Hanging By A Thread

By Ken Undercoffer

A lot of concern has been expressed lately about the current drought and its affect on wild trout, especially those of the freestones streams which have been mere trickles for several months now. In Huntington County there is a tiny tributary to one of Pennsylvania's many Roaring Runs. This particular Roaring Run must have been a beautiful little freestone trout stream back around the turn of the century.

Although not large, it contains many waist deep pools and undercut banks. Unfortunately, somebody dug a mine at the headwaters many years ago, the drainage from which renders it lifeless with a pH of about 4.5. But the tiny trickle tributary, which starts about a mile up in the mountains above Roaring Run, still runs clean and holds a thriving population of native brookies. Too tiny to fish, this brooklet can be jumped over much of the year.

During most summers it dries up almost completely. Here and there a sharp bend, log, or pile of woody debris creates a small pool. Each supports a brookie or two. About a quarter mile above the confluence with the acidic waters of Roaring Run, the stream makes a hair-pin bend. The bank here is chest-high and deeply undercut, forming an especially nice pair of pools, each about the size of a large throw-rug, perhaps 18 inches deep and separated by a few feet of riffles. Several giant hemlocks provide dense shade and the sun seldom touches the water in this section.

For the last few years each pool has held a single, respectable-sized, brookie. The fish in the lower pool is about 9 inches long and the one in the upper, somewhat longer and deeper pool, is about 11 inches. A good size for brookies for a trickle that nobody would even consider fishing! My sister and her husband have a camp near here and every time I visit them I walk down to the stream and check up on these two fish. They are extremely wary, and as soon as they see me, they dash beneath the undercut bank, taking refuge deep among the washed out hemlock roots.

It was another dry year a few Septembers ago and we were visiting camp for the weekend. I decided to check out this little tributary to see if the brookies had survived the summer's drought. Starting at the confluence with Roaring Run, I walked slowly upstream. Only the barest of trickles ran between the rocks. A cigarette butt couldn't have been floated down this pitiful trickle. But amazingly, in every puddle there were anywhere from one to half a dozen of this year's hatchling brookies, 1.5 to 2 inches in length. They frantically scurried

under the rocks at my approach. At one spot I knelt down on the bank and carefully peered into the foot-deep water of a tiny pool formed by a tangle of woody debris. I got a quick glimpse of a 5-inch brookie before it darted swiftly out of sight.

At this point I became a little more hopeful that the two larger brookies I had been watching for the last couple of years would still be in the holes under the big hemlocks. As I approached the lower of the two pools, the water appeared to be completely stagnant. The surface was totally covered with a dense scum of needles, dropped by the drought-stricken hemlocks. It seemed unlikely that any trout could survive in such conditions. I crept in a crouch, slowly and gently along the edge, trying in vain to see into the water. A slight movement of the surface gave away the presence of a fish as it moved beneath the undercut bank, but gave no indication of its size.

The upper pool was just as thickly covered with hemlock needles as the lower. A pitiful trickle of water ran in so slowly that the tiny needles were unmoved by the current. Again I moved quietly upward along the edge unable to see into the water to establish whether or not the larger brookie had survived the drought. I had about given up hope when all of a sudden the surface of the water at the head of the pool boiled. Hemlock needles surged and a wide wake rushed past me toward the roots of the undercut hemlocks. I never saw the brookie that made this mad dash for safety, but it had to have been my old friend. So far he had survived the drought.

I returned to these two pools in the middle of October of that year, after a couple of good rains had raised the water level back to normal. I crept carefully up to the lower hole on my hands and knees, keeping a large stump between myself and the stream so as to hide my approach. Side-by-side, tucked in next to a waste-basket sized rock at the tail of the lower pool, just where the water began to accelerate as it spilled out, was a pair of brookies, one of about 11 inches and the other about 2 inches smaller. The larger fish apparently sensed my presence and drifted upstream into the upper pool. The smaller, obviously a female, was clearing a redd . . . too occupied with the work at hand to notice my presence. I had obviously interrupted their spawning ritual. I backed away quietly so I didn't to disturb them any further. These two old friends had survived another, and especially difficult, year and were about to assure the survival of the species for a while longer.

Brookies seldom live much longer than about six years in small, sterile, freestone waters like this and at a growth rate of one to two inches per year, fish of this size would be near the end of their life-span. But their replacements were there in the puddles between the rocks and another generation was being deposited in the gravel beneath the hemlocks. This ritual had been carried out for countless generations before our ancestors ever set foot in North America … even before Native Americans walked this land.

These brookies are truly survivors. They have endured a century of isolation in this tiny trickle tributary, locked in by the acid waters of Roaring Run and kept alive by a thread of clear, cold water flowing down the mountain. But given enough time, the last of the

sulfur will finally leach out of the long-abandoned mine at its headwaters and Roaring Run will clear. Then this relict population will move down into the bigger stream and once again Roaring Run will stir with hatches of mayflies and caddis and the swirls of feeding natives.