

# The Tellico River Basin

Tennessee and North Carolina's historic Tellico River basin, one of the Southeast's premier trout-fishing destinations, offers year-round fishing for wild and stocked trout in secluded mountain streams. The basin, which includes the Cherokee National Forest and the Citico Creek Wilderness Area, has 138 miles of trout streams, including 19 miles of brook-trout streams. It lies just south of Great Smoky Mountains National Park and is within driving distance of Atlanta, Birmingham, Charlotte, and Nashville. Although close to these cities, the Tellico River basin remains relatively uncrowded, perhaps because they are overshadowed by the more hallowed waters of the nearby national park.

The Tellico basin, the birthplace of the famous Tellico Nymph, can be divided into three regions, each of which appeals to a different angling constituency. The first region, the Tennessee portion of the main Tellico River, is primarily for catch-and-keep fishermen, and contains both stocked and wild trout. The second region, which includes the larger tributaries to the Tellico, the Bald and North rivers in Tennessee, and the headwaters of the Tellico in North Carolina, has managed wild-trout streams, with mostly rainbow trout. The third region, the remote headwaters of the Tellico, supports the rare Southern strain of brook trout.

## The Tellico River

One of the largest natural trout streams in the Southeast, the Tellico is big water by most standards. Although the Tennessee portion of the river is stocked weekly during spring and summer and has a liberal creel limit, large trout are occasionally taken. Brown trout of more than 20 pounds have been caught there, and each year anglers catch trophies of ten pounds or more. Excellent fishing for small wild rainbows can be found upstream from the Tellico Hatchery to the beginning of the brook-trout waters in North Carolina.

To reach the Tellico, go to the Sweetwater exit of I-75 and take Tennessee Highway 68 south. Go to the town of Tellico Plains and turn onto Tennessee Route 360. Then take Tennessee Route 165 to the Tellico River and Tellico River Road, which follows the river to the North Carolina border. The river is easily accessible along Tellico River Road.

The stocked trout waters on the Tellico begin at the Turkey Creek bridge, about 14 miles from the North Carolina line. Trout may also be found below the bridge, but that water is better known for its smallmouth bass fishing. The river from Turkey Creek to the North Carolina line is known as the Tellico-Citico permit area. It costs \$3.50 a day to fish there from March 15 to September 15 (permits are available at any fishing license dealer).

While the stocking arrangement may sound like an only slightly more sporting version of a trip to the fish market, many big browns survive the summertime bait fishers, and some grow into the large trout for which the Tellico is famous. The stocking and permit season ends on September 15, and the river is open to regular license holders from September 15 through March 15. Since the weather during that time is often warm, with high temperatures in the 50s possible all winter, the water is ideal for winter fly fishers.

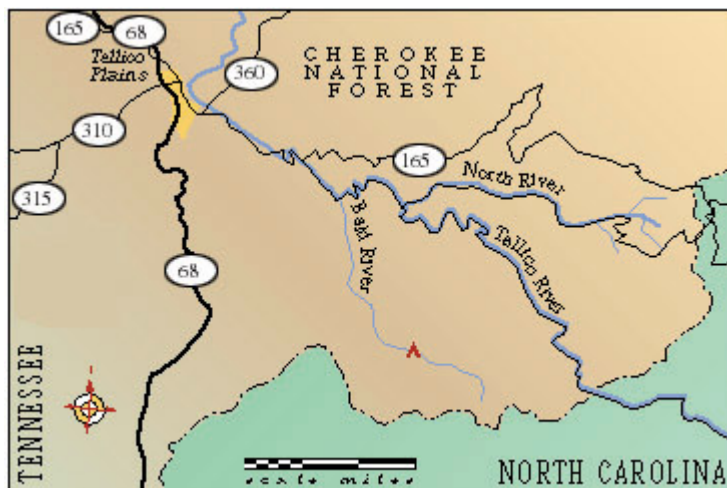


*Several streams in the Tellico River basin have special regulations to maintain quality fishing. The Tennessee portion of the Tellico River (left and above) contains both stocked and wild browns and rainbows. The tributaries and the headwaters hold wild brook trout.*

# Wild Trout

The paved Tellico River road becomes a gravel road at the North Carolina line, and within two miles it becomes an off-road-vehicle trail (a footpath), which follows the Tellico into its remote wild-trout headwaters. All of the Tellico in North Carolina is exclusively wild-trout water, with rainbows dominating the lower sections; Peckerwood Creek and Fain's Ford in North Carolina mark the beginning of the brook-trout territory. I've had excellent days fishing the wild-trout section of the Tellico, including one golden fall afternoon when 69 rainbows and brookies jumped on my #16 caddis and #18 Wulff flies.

Two prime wild-trout rivers, the North and Bald rivers, both major tributaries to the Tellico, flow down from the Tennessee mountains in the vicinity of Haw Knob (elevation: 5,472 feet) and Beaverdam Bald. While the lower portions of these rivers offer easy access, the headwaters often require as much mountaineering as fishing expertise. The rewards, however, are proportional to the amount of effort you expend.



