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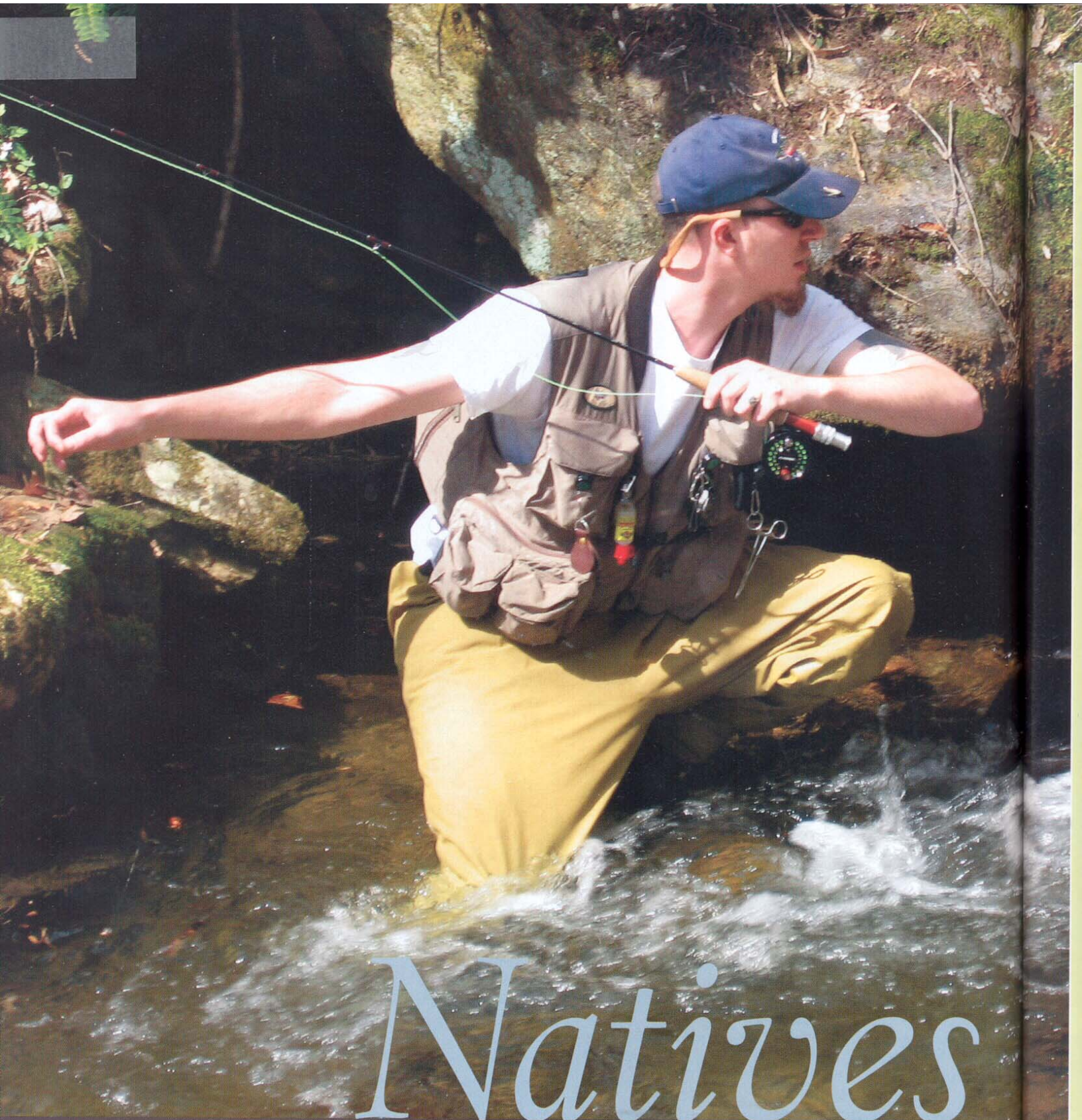
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Two writers go in search of native trout

