An Angler's Impressions of Wiscoy Creek

By Scott Cornett

I've been fly fishing for the wild brown trout of Wiscoy Creek since I moved to western New York in 1990. And, as a NYS Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) biologist, I have had the responsibility and privilege of managing the trout fishery in this stream for the last 17 years and have been sampling fish populations there for the last 34 years.

For me, Wiscoy Creek is really two streams from an aesthetic standpoint, with the section downstream of Pike flowing mostly well away from roads, with lots of peace, quiet, and solitude, and the section upstream of Pike, mainly parallelled by State Route 39, where you will hear plenty of traffic. I normally gravitate to the more peaceful, quiet section, but I know from our fish sampling efforts that the trout population is higher in the section upstream of Pike. An abundance of DEC public fishing easements, angler footpaths, and parking areas provide access to the stream from Pond Road in Allegany County upstream to the village of Bliss.

Historically, beginning in the 1930s with work performed by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and continuing through the 1960s and 1970s with work done by the DEC, literally miles of stream improvement projects were constructed in and along Wiscoy Creek. Unfortunately, much of this work is deteriorating or is already gone. Some of it has been replaced by natural habitat and, since 2000, combined with habitat work done by the Western New York Chapter of Trout Unlimited, the Wyoming County Soil and Water Conservation District, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the DEC. Still, some areas lack the deep pools with complex woody habitat that is vital for brown trout to find protection from ever increasing numbers of natural predators such as mergansers, otters, Bald eagles, and osprey.

Along with habitat changes, it has been my observation as an angler (no deep science here) that the behavior of the trout has changed over the last 15 years. In the past, it seemed that a good hatch or spinner fall of mayflies, especially Hendricksons or Green Drakes, would usually have fish feeding on the surface, quite often out in the open pools. In recent years, it has not been unusual to see a good hatch occurring with virtually no surface feeding activity, and even if a few fish are rising, they are rising in the very heaviest, tightest log jams, where presenting a fly is difficult.

This makes sense to me if we think of it in terms of the fish having to survive more abundant numbers of mobile, underwater predators such as mergansers and otters. In the days when fish rose to the surface out in open pools and their main predators were Great blue herons, a bird limited to feeding in 3 feet of water or less, the trout could feel relatively safe in a deep pool, even without much cover. In recent years, a fish feeding like this would be much more likely to leave the gene pool early! I think it's possible that increasing predator abundance has selected for trout that are not as surface oriented in their feeding and are less likely to be found outside of heavy instream cover, making for less productive angling for someone like me who enjoys the visual aspect of dry-fly fishing.

A few seasons ago, I joined my friend Joe Morgan to fish a Hendrickson hatch in early May. We had an afternoon where, for a couple of hours, there was an exceptionally good hatch of these

mayfly duns, but in that whole time we saw only a single fish rise. It wasn't even in a spot where either of us would have thought to look for a fish. Joe gave the fish a try and, on his third drift, he caught a fat 15-inch brown, apparently the only surface-feeding fish in a mile of the creek that day!

Joe Morgan with the fat 15-inch wild brown trout caught during the Hendrickson hatch.

I have also had some experiences that lead me to believe that, when it comes to surface-feeding trout, where you happen to be on the stream can make a significant difference in what you experience on any given evening. A few seasons ago, when comparing notes with several friends who had all fished the same evening on Wiscoy Creek during the Green Drake hatch, we found that we all had different stories to relate. I was fishing upstream of the area known as the Grey Cabin, and I experienced a very heavy spinner fall of Green Drake mayflies towards dusk. However, while there were many spinners on and over the water, there were almost no fish rising to the surface. My friend Mike was fishing about a half mile downstream of me and had lots of spinners and lots of rising fish (he caught a bunch). Two other friends fishing a couple of miles downstream nearer the Boy Scout Camp area had neither many spinners on the water nor any rising fish, while two other friends fishing a couple of miles upstream of me at the fairgrounds in Pike saw very few spinners but lots of rising fish. Six anglers on a 4-mile-long section of the creek, all having vastly different experiences.

