Michigan’s Trout Trails

A new resource in the Wolverine State is helping DIY anglers move off the beaten paths and into intimate waters.

By James P. Spica Jr.
My friend Colin and I begin each of our fishing road trips saying the line, “I was born to have adventure.” Besides the fact it’s from one of the greatest songs ever recorded, Frank Zappa’s simple and awkward verse sticks in our heads and rattles around when we’re hauling boats up the bank, seeing hungry fish charge streamers from under logjams, or sitting with a glass of rye whiskey after rolling in, exhausted, from a midnight mousing run. We think, “Yes, we were born to have adventure.” It’s living at its finest.

I picked Colin up from the Detroit Metropolitan Airport at 10 in the morning, but only after a bit of travel drama involving a stubborn Uber driver, a missed flight, a helpful gate agent, and a lot of anxiety. No good road trip is without some hiccups and tribulations, though we hoped we were getting it out of the way early.

Our loose plan was a four-day fishing mission under the guidance of Michigan’s Trout Trails program—a combined resource from Pure Michigan, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR), and other organizations created to highlight Michigan’s superb array of trout angling opportunities. You can access the app at www.michigan.gov/dnr and review information, or download the app to a smartphone or electronic tablet. It contains information to help plan trips (without giving away too much) like access points and maps, nearby lodging and dining, and some info about the dominate species in specific streams. It’s great for DIY anglers like Colin and myself because it doesn’t cost a dime, and after we plan a road trip, we’re on your own!

The road trip was a perfect way for Colin and myself to see the Michigan that runs somewhat under the blue-ribbon radar for most anglers—which is precisely what the DNR intended. Fly fishermen travel here to fish fabled waters, perhaps some of the most iconic in angling literature like the Au Sable, Pere Marquette, and the Two-Hearted, where the first TU chapter was founded. All are excellent rivers. But the trout streams at the northern reaches of the Lower Peninsula are partially hidden gems, just as, or perhaps more, saturated with local angling culture.

Though the Trout Trails program highlights waters all over Michigan, we focused on streams around and in the Pigeon River state forest. While there are some old, historic, exclusive hunting and fishing clubs here and there in the State Forest, private lands are few and far between. The Pigeon River State Forest, criss-crossed with two tracks, bisected by highways, and surrounded by great for DIY anglers like Colin and myself because it doesn’t cost a dime, and after we plan a road trip, we’re on your own!

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way through the Michigan woods, you’re hunting for small-to-medium sized wild and wily fish for the most part; but know there’s the potential for a monster around anywhere. It’s not like fishing a wide Montana river, but you don’t go to Michigan for that experience anyway.

In Midwest fashion, we tied on mouse flies at dark. Moaing, if you haven’t done it, is the full acceptance of nature’s darkest and myriad of beautiful night sounds, punctuated by explosive moments of complete, violent mayhem. You’re lucky if you can see the wave of your big, floating foam-and-fur fly, but just when you’re beginning to nod off, a trout attacks. It’s a quality, not quantity game, and while we had strikes, there were no hook-ups.

The Black and Pigeon

Our next pit stop was deep in the State Forest Area to fish the Black and the Pigeon, but we first stopped at the area’s information center—a little cabin compound that also acts as a basecamp for biologists and volunteers working tirelessly to improve the massive area of land. That’s where we met DNR fisheries biologist Tim Owsinski, who drove with us to the Black River and fished alongside us, and true to his craft, he caught better fish than we did.

We especially designed the Pigeon River State Forest Area with hunters and anglers in mind,” Tim told me. “We allow very little ATV traffic. And we listened to everyone when developing our areas. Tim told me, “We allow very little ATV traffic. And we listened to everyone when developing our areas. We planned our roads and trail systems, our boat ramps, and boat access ways to suit both hunters and anglers. And we listened to everyone when developing our areas.

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In 2008, a massive failure of the only dam on the river caused a beautiful, wild river a little wider and deeper than the Black, but it was worth it. Having fished larger waters most of our lives, Colin and I were unprepared for the narrow, brushy-banked streams in the area. Small-stream anglers take note: if you enjoy whacking your way through tall grass to make casts to wild brook trout in streams less than 20 feet wide, this is your kind of place, and it pays to know how to make extremely accurate 20-foot roll casts without snagging the trees.

WeRubbed many a cast against a rhythm after a while, Walking upstream and casting upstream is the only way to fish small-to-medium sized wild and wily fish, but it was worth it. Having fished larger waters most of our lives, Colin and I were unprepared for the narrow, brushy-banked streams in the area. Small-stream anglers take note: if you enjoy whacking your way through tall grass to make casts to wild brook trout in streams less than 20 feet wide, this is your kind of place, and it pays to know how to make extremely accurate 20-foot roll casts without snagging the trees.

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The Black River is almost exclusively a brook trout stream. It’s narrow, but we had a lot of fun, and we spoke fish. But it was worth it. Having fished larger waters most of our lives, Colin and I were unprepared for the narrow, brushy-banked streams in the area. Small-stream anglers take note: if you enjoy whacking your way through tall grass to make casts to wild brook trout in streams less than 20 feet wide, this is your kind of place, and it pays to know how to make extremely accurate 20-foot roll casts without snagging the trees.

