

y 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

small quintessential northern Michigan towns, is an adventuring angler's paradise. The streams are too small for much canoe traffic, regulations on many sections require artificials only or flies only, and access is plentiful. To turn a clichéd phrase, what's not to like?

The Jordan

The plan was to fish seven rivers in four days, so from the word "go," we hit it early, and we hit it hard. We met Ethan Winchester, head of sporting operations at Boyne Resort and Boyne Outfitters, after checking into our little cabin in Boyne Mountain. The accommodations were comfortable and simple—how I like it. No frills, but no camping discomfort, or rustica pushed to the limit. I suppose the hot tub on the deck was a "frill," but it turned out to be more like medicine for sore casting arms than a luxury.

We floated the nearby Jordan River, what some consider a "major" river compared to the smaller streams deep in the state forest. It's unique in its own right, and yet clearly a Michigan trout river—spring-fed with overhanging cedars, a mix between a sand and mud or cobble bottom, not much gradient, and tons of partially or totally submerged wood. This is where the big trout were hanging out: waiting beneath a pile of fallen logs and branches before shooting out to take a streamer or large mayfly imitation.

With Ethan's expert help, we caught several fish on dry flies, and I was lucky enough to turn a few large fish on streamers before pulling an aggressive 19-inch brown out from an undercut bank.

It took to the air twice, and suspended above the tannin-stained water and against the thick cedars, it made for a most Michigan of tableaus.

What many anglers don't know is Michigan trout get very large, they just don't average very large. The rivers here hold many high-teensto-mid-twenty-inch brown trout, but when you fish a brushy, woody stream winding its

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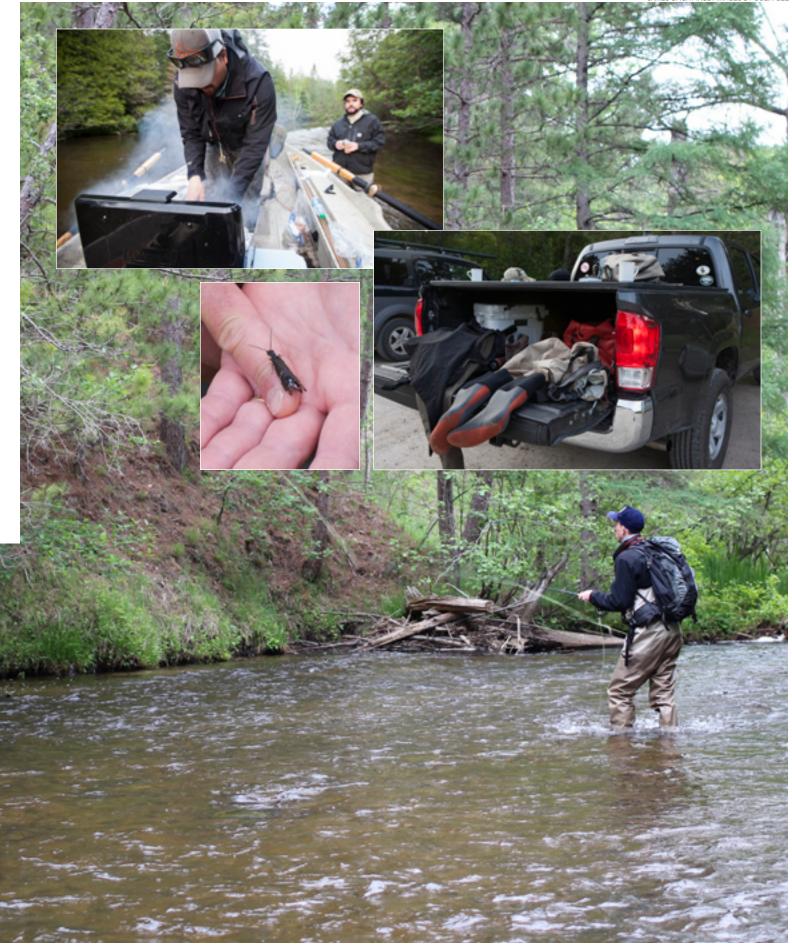
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great for DIY anglers like Colin and myself because it doesn't cost a dime, and after we plan a road trip, we're on your own!

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 Two-Hearted, Pere Marquette, and the Au Sable, 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, saturation 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, crisscrossed with two tracks, bisected by highways, and surrounded by



way through the Michigan woods, you're hunting for small-tomedium sized wild and wily fish for the most part; but know there's the potential for a monster around any bend. 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. Mousing, if you haven't done it, is the full acceptance of nature's darkest dark and myriad of beautiful night sounds, punctuated by explosive moments of complete, violent mayhem. You're lucky if you can see the wake 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 rivers, 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 Cwalinski, who drove with us to the Black River and fished alongside us, and true to his craft, he caught better fish than we did.

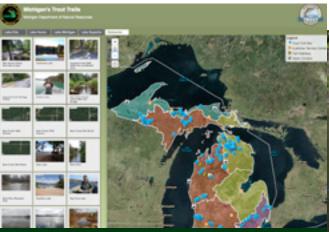
"We especially designed the Pigeon River State Forest Area with hunters and anglers in mind," Tim told me. "We allow very little ATV traffic. And we listened to everyone when developing the area—for example, we couldn't give the snowmobilers everything they wanted, because that might detract from the hunter's and angler's experience; but we could make it so that everyone can enjoy some part of the State Forest. This is one of the most wild places in Michigan."

