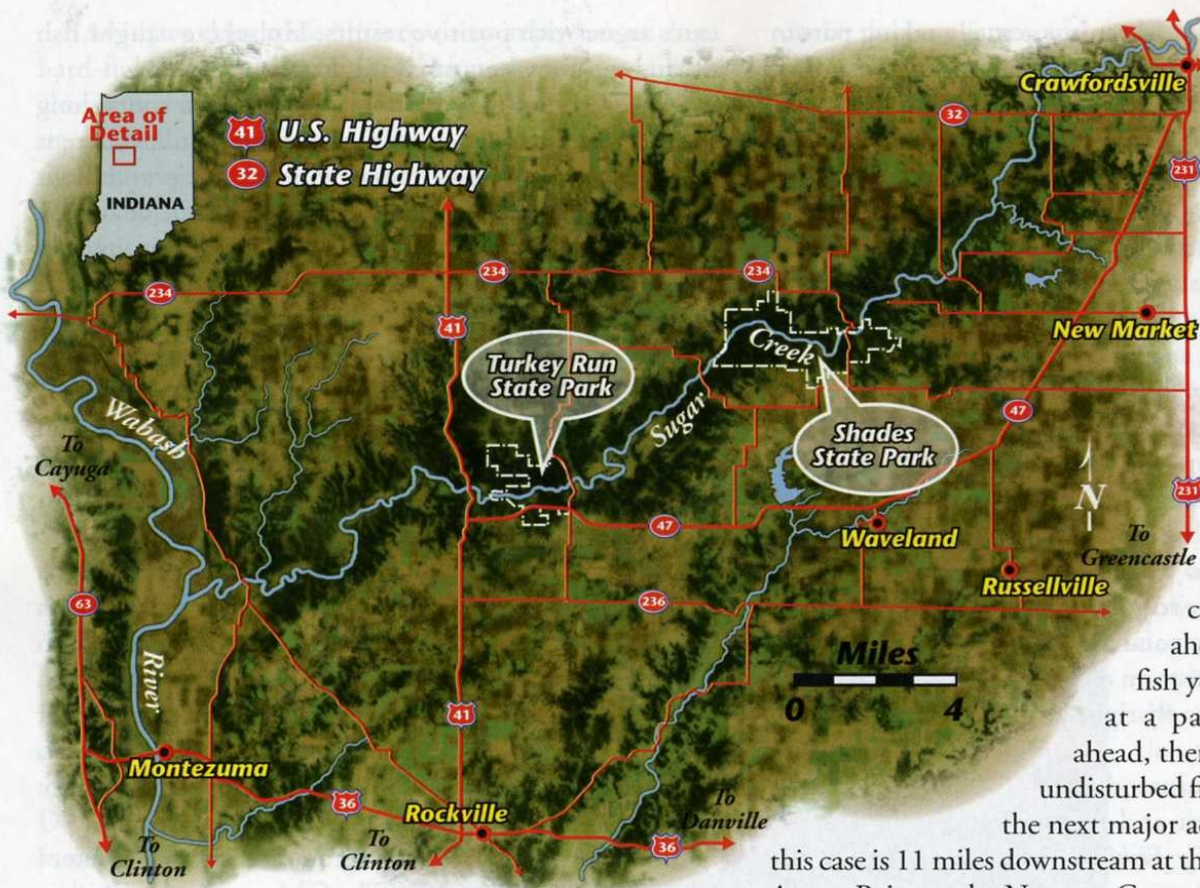
PHOTO BY EASTERN FLY FISHING

Holschlag Hackle Fly



Hook: Mustad 9671, size 6
Tail: Brown marabou and copper Flashabou
Skirt: Brown chenille and brown saddle hackle
Legs: Yellow silicon
Eyes: Orange barbell

PHOTO BY EASTERN FLY FISHING



Road. The first few miles of creek downstream from the park run through developed areas. Once you pass under the State Route 32 bridge at Yountsville, though, you have entered the scenic stretch of Sugar Creek, which continues to the confluence.

Just 1.5 miles south of the State Route 32 bridge is the relatively new, very out-of-the-way, DNR-maintained Sugar Creek Public Fishing Area. The small site covers just a bit more than 12 acres, but provides great access for both wading anglers and those who wish to launch a fishing craft.

The Deer's Mill Public Access Point is located on State Route 234 and serves as the gateway to Shades State Park. Shades is one of the all-around best state parks in Indiana, for a number of reasons. First, Sugar Creek runs the length of the park, meaning you can access the water for fishing from countless points. Second, the river-bottom hardwoods scenery of the park is spectacular. Third, the campground is limited to nonelectric sites. There are warm-water shower houses with flush toilets, but no full hookups on individual sites. Most of the campers stay in tents or small travel trailers, which in my opinion lends a more rustic feel. The million-dollar motor homes with their buzzing generators are down the road at Turkey Run.

From Deer's Mill down through Turkey Run, the canoe traffic can be insane. Some people advise forgetting about fishing the section between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. on a weekend from Memorial Day to Labor Day. I agree, for the most part, but there are ways to slip in for a few hours.

If you have ever fished a hydroelectric dam tailwater, then you know how important it is to pay attention to fluctuating water levels. You also know that if the dam begins generating, you have only a certain amount of time before the rising water reaches points A, B, and C. It's the same with canoes. If you launch ahead of the flood and fish your way downstream at a pace that keeps you ahead, then you can experience undisturbed fishing until you reach the next major access point, which in this case is 11 miles downstream at the Brush Creek Public Access Point at the Narrows Covered Bridge.