Deeply-marked, strong-swimming wild trout occupy all reaches of the two streams. Both the introduced rainbow and brown trout of the area are known for their spectacular coloration. The rainbow trout have "cat eye" markings and a strong red band on each side. The genetically distinct native Southern brook trout and the introduced Northern brook trout are also known for their beautiful cryptic coloration. On these waters, you can catch wild brown, rainbow, and brook trout in one day while enjoying a respite from the corn-chucking crowds on the lower Tellico.

Bald River is the largest of the wild-trout rivers, draining both the Bald River Gorge Wilderness and the Upper Bald River Primitive Area, a total of 14,181 acres. With only one mile of road access along its length, it is also the major backcountry river in the Tellico basin. For the first 4.8 miles above the 120-foot-high Bald River Falls along Tellico River Road, the Bald flows through a gorge and is accessible only by foot. The gorge section of the river is a federal wilderness area and is, predictably, the home for some of the area's largest wild rainbow trout. But the Bald River Trail, which runs the length of the gorge, is heavily traveled, especially in the summer and during hunting season.

The middle portion of Bald River is accessible via Forest Service Road 126, which leads to Holly Flats Campground on the banks of the Bald River. The river becomes increasingly smaller as it passes two small

wild rainbow- and brown-trout feeder streams, Kirkland Creek and Henderson Branch. At .8 miles from Holly Flats, the river leaves the road for good, and only the Brookshire Creek trail and an old logging road provide access. The upper section of the Bald River offers excellent, if somewhat cramped, backcountry fishing.



*The North and Bald (above) rivers provide backcountry wild-trout fishing. A portion of the Bald flows through a gorge that is accessible only by foot. The North River has easy road access, and consequently is fished more heavily.*

The North River, on the other hand, offers easy road access via North River Road from the Tellico to its remote headwaters. Consequently, it suffers from greater fishing pressure than the Bald River, but it still has some of the best wild-trout fishing in the Southeast. The North River's lower reaches, from the Tellico to the confluence of Sugar Cove and Meadow branches, about six miles of water, have both rainbow and brown trout, mostly in the 6- to 12-inch range, with browns being more numerous in the lowest reaches of the river. Browns of more than seven pounds have been pulled from the North River. This is my favorite stretch of water in the basin, and it is no great feat for an angler to catch and release 40 or more wild trout on a good day.

The native brookies are there, too, but just barely. A moratorium has been in effect on brook-trout fishing in Great Smoky Mountains National Park since 1975. The brook trout in the Tellico basin are only now coming back from the edge of extinction, largely because of an admirable restoration program overseen by state and federal agencies. A recent study funded by the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Division found the state's brookie population to be 57 percent Southern strain fish, 15 percent Northern strain fish, and 28 percent hybrids. All brook trout should be released unharmed.

## Tellico River Hatches

Anglers who want to match mayfly hatches will face a challenge in the Tellico area, because the mayfly hatches there are usually described as either sporadic or sparse. *Epeorus* (Blue Quills) and *Stenonema* (Cahills) are the most likely genera to be encountered. Caddis, stoneflies, and terrestrials, however, can provide good fishing.

Because of the unpredictable nature of the local aquatic insects, prospecting is the best tactic on most Southern streams. Many local anglers prefer traditional attractor and searching patterns. For dries, they use various Wulff patterns, a Trude Coachman, or a Parachute Adams, and for nymphs, they use the Tellico Nymph, George Nymph, and Zug Bug.

Caddis are easily the most reliable and numerous aquatic insects in the area and can be found hatching just about every day of the year, and they provide the basis for year-round dry-fly fishing. Though yellow and olive Elk-hair Caddis are hard to beat as searching patterns, I favor a fluttering Caddis design as a fish exciter. [See *the book*, *Fishing the Dry Fly as a Living Insect*, by *Leonard M. Wright, Jr.*, 1972. THE EDITORS.]

My Haw Knob Caddis was designed specifically with the Tellico and North rivers in mind, and in its light incarnation, with a yellow mixed dubbing of rabbit, Antron, and hare's ear, it imitates many Southern caddis species. In spring and summer, try any #12-#18 high-floating caddis pattern, however; and in winter, stick with a #18 dark caddis. The large (#6-#8) ginger-colored Great Autumn Caddis (*Pycnopsyche*) hatches in September and October, and a good imitation can produce some spectacular surface fishing for large trout. I tie a simple pattern on a 2X-long hook, #8-#12, and even though it has the elegance of a hairball, the trout don't seem to care.

Several species of stoneflies hatch throughout the year, but they are most numerous from May through September, with little yellow *Isoperla* stoneflies ranking as the most conspicuous. Many anglers match *Isoperla* stonefly hatches by using the "two bugs with one stone" approach--they use a #12-#14 yellow Elk-hair Caddis.