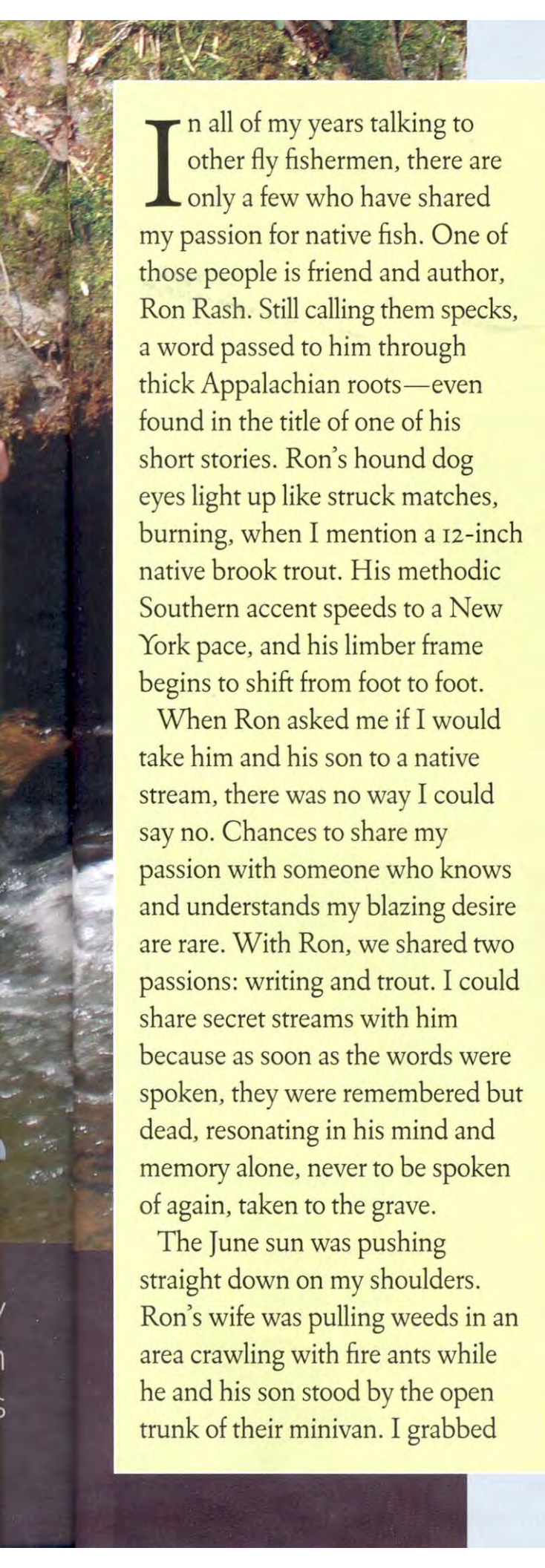
*Plus:* Short fiction by Sharyn McCrumb



# *Natives*

Two writers, a hound dog, and a teen-age boy set out with fly rods to search for native fish in secret mountain streams

STORY & PHOTOS  
BY DAVID JOY



In all of my years talking to other fly fishermen, there are only a few who have shared my passion for native fish. One of those people is friend and author, Ron Rash. Still calling them specks, a word passed to him through thick Appalachian roots—even found in the title of one of his short stories. Ron's hound dog eyes light up like struck matches, burning, when I mention a 12-inch native brook trout. His methodic Southern accent speeds to a New York pace, and his limber frame begins to shift from foot to foot.

When Ron asked me if I would take him and his son to a native stream, there was no way I could say no. Chances to share my passion with someone who knows and understands my blazing desire are rare. With Ron, we shared two passions: writing and trout. I could share secret streams with him because as soon as the words were spoken, they were remembered but dead, resonating in his mind and memory alone, never to be spoken of again, taken to the grave.

The June sun was pushing straight down on my shoulders. Ron's wife was pulling weeds in an area crawling with fire ants while he and his son stood by the open trunk of their minivan. I grabbed

my waders, boots, vest, rod tube, and reel from the cab of my pickup. I had just finished helping Ron's son, James, move a couch into their new home in Cullowhee, N.C., and now it was time to hit the water. I threw my gear in the van and we all hopped in: James behind the wheel, me riding shotgun, and Ron in the back.

The Red Hot Chili Peppers came through the speakers, James drumming on the steering wheel, as the van curved through mountain roads on the way to a cold, Jackson County stream. Ron was reclined in the back, his hands pillowing his head, his long legs straightened and crossed between the front seats. We swapped fishing tales, the stories ricocheting off and triggering more: stories of fish caught, fish lost, and fish seen.

"Tell him about that carp I caught on the fly rod," Ron urged his son.

"Man, that fish was big," James explained. "Dad and me were fishing in a pond and he hooked that big ol' sucker. It was fighting hard, but he got it in."