The Brush Creek Public Access Point is an official DNR access point located just upstream of the Narrows Covered Bridge on County Road North 102 East. It is at the eastern edge of Turkey Run State Park. Brush Creek is also heavily used as a starting point for canoe livery trips. It's a wonderful place for starting or ending a float trip, but isn't great for wade-fishing. First of all, as the bridge's name implies, the creek narrows and deepens as it passes between bluffs. Also, parking is a problem at both Turkey Run public access points, Brush Creek and Cox Ford, as parking is limited to 30 minutes for loading and unloading.

From the Narrows to the Cox Ford Public Access Point, the creek meanders through Turkey Run State Park. By far one of the most popular state parks in Indiana, Turkey Run is highly regarded for its scenic hiking trails. As glaciers came and went during the last ice age, deep canyons and sandstone formations were carved, turning the area into a unique natural masterpiece.

The Cox Ford Covered Bridge is on Cox Ford Road along the west side of the park, and is a heavily used exit point for canoe trips. There's a nice, large parking lot, but it is limited to 30-minute parking for loading and unloading. The water below the bridge is shallow in the center of the creek, with nice runs along both banks. Many a nice evening, fish have fallen to my flies in this stretch. You'll have to work out the parking situation, or you can ride a bike down from the state park.

The West Union Public Access Point, located at the

West Union Covered Bridge just off Tow Path Road, is the last access point on Sugar Creek. Anyone who wishes to paddle on past here will be taking out on the Wabash at Montezuma. You can park at West Union, and the canoe traffic all but dies below the access point. For those looking to get into bigger fish, with the possibility of mixing in some largemouth and Kentucky spotted bass, West Union is a good choice. The creek begins to grow in size here as it prepares for its confluence with Indiana's state river, the Wabash, and begins to take on the look of a larger river, rather than a scenic creek.

Planning a Trip

Sugar Creek is a must-fish destination for anglers from Indiana and beyond. It is ideal for day trips or weekend-long retreats. To fish this productive stream effectively, you need only plan according to the time you visit: if you're arriving in spring or fall, your only concern will be water level. In the spring, make sure the creek isn't blown out; during a dry fall, be prepared to deal with stressed fish in skinny water. If you plan your visit in the summer months, just know you are going to be dealing with hordes of canoes between the parks.

If your life is anything like mine, combining and compromising are regular aspects of any outing. My little girls, 5 and 6 years old, love to camp. Turkey Run and Shades state parks are both excellent family destinations. So I simply load up the family and the fishing gear, then work out a plan to enjoy both. My kids aren't into waking up before dawn, and neither are most paddlers. So when I slip out of the tent for a few hours of sunrise solitude and return in time to start breakfast for my wife and a couple of wide-eyed young'uns who delightfully smell of campfire smoke, I'm double-dipping on good times. After a day filled with riding bikes, gentle hiking, swimming, swing sets, and more, the family excuses me again at dusk to fish a couple more hours. I just make sure I'm back in time to light the fire and break out the marshmallow sticks. ➔

Brandon Butler is a freelance writer and photographer who lives in Fayette, Missouri.

Sugar Creek NOTEBOOK



When: Year-round; prime time, April–October.

Where: Montgomery County and Parke County, from Darlington to West Union, IN.

Headquarters: Crawfordsville, IN (50 mi. NW of Indianapolis). *Information:* Crawfordsville Chamber of Commerce, (765) 362-6800, www.crawfordsvillechamber.com; Indiana Outfitters, www.indianaoutfitters.com. *Lodging:* Turkey Run Inn, (765) 597-2211, <http://in.gov/dnr/parklake/inns/turkeyrun>. *Campgrounds:* Turkey Run State Park, (765) 597-2635, www.turkeyrunstatepark.com; Shades State Park, (765) 435-2810, www.in.gov/dnr/parklake/2970.htm; Sugar Creek Campground, (765) 362-5528, www.sugarcreekcampground.com; The Canyon Camp & Cabins, (866) 372-7285, www.clementscaoes.com. *Canoe liveries:* Sugar Valley Canoe Trips, (800) 422-6638, www.sugarvalleycanoes.com; Turkey Run Canoe Trips, (765) 569-6705, www.turkeyruncanoetrips.com; Clements Canoes Outdoor Center, (866) 372-7285, www.clementscaoes.com.

Appropriate gear: 5- to 7-wt. rods, floating lines, strike indicators, 12-ft. leaders.

Useful fly patterns: Holschlag Hackle Fly, Blockhead Popper, Sneaky Pete, Shenk's Streamer, Whitetail Hare, Clouser Minnow, Woolly Bugger.

Necessary accessories: Polarized sunglasses, rain jacket, waders/wading boots for spring and fall, wet-wading shoes or sandals for summer, sunscreen, camera, insect repellent.

Nonresident license: \$9/1 day, \$20/7 days, \$35/annual.

Fly shops/guides: *Bloomington:* J.L. Waters & Co., (812) 334-1845, www.jlwaters.com. *Carmel:* Orvis Carmel, (317) 249-6000, www.orvis.com/carmel. *Indianapolis:* FlyMasters, (317) 570-9811, www.flymasters.com; Indiana Fly Fishing Guides (Jeff Conrad), (317) 258-8608, www.indiana-flyfishing.com. *Terre Haute:* Gander Mountain, (812) 237-0940, www.gandermountain.com. *Zionsville:* Wildcat Creek Outfitters, (317) 733-3014, www.wildcatcreekoutfitters.com.

Books/maps: *Smallmouth Fly Fishing* and *River Smallmouth Fishing* by Tim Holschlag; *Paddle Indiana* by Alan McPherson. *Indiana Atlas & Gazetteer* by DeLorme Mapping.

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