*Access to many Tellico basin streams is easy, but the best fishing for wild trout requires a hike into the mountains. In Tennessee, the Tellico is stocked but has many holdover browns.*

I match the stonefly hatch with a realistic Idaho pattern, Mike Lawson's Henry's Fork Yellow Sally. I spent an entire day last summer on the brook-trout streams catching and releasing brookies on a #14 Henry's Fork Yellow Sally. One foot-long fish I caught, I've been told, was one of the largest brook trout reported from the area in several years.

Big stonefly nymphs regularly account for some of the largest fly-caught trout in the region. Good numbers of stoneflies, ranging from large black *Pteronarcys* and golden *Acroncuria* to small green *Chloroperlidae*, inhabit the fast clear waters of the Tellico basin. A Tellico Nymph up to #6 can be considered a golden stonefly nymph imitation. A #16 or #18 black stonefly dry can produce outstanding winter angling, especially when fished drowned or spent.

When all else fails in the summer and fall, my wife, Melanie, and I fish terrestrials. The two most productive patterns are a Letort Cricket (#14-#16), which is also a regional favorite searching pattern, and a herl-bodied Crowe Beetle (#14-#16). I have caught more Tellico-area browns on Letort Crickets than on any other fly. A #12-#14 golden-colored Letort Hopper doubles as a hopper or a stonefly imitation, and is also a good fly for brown trout. In the fall, I tie on a #18-#20 Grizzly or Ausable Wulff, and the trout slurp it down like candy.

The equipment used to cast this bug assortment should be simple, rugged, small-stream tackle, unless the mission is trophy brown-trout hunting. Rods in the 2- to 5-weight range are ideal, in lengths ranging from six

to eight feet. My personal favorite outfit is a 6 1/2-foot, 2-weight with a double-taper line. Its lightweight nature has not prevented me from pulling 14-inch wild rainbows out of logjams.

Because of the rough water, plunge pools, and overgrown vegetation that characterize the Tellico basin, 4X to 6X tippets on leaders as short as six or seven feet work best. Some anglers claim an average cast on the wild-trout streams is no more than six feet, and some old-timers fished with cane poles with just leaders and flies--no reels or fly lines. Legendary angler Carl Standing Deer of the Cherokee Nation reportedly refused to use even leader material. He fished with only a line made of braided horsehair. The Tellico basin streams have thick, overgrown vegetation because the area averages about 70 inches of rainfall a year. Raingear is a necessity, though the rain is unusually distributed--fall is the driest season; summer is the wettest. Fall and winter can be mercilessly cold or unbelievably mild.

In February 1996 the temperature hit the upper 60s, so Melanie and I went to the Tellico for some winter dry-fly fishing. After dodging the melting snowbanks on Tellico River Road, we found early black stoneflies everywhere, and trout gobbled them during midday egg-laying flights. Melanie fished one of her favorite little wild-trout streams, and I took to the main Tellico. We agreed to meet back an hour and a half later.

I began with a black stonefly imitation. It is so realistic that I reach for the collecting bottle every time I see it. The rainbows would have none of it. In frustration, I turned to a #14 fluttering brown stonefly pattern, a Stone Hare, because I dimly recalled having seen one adult earlier in day. The trout went crazy over it, and after catching eight fish, I was sure my fly selection would prove me the genius of the day.

Melanie returned with a pleased expression on her face. She announced she had also caught eight fish, and she assured me her trout were bigger. I asked what fly pattern she had used. "Surely it was a brown stonefly," I said.

"No, a #14 Haw Knob Caddisfly," she replied.

A brown stonefly and a yellow caddisfly? In February? The fish were playing tricks on us. Or maybe their brains were still frozen. But the similarity was obvious--the fluttering wing. As it turned out, the trout had just wanted something, anything, that looked alive. On some days, on the Tellico River, the wing is the thing.

## Tellico River Flies

### SPRING

- Tellico Nymph, #6-#10.
- Soft-hackle Gold-ribbed Hare's Ear, #12-#16.
- Elk-hair or Fluttering Caddis, olive or yellow, #12-#18.
- Mr. Rapidan, Grizzly Wulff, or Ausable Wulff, #12-#16.
- Parachute Adams, #12-#16.
- Fluttering Stone Hare, #12-#16.



*Autumn Haw Knob Caddis*

## SUMMER

- Tellico Nymph, #6-#16.
- Elk-hair or Fluttering Caddis, olive or yellow, #12-#18.
- Henry's Fork Yellow Sally, #14-#16.
- Trude Coachman, #12-#14.
- Letort Cricket, #14-#16.
- Crowe Beetle, #14-#16.



*Tellico Nymph*

## AUTUMN

- Tellico Nymph, #6-#10.
- Autumn Haw Knob Caddis, #8-#12.
- Mr. Rapidan, Grizzly Wulff, or Ausable Wulff, #18-#20.
- Letort Cricket, #14-#16.
- Crowe Beetle, #14-#16.



*Fluttering Stone Hare*

## WINTER

- Tellico Nymph, #6-#12.
- Red Fox Squirrel Nymph, #6-#14.
- Soft-hackle Gold-ribbed Hare's Ear, #12-#16.
- Elk-hair or Fluttering Caddis, gray or black, #18.
- Little Black Stonefly, #16-#20.