While fishing the Pigeon River later that afternoon that proved to be a beautiful, wild river a little wider and deeper than the Black, and home to brown, brook and rainbow trout. (We caught a few of each.) It has recently emerged from hard times, thanks to a lot of work by Michigan’s Trout Unlimited, the Huron Pines, and other organizations. In 2008, a massive failure of the only dam on the river caused a beautiful, wild river a little wider and deeper than the Black, and home to brown, brook and rainbow trout. (We caught a few of each.) It has recently emerged from hard times, thanks to a lot of work by Michigan’s Trout Unlimited, the Huron Pines, and other organizations.

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...not even fished Michigan’s historic Au Sable river, you may never have heard of these peculiar, albeit traditional, fishing boats, rarely seen on other rivers around Michigan, let alone other states. The vessels are long and narrow, shallow-running, crafts designed after logging boats used when Michigan’s timber industry was booming at the turn of the century. Since they’re suited for navigating the rivers here, they were converted to fishing boats and local boat builders offer new custom built models for guides and anglers alike. The guide sits in the stern and poles with a push pole instead of rowing, keeping pace with the river’s flow, while two clients have 19 feet of boat to cast from without worrying about hooking the guide or each other.

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the Au Sable River to do a short float with local trout and small-to-medium sized wild and wily fish in the middle of the day before hunting for trophy fish becomes a night game in the hot summer months.

Tired, but as you may imagine, quite satisfied with seven rivers in four days, we recapitulated the highlights in the drive back to the Motor City. It was a pleasant and summarily exhausting blur of nonstop beauchwacking into tiny creeks and seduced upper sections of pristine trout water, dry flies and streamers, wild trout, eating spartner lunches off our tailgate and bumbling our way down dirt roads smelling the bracken ferns and tamaracks pine. The history, the wild trout, the tiny friendly northern towns, the great food and most importantly the plentiful access to water make Michigan a true fly angler’s paradise. And, on only one river, in the seven we fished, did we run into another angler.

So named because it neighbors the Steurgeon River, this little bar and restaurant has local Michigan beers, excellent burgers and pizza, and to my delight, some of the best coffee I’ve ever had. It was just the pep I needed to visit one more river that day—the Boyne.

The Boyne has a lot of nice fish in it, but (or perhaps because) access is limited. Colin stepped to the water, made one cast with a large attractor dry, and we watched as a 14-inch long, chunky brown sashayed instantly. And so we fished as the sun went behind the trees, pulling good browns and brook trout from their logjam homes with dry flies and articulated streamers.

With the sun fully set, only orange and pink streaks in the sky were visible behind the black trees. So we elected to give in to our building exhaustion after two days of hard fishing and headed back to our little cabin.

The Sturgeon and Maple

The best day, we fished the Sturgeon and Maple rivers. The Sturgeon has several branches that converge in the little town of Wolverine and it’s one of the coldest rivers in Michigan. Between the high sun and extremely cold water, the fish just weren’t interested in taking a second look.

Similarly, the Maple didn’t produce much, but we were told to come back in the early fall when a variety of large fish swim in from the lake to spawn, and shots at giant trout brown trout increase exponentially. I made a simple mental note—come back in the fall!

But, as fly anglers have a penchant for doing, we found the best way to soothe our battered fishing egos was to drink a few local beers in a local brewery. We followed Ethan to Petoskey Brewing Company in downtown Petoskey—a lively local town that aside from when the summer when tourists come to swim, tour wineries, shop, and dine, has a thriving year-round culture of art, fine food, and outdoor pursuits. We met with Lou Goshinger, co-owner and operator of the brewery, who renovated the historic building (which began as a brewery almost 115 years before, despite changing hands many times in the interim) to its former glory, co-owner and operator of the brewery, who renovated the historic building (which began as a brewery almost 115 years before, despite changing hands many times in the interim). Oh, and the beer is delicious.

The Au Sable

On our way back down to Detroit the last morning, we stopped at the Au Sable river to do a short float with local trout and grouse guide, Josh Nethers, in his Au Sable longboat. If you’ve never fished Michigan’s historic Au Sable river, you may never have heard of these peculiar, albeit traditional, fishing boats, rarely seen on other rivers around Michigan, let alone other states. The vessels are long and narrow, shallow-running, crafts designed after logging boats used when Michigan’s timber industry was booming at the turn of the century. Since they’re suited for navigating the rivers here, they were converted to fishing boats and local boat builders offer new custom built models for guides and anglers alike. The guide sits in the stern and poles with a push pole instead of rowing, keeping pace with the river’s flow, while two clients have 19 feet of boat to cast from without worrying about hooking the guide or each other.

We fished imitations of brown drakes, a large mayfly that emerges and really kicks off the summer fishing season in Michigan. It’s also one of the last, few reliable times to catch large fish in the middle of the day before hunting for trophy fish becomes a night game in the hot summer months.

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James P. Spica Jr. flies mouse and hunch birds over 100 days each year and writes about his experiences; even when he should be doing something more “important.”

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