"Yeah, I saw that boy feeding, and I went over there and put my fly in front of him and he sucked it in," Ron continued in his soft, lackadaisical voice, the words never rushed, chewed for a while, coming out effortlessly. "My rod was bowed up pretty good before I got him in. He was about this big." Ron sat up, held out his arm, and ran his finger across his forearm where the fish would've ended.

"That thing was big," James finished.

"Yeah, I hooked into a huge carp when I was a kid," I continued without a pause. "That one was about 3 feet long and around 25 pounds. I fought that thing for an hour or so before I ever got it close. Snapped my tippet and was gone."

"You know some folks eat them things," Ron added.

"I know," I said. "My uncle caught one, one time, and a bunch of guys fishing from the bank asked him if they could have it. When he asked them what for, they told him they were going to make carp burgers. Seems like them fish'd be greasy to me."

"Pull over right there," I directed James to a carved out section of gravel, the last parking spot for anything other than off-road vehicles.

We all stopped talking as James pulled to the side of the dirt road and cut the engine, a van full of fishermen all itching to get in the water and try our luck. We hopped out in unison and walked to the

trunk. Ron and I put on our waders, lacing our boots and rigging up our fly rods. James, wearing shorts and a pair of loafers, ran monofilament through the guides of a micro-spinning rod. When Ron had told me that his son wasn't a fly fisherman, I instantly thought he couldn't be raising him right. After talking with James, I picked up on his love of the wild and assumed that the lack of a fly rod was circumstantial; he just hadn't reached that part of his angling development, and there was no better man to get him there than Ron.

With flies cinched tight to tippet and a chocolate brown Trout Magnet hooked to the eye of James' rod, we headed up an old logging road toward the growing murmur of fast water. The summer air was cool beneath the cover of new growth white oaks, red maples, and shagbark hickories. The dense forest cloaked the smell of conifers, morning glories, and fresh water. We remained silent; the only sounds were chirping wrens, the scatter of squirrels across dried leaves, and Moses Creek. It wasn't that we had nothing more to say to one another, but what can be said in a place so magnificent? The wild leaves men speechless.

The stream was right beside the trail now, the cold current pushing under low branches of rhododendron then dropping into open pools as it ran through the valley. We got to a place where the land flattened out beside the stream, shallow runs working through a mountain hollow. A steep bank was all that separated us from the current.

"This is where I usually get in," I said, breaking the silence and signaling that we'd arrived. Holding to the thin trunk of a redbud, I eased down the bank, scattered with nodding ladies' tresses and Dutchman's breeches. Layers of wildflowers and underbrush covered the flat, but we were all focused on the stream, all staying far enough back not to spook any fish that held just beneath the ripples.

"Go ahead Ron," I said. "There's usually a fish holding right there in the middle where the current wraps around that rock." I pointed toward the stream with my rod tip.

"James you go ahead," Ron said, passing the torch.

"No, you get in there and show me how it's done," James shot back, refusing the offer, choosing to see his old man catch the first fish.

Ron didn't pass up the chance again. As he crept toward the moving sheen, he pulled his fly, a weighted Woolly Worm, his go-to fly for every situation, from the stripping guide and took out just enough line from the reel to make the cast. He worked the backcast beneath leaf-strung branches and dropped the fly just above the ripple. An orange strike indicator ran along the seam as the Woolly Worm bounced across the freestone bottom. James and I watched closely. I could sense the emotion of a man who had finally come home, a man who knew nothing better than mountains, cold streams, and native specks. Ron set the hook as the Woolly Worm passed through the section I knew held fish.

"Missed one." Ron turned toward us.

James and I remained transfixed in meditation. I saw the perfect convergence of man and water. There was no question that Ron fit, his leggy frame and scruffy shave melting into the thin trunks and rough bark of red bays.

After a few more casts, he gave the next section to me. He hadn't hooked a fish, but he had missed one, an eminent sign that trout were there. I began throwing flies to incoming seams of current. The Parachute Adams rode flat upon the run, the dangling Pheasant Tail Nymph dragging across stones as the flies came back toward me. A trickle along the left bank emptied into a small pool, bubbled, and rejoined the flowing brook. I knew there would be a fish holding on the sandy slope of the pool.

Whipped into the trickle, the Parachute Adams disappeared into the bubbling foam, emerged on the inside cut, and curved toward the main current. The Adams vanished, yanked under with force, gone. I set the hook and felt fish, the two-weight rod pulsing and bowing with the tug of trout. I lifted a small native from the stream—the fish's colors a squirming reflection of a James Prosek painting—held the speck loosely in my hand, and turned toward Ron and James.