The Black River is almost exclusively a brook trout stream. It's narrow, so we had to fish upstream, lest we spook fish. But it was worth it. Having fished larger waters most of our lives, Colin and I were slightly unprepared for the narrow, brushy-banked streams in the area. Small-stream anglers take note: if you enjoy whacking your way through tag alders to make roll 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.

We flubbed many a cast, but developed a rhythm after a while. Walking upstream and casting upstream is the only way to cover water without spooking fish. Colin mastered this art quicker than I did, and was rewarded by larger-than-average brook trout by stripping a "skunk"—a variation of Earl Madsen's Au Sable Skunk, an indispensable multi-purpose attractor pattern that should be in every angler's box.

We fished 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 Trout Unlimited, the Huron Pines, and other organizations. In 2008, a massive failure of the only dam on the river released silt and sediment downstream, choking life and destroying habitat on one of the best trout streams in Michigan. A lawsuit ensued, and lasted several years. The dam has since been removed and the trout are thriving once again.

Integral to a good road trip is finding cool, local, out-of-the-way restaurants—and after fishing the Pigeon, we found a true gem of a place, The Thirsty Sturgeon. (The Trout Trails app suggested it.)



RESEARCH

Everyone does fishing road trips a little differently. Thankfully, Michigan has something for everyone when it comes to fishing, lodging, and food. Check out the Michigan Trout Trails application at www.michigan.gov/dnr. It's a great resource that's intuitive and simple to use, and coupled with a few good maps, makes it easier to find public access on some of the state's overlooked water. While spectacular trout fishing is one of Michigan's highlights, it certainly isn't the only draw. The state's small-mouth bass, carp, steelhead, pike, and musky fisheries are world class, and you can create a fine road trip that also centers those game fish.

GETTING THERE

Michigan's main hub is Detroit/Wayne International Airport (DTW) but there are several other smaller airports serving the state, including Cherry Capital International Airport in Traverse City. Both are hubs for Delta airlines. If you fly, renting a car is a must for a DIY trip, and most major car rental businesses offer capable small SUVs or pickups to handle dirt roads and carry your gear. That said, make the road-trip from you home state in your own fishmobile if you can (for the memories, if nothing else).

FOOD AND LODGING

The Trout Trails app recommends some local businesses in any area you plan to fish and there are small towns with grocery stores, gas, lodging, and great restaurants near most waters. There are too eateries to mention here, but on our trip, the Thirsty Sturgeon in Wolverine had phenomenal pizza and hamburgers (and coffee) and was in a great central location to the state forest. Petoskey Brewing (www.petoskeybrewing.com) and Shorts Brewing Company (www.shortsbrewing.com) are excellent spots for a cold brew after a day of fishing.

LICENSES

Michigan charges \$26 for an annual resident fishing license, \$30 for a nonresident 3-day fishing license, and \$76 for an annual non-resident fishing license. Visit www.mdnr-elicense.com to buy a license online, or visit a license dealer.

GFAR

Bring a 3- to 6-weight rod for trout, though the shorter the better on rivers that are brushy and tight. I prefer an 8-foot long 4-weight that has the backbone to throw small streamers. If you have a 6-weight for mouse fishing, I highly recommend bringing it. Floating lines, weightforward or double-taper, are perfect. Your trout fly selection can be basic—size 14 to 18 attractors like Adams, Patriots, Wulffs, Elk Hair Caddis, and Stimulators are good dry flies. For the early summer, have size 6 to 10 brown drake and Hexegenia patterns, and size 16 sulphur dry flies. For streamers, bring traditional Ghosts and Muddlers, and Matukas and Buggers (or variations of any). Nymphing is difficult on some of the more confined streams, but wherever possible, you only need the basics—flies like Pheasant-tail Nymphs and Copper Johns.

EXTRAS

Bug protection is important on any Michigan stream, and I'm a big fan of insect repellant clothing and Buffs. The DeLorme Michigan Atlas is an indispensable tool for when you're out of cell service range in the undeveloped corners of the state. Don't forget polarized sunglasses and a bottle of a local Michigan whiskey from one of the local distilleries like Two James, Traverse City Distillery, or Valentine's.

write to fit for both. write to fit for both.

So-named because it neighbors the Sturgeon 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 savaged it instantly. And so we fished as the sun went behind the trees, pulling good browns and brook trout from their logiam homes with dry flies and articulated streamers. With the sun fully set, only orange and pink streaks in the sky were visible between 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 next 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 our offerings that day.

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 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 Gostinger, 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 current splendor. 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.

Tired, but as you may imagine, quite satisfied with seven rivers in four days, we recapped the highlights in the drive back to the Motor City. It was a pleasant and summarily exhausting blur of nonstop bushwacking into tiny creeks and secluded upper sections of pristine trout water, dry flies and streamers, wild trout, eating spartan lunches off our tailgate and bumping our way down dirt roads smelling the bracken ferns and tamarack pines. 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.

James P. Spica Jr. fly fishes and hunts birds over 100 days each year and writes about his experiences; even when he should be doing something more "important."

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