Based on my experience on this stream, at times Wiscoy Creek brown trout can be exceedingly difficult to catch to the point that, on some days, if you didn't know differently, you would think the creek doesn't hold trout. This is borne out by the records in my fishing journals, which I have

kept since 1986. For every evening at Wiscoy Creek where I caught a decent number of fish, there are two where the fishing was just dead. And just to show that, in fishing, you never know what can happen, I did have one day on the stream in mid-October 2004 where a modest hatch of small blue-winged olive mayflies made fishing for these brown trout about like catching bluegills on their spawning beds. In a little over an hour, I landed three dozen brown trout from 100 yards of stream. I have no idea why they acted like this, and I don't expect to ever see it happen again!

This leads me to another thing I have been hearing for several years from Wiscoy Creek anglers, which is, "the hatches aren't what they used to be." Unfortunately, no one, including biologists at the DEC, has done in-depth, quantitative sampling of the aquatic insects in the stream over the years, so we can't make any definitive comparison of insect abundance now verses the "good old days" that I hear about. The DEC's Division of Water does routine qualitative sampling of aquatic invertebrates in Wiscoy Creek, and the most recent report, from work done in 2014, showed that, while a couple sites on the main creek and the North Branch are described as "slightly impacted," overall the insect species present indicated good water quality conditions. This is not to say that, at times and in certain sections of the stream, there aren't some temporary impacts from the use of pesticides or excessive sedimentation from the large number of agricultural operations in this watershed. However, the DEC's sampling is designed to identify chronic, long-term impacts, not these temporary impacts. My observations as an angler are that Wiscoy Creek is still a highly productive stream with good hatches of various caddisflies and mayflies such as Hendricksons, March Browns, Sulfurs, Slate Drakes (*Isonychia*), and Green Drakes. It seems to me that the Green Drake spinners tend to reach the water later than they used to (not until near dark or even after); however, it could also be that my low-light vision is not what it used to be (and I notice the long drive home afterwards has gotten even longer now as well!).

DEC trout population surveys done in the 1970s, at a time when anglers still harvested trout at a high rate, showed that restrictive regulations benefited the trout population. However, surveys done since the 1990s indicate that the Wiscoy's trout population is not substantially affected by the restrictive regulations, likely because the vast majority of trout are now released, even if they could legally be kept.

During the 1990s and 2000s, Wiscoy Creek was known for its remarkably high abundance of wild brown trout but not for producing many large trout. That has changed in the last decade: As the overall trout population has declined somewhat, fish of 16 to 20 inches have become more common. The DEC's 2021 trout population study, done at six sites, showed an average of 787 yearling and older wild brown trout per mile of stream, ranging from 414 fish/mile at Pond Road in Allegany County to 1,232 fish/mile at Hillside Road near Bliss. As in the past, abundance tended to increase as you moved upstream on the stream, but larger trout can show up anywhere in this stream where good habitat exists. Fish up to 20 inches were captured during the 2021 survey of the stream.

The author's 18-inch male Wiscoy Creek brown in his November spawning colors. The fish was taken on an elk hair caddis dry fly.

While my personal best fish from Wiscoy Creek came in at around 18 inches, most of the fish I catch there are in the 7- to 11-inch range, with the very occasional bigger fish coming to the net. I think this is due to the fact that I usually don't fish at the optimum times or use the techniques that are required to catch large brown trout on a regular basis. Anglers I know who *do* catch them try hard to get out when stream flows are ideal (rising flows just beginning to turn off color) and are fishing with streamers and large nymphs or fishing with stick baits and spinning rods. Luckily, most of these anglers release the big trout they catch, which was not the case in the old days, and I believe this may be one reason our trout population surveys are turning up more large trout than they used to.