"Look at that, James. That's a speck. That's the fish I write about." Ron explained the magnificence to his son, who had never caught a wild trout.

James peered hard at the glorious marmorations of the brook trout, the fire-orange fins and gut. If a picture's worth a thousand words, a brookie's worth a million. Yet, there was nothing to say, awestruck by beauty. Lowering the trout back into the stream, I watched the fish merge back into the darkness and vanish among the rounded backs of stones.

The brook trout is the only salmonid native to the Southern Appalachians, and over time the Southern strand of trout has evolved. Genetics

prove that the native Southern Appalachian brook trout differs from other populations of brookies on a subspecies level, and I like to think that they are superior to those other strands.

The specks first made their way into these cold creeks as the temperature rose and the ice sheets receded at the end of the last Ice Age, 10,000 years ago. Since then they have adapted to their new environment, made these cool mountain creeks home, and prospered in the swirling eddies. The fish that came, stayed, and survived have colors that pop: brilliant emerald backs with moss marmorations, goldenrod sides scattered with piercing dots, a fire-orange belly lined with blood red fins tipped in white. These are the fish that belong, the only fish native to Appalachia.

James took the next stretch. He was larger than his father, but just as agile in the creek. Tossing the



Maybe I've romanticized the moment, dramatized an innocent smile, but there was something there, one more thing shared between father and son, a fish that belonged, what it meant to be wild and native, the life force of Appalachia.

small lure upstream, he had a hard time keeping up with the quickness of a narrow rush of water. When he reeled too slow, he got slack line; too fast and the presentation was unnatural. If Ron and I couldn't push James to pick up a fly rod, this outing on the stream might. James got a couple of bites but was unable to set the hook.

Ron took lead and sidearm cast under overhanging branches that enclosed the stream in a tunnel of foliage. His touch was soft, the placement perfect. The fluorescent orange strike indicator disappeared, Ron pulled up, and a fish was on. With fish in hand, Ron stared into the trout's red jasper eyes, took in every speck of the piscine splendor, and released the fish into the water's clutch.

We took turns as we headed upstream, rotated positions to give everybody a shot at trout. Ron and I generally hooked into one, or at least got a bite on our turns, but James was having trouble adjusting

to the small scale of a native stream. On a creek, the approach is entirely different than on a river; the same general rules apply, but there are no long casts, shifting steps, or misplacement of fly. Everything must be perfect.

I could see that James was getting antsy, itching for a speck of his own. A large deep hole widened the stream at a place where lichen covered boulders worked as dams along the banks. If there was a place for James to hook a brookie, this was it. The water was deep and wide, a perfect spot for his lead-headed Trout Magnet. He cast the dark brown grub into the current and held the rod high, keeping the lure down but not sunk. The line twitched, the rod wavered, and he set the hook without hesitation.

James' eyes lit up with the same passion I'd seen in his father's. Until that point, I hadn't thought

James looked very much like Ron, his dad tall and slim, lanky as me, and James mid-height and stocky like a football player. Yet, in that excitement, I saw the same glint flare from his pupils, the passion for things wild, a bond perhaps deeper than blood.

"I got one," James called to make sure his father took notice.

I was reminded of fishing with my dad, unforgettable moments shared on the water, as Ron walked across a pebbly shoal towards his kneeling son. James held the beautiful native proudly in his hands, carefully removing the hook, holding the fish just long enough, and releasing the trout back into the unknown.

With slime still fresh on his palms, James looked up at his father with an unbreakable smile. In that instant two words seemed to pass between the two: "I understand." Maybe I've ro-

manticized the moment, dramatized an innocent smile, but there was something there, one more thing shared between father and son, a fish that belonged, what it meant to be wild and native, the life force of Appalachia.

James and I continued up the stream, swapping holes, the one in back always glaring on at the one in front, both wanting to see a fish. After a while, I noticed that Ron was no longer with us. I turned around and saw him about 30 yards downstream. He was sprawled out across the cool surface of a flat granite slab covered with lime green lichens like fungal camouflage, the car-sized rock resting in the creek. He stared up through leaves spread like hands across a glass pane, into the afternoon sky. He adjusted his legs, shifted his spine, and closed his eyes. Only one thing can fuse a man to a place like this. Only one thing, and all three of us knew exactly what it was.

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