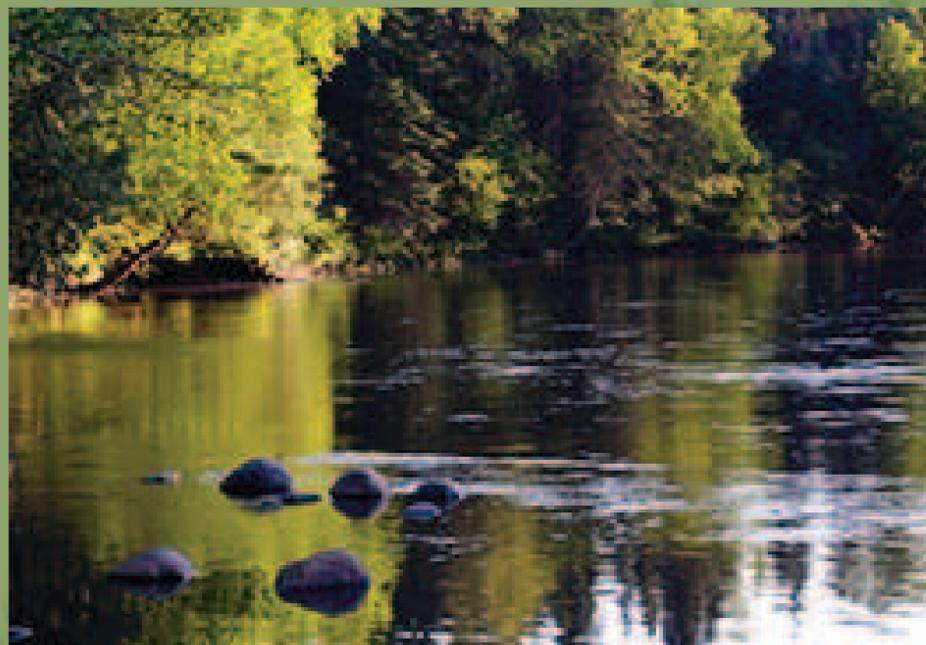
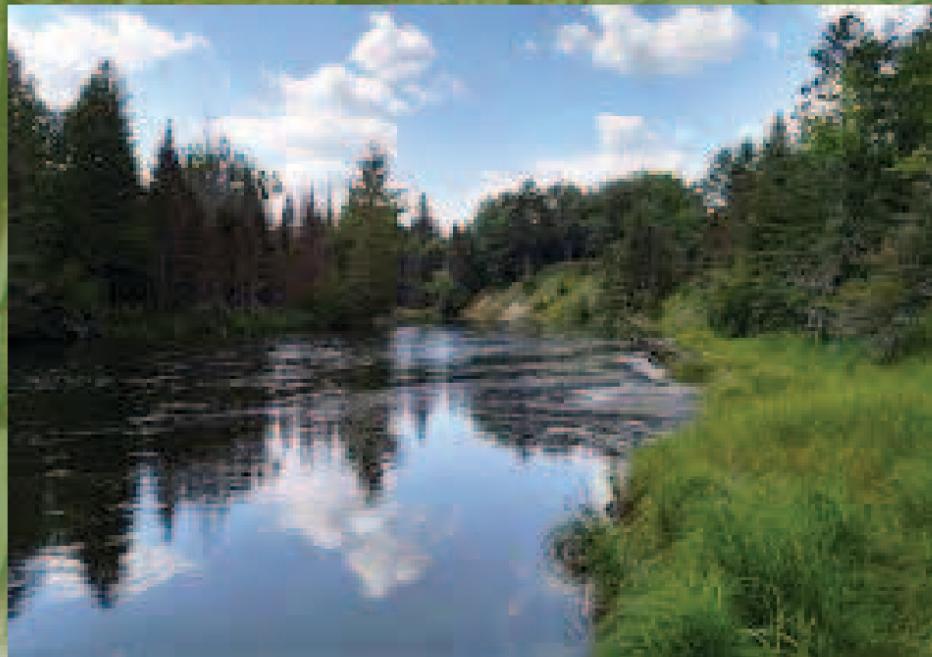


FISHING FOR FLIES

BY Ben Schanz



I learned to fly fish on the Au Sable River near Luzerne, Michigan. My great-uncle Bill taught me when I was about eight years old and every time I pull my fly rod out of the case, I can almost hear his voice: “Back and forth, Ben, back and forth.”

I remember his first lessons. In the yard of the cabin on the river, he placed in my awkward hands, a fishing rod longer than any other that I have ever held. He told me to imagine that I was standing in the face of a clock, and the rod was the hand. *Ten to two* was the only path of that hand, though. *Ten to two*. In a rhythm, much like music, with grace and balance. *Ten to two, back and forth*. I repeated that cadence until my wrist hurt. I can't recall if it was the same day or the next, but he eventually strung the line through the guides on the rod, and tied on a tired old fly he had clipped the barb off of. I repeated the back and forth cadence—for hours if I recall—all the while, looking down the hill over the river, wishing to get the chance to climb in the water, and hook into a trout. Fishing in the purest form.

I remember his instructions when lifting the rod, and the line, to start your back cast, I needed to pull the line towards me slightly, to start the momentum backwards. Once the line caught up with the rod behind me, only then could I begin the motion forward. I would then feel the line race out towards the target, and with a little luck, the fly on the end would float graciously to the water, or in this case, the lawn beside the cabin. For quite some time, the line bunched

up in front of me forming a pile of line, making quite a mess. The leader would tangle, and Uncle Bill patiently untangled the knots that I created, and urged me along. As I got the mechanics of the lift correct, I found myself rushing the fore cast, and snapping that tired old fly clean off the leader. After Uncle Bill tied another fly onto the leader and reminded me, “back and forth, back and forth,” I practiced there in the yard for hours. I practiced until that fly rod became a part of me.

After some time of practicing the back-and-forth motion, learning the rod's characteristics, and feeling the rod load with power, letting me know when all was ready for launch out before me, Uncle Bill decided that I was ready to try the river. He tied on a good fly, soaked it in silicon water repellent and started off down the hill. I anxiously followed. He handed me the rod, and told me to stand in a very specific place, and cast toward the feeder creek that ran through his property. I was very nervous, and a bit cold, but I cast my fly towards that creek's mouth and bunched my line up a few yards in front of me. Uncle Bill was on the dock, reminding me about the form the nervousness and the cold river water caused me to neglect. After a few casts towards the creek, there was a little splash, and my fly that was once floating delicately on the surface of the calm water near the creek's mouth was gone. “Lift your rod tip up Ben to set the hook,” he instructed. I did, in a nervous and panicked fashion, and pulled that fly right out of the fish's mouth.

He advised me that trout have thin lips and pulling too hard will pull the hook right through. He told me that I needed to set the hook gently, like I was tapping the ceiling with the rod tip. I cast again and again to the same spot, and before too long, another splash took my fly under, this time, I saw the white belly of a trout break the surface. I set the hook as Uncle Bill had instructed, and felt the pull of my first fly rod brook trout. I saw this little green body with bright red flanks try to dart out into the current. Like a bullet, it rushed out towards the main river, trying to resist the pressure that I was applying with the rod and reel. This fish was yanking and tