

Fly-Fishing Tactics for Oatka Creek

By Adam Schroeder

The legendary Oatka Creek meanders through the beautiful farmlands and rolling hills of Wyoming County, Genesee County, and Monroe County, New York. This stream is revered by many local and not so local anglers due to its beauty, fertility, and productivity. It offers anglers of all methods and skill levels the opportunity to catch stocked and wild brown trout in a remarkably beautiful and rustic setting. The beauty and fighting ability of the wild fish in Oatka Creek are second to none, and some real trophies can be found in its waters.

The headwaters of Oatka Creek are located near the hamlet of Rock Glen in central Wyoming County. Though small and brushy, you can find wild brown trout between Rock Glen and the village of Warsaw. This section of the stream is worthy of a separate article and won't be covered here. This article will focus primarily on the waters downstream of the village of Leroy, specifically the sections along Oatka Trail in Genesee County and the waters between Mumford and Garbutt in Monroe County, including the famed stretch in Oatka Creek Park (my personal favorite).

The first stretch I will discuss follows Oatka Trail (a road, not an actual trail). There are two easy access points available to anglers along this section. One is a New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) parking area and fishing access on Oatka Trail, about a half mile east of Circular Hill Road. The second access point is a few miles further downstream, where you can pull your car off the road right next to the creek. The DEC has purchased public fishing rights along most of this section of the stream, but they are not continuous. Use your best judgment and be aware of posted signs. These access points are easy to find, and this section of the stream is heavily stocked with brown trout.



I caught this chunky brown trout in the Oatka Creek Park section of the Oatka on a Purple Perdigon.

The waters along Oatka Trail are characterized by shallow riffles, slow-moving pools and runs, and overhanging trees and bushes, and these conditions provide excellent adult trout habitat. These waters get very buggy in the spring and summer, and it does get some of our typical mayfly activity. During the day, however, caddis flies and terrestrials are go-to favorites of mine. The fish in this stretch of water are not as snobby as others we will discuss later. After trout have been stocked in the spring, anglers can enjoy some relatively easy fishing and take advantage of some

aggressive surface activity. Lightly twitching an elk hair caddis, black ant, or beetle in size 14 or 16 is a deadly way to catch fish during the early parts of trout season.

Although most anglers enjoy the challenge and thrill of catching wild fish, there is something to be said about being able to hop out of your car, take a quick walk through the woods, and catch some healthy fish with relative ease. I mean, that sounds like good fun, right? During the spring months, as mayflies hatch, mate, and die, I love focusing on the evening spinner falls. The stocked fish in these stretches of Oatka creek will rise with reckless abandon to a well-presented rusty spinner pattern in the twilight before dark. I have two favorite rusty spinner patterns, which I use not only on Oatka Creek but also on any trout stream. These are the Splittsville spinner and the Krystal spinner. The Splittsville spinner is an excellent pattern that floats well and looks natural. It has a parachute of grizzly dry fly hackle on top to help it float, and this also helps the angler see it. The Krystal spinner is tied with krystal flash wings, which can help it stand out in a buggy crowd. This can be important if you think you're fishing amongst so many natural spinners that your fly is getting lost in the crowd. The waters along Oatka Trail are fun for both new and seasoned anglers looking for easy access and relatively easy fishing. Enjoy it, handle the fish with care, and release them to fight another day.

The second stretch of water I will discuss lies in the town of Mumford. This is where the stream really starts coming into its own. Oatka Creek has a magical sister stream named Spring Creek. This stream joins the waters of Oatka Creek on private property just above Main Street/Route 36 in Mumford. Spring Creek has some of the healthiest and most beautiful trout one will ever find. It is a true spring creek and the water is cold and clean. Consequently, the waters below where Spring Creek joins Oatka Creek benefit greatly from the influx of that healthy water. As a teenager, I used to enjoy fishing where Spring Creek joins the Oatka, but the current owner of the land does not allow fishing on his property. It's very unfortunate that one can own and post such a local treasure, but I digress.

Just downstream from the confluence of the two streams, access becomes public again and the fishing remains amazing. This stretch of water is often overlooked by fly anglers as it is very slow moving, and the bottom is mucky. It just doesn't have the rolling riffle look that appeals to so many anglers, myself included. But guess what, the fish don't care, in fact they love it here. The muck is nothing to be concerned about, it is a normal characteristic of many spring-fed streams.

A short distance downstream of the confluence with Spring Creek, the Oatka is crossed by Route 36. A DEC parking area is located near the bridge, and this formerly stocked section is now managed as "Wild-Quality" under the DEC's *New York State Trout Stream Management Plan*. This is another area that sees a lot of fishing pressure, as it offers anglers the opportunity to hop out of their car and enjoy some easy fishing. A few years ago, a nice little store opened up near this bridge. They sell homemade sandwiches, snack, and drinks. Stop in and grab a bite to eat; it's always nice to patronize a local business.

The stream is fishable both at the bridge and on the downstream right-hand bank for several hundred yards until it is apparent that you are walking in someone's backyard. All the aforementioned dry fly tactics will work down here. This is also a great stretch of water to strip streamers, as it is very deep and slow. In this type of water, it's hard to beat an olive or black wooly bugger in sizes 4 to 10.

Try altering the way you strip your streamers while fishing Oatka Creek (and other places). I find that if a fish will not take a swung streamer, you can oftentimes get them to strike by doing very

short and very fast repeated strips, and vice versa. Altering depth can also make a big difference. Other productive tactics include using a weighted streamer with a fluorocarbon leader. You can also try using a poly (sinking) leader of varying sink rates to entice these fish. This is another gem stretch of water that inevitably flows down to another access point at Twin Bridge Road.

The Twin Bridge section of Oatka Creek used to be very heavily stocked and, consequently, very heavily fished. The DEC reclassified this stretch of water as Wild-Quality, and they no longer stock it. This is actually a good thing. In the water above Twin Bridge you will find a wonderful, endless riffle that offers the opportunity to catch fish on your preferred method. This water to me is ideal dry-dropper water. The broken current and ideal depth make this a fun place to throw a large caddis or stimulator and drop a nymph below it. Some of my favorite nymphs for this method



Some of the nymphs I use when fishing the Twin Bridge section of the Oatka include (left to right) a Holy Grail, Quasimodo Pheasant Tail, and a Purple Perdigon.

include a Quasimodo Pheasant Tail (sizes 14-18), purple or black Perdigon (sizes 14 to 18), 20 Incher Jig nymph (sizes 8 to 12), tan or black Holy Grail, and pink or gray scuds (sizes 14 to 18). A quick side note: Oatka Creek is loaded with scuds, so don't forget your scud box. This is also another fun area to try Euro and tight-line nymphing tactics.

The last stretch of water to I'll discuss lies withing the famed Oatka Creek Park. This section of Oatka Creek is my personal favorite for so many reasons. This is a special regulations park, meaning it is not stocked, it is catch and release ONLY (thank goodness), and artificial flies and lures ONLY. These regulations help protect the fragile and beautiful trout that call this water home. "The Park" as it is known, flows from the railroad bridge next to Stewart Road down to the Union Street bridge. Within these boundaries anglers have access to some of the pretties and most appealing water on the entire system. The Park has every stream characteristic an angler would look for in a trout stream. Pools, runs, riffles, foliage on the banks, it's not next to the road, it has bugs, and it has... oh yeah, wild trout!

If I have the whole day, one of my favorite ways to fish the Park section is to park at the access on Union Street, walk all the way upstream to the railroad bridge and fish my way back. I might get distracted on the way up and catch a fish or two in one of the many ideal riffles or pools on the walk up. The Park has gone through many ups and downs over the years. Many folks talk about the "good old days" when fish would rise like clockwork every night, and of the incredible sulphur hatches and the ridiculous spinner falls. The Park still gets good hatches and spinner falls, and the fish are still there; you just may have to work a little harder than in the past to be successful.

As you work your way downstream from the railroad bridge you will find that each turn and stretch is different from the last. The Park has a unique way of having you wonder if you're near the bottom in a 6-foot-deep slow run and then making you think about putting on a dry fly for the foot-deep riffle you see downstream out of the corner of your eye. Springtime/early summer, when the water is swollen but clear and fishable, is my favorite time to be in the park. At this time, the fish are spread throughout the system. The riffles are fast, rocky, and fishy, and the pools are deep and mysterious. There is opportunity everywhere you look and something new around every bend.



My friend Andy Smith, seen here wrangling a big brown trout, chose the park section of Oatka Creek as the appropriate setting to test out his new Orvis Clearwater 10-foot, 3-weight Euro nymphing rod.



After a good fight, Andy brought this beautiful fish to the net. What a way to break in a new nymphing rod!

All of the tactics previously mentioned throughout this article can be used very successfully on this stretch of the Oatka; however, the romance of fly fishing Oatka Creek involves targeting spinner falls. The Park boasts some of the best mayfly hatches on the entire system and, in turn, can potentially have the best spinner falls. I have many fond memories from my teens and early twenties of standing in knee-deep water around 9:30 p.m. and struggling to re-tie a rusty spinner on as my hands shake due to the sound of slurping trout inhaling every spinner that passes through

their lane. Under ideal water flows, common nymphing techniques with an indicator and tight-line style fishing are also highly productive methods for catching these fish.

Streamer fishing is another fun way to fish this stretch of water. I have caught some of my largest Oatka fish while dedicating some time to solely stripping streamers. A strategy I've been practicing is to carry two rods rigged for different techniques. I will oftentimes carry a nymphing rod and a rod suited for streamer or dry-fly fishing. This way I can work through a spot with one technique, and then quickly switch and fish through with another technique and not feel as though I've missed out on some opportunities.



When fishing the Park section of the Oatka, I carry a variety of dry flies with me, including Hendrickson Emerger, Sulphur Dun and Rusty Spinner.

Oatka Creek is a special place to me. It is where I learned how to fly fish, and it is where all the anglers in my family fished before me. It has some of the most beautiful trout I have ever seen, and I have fished in a lot of places! Treat the fish, the water, and the land surrounding this amazing resource with care. Be respectful of private property and of other anglers. Enjoy it and use it—we are lucky to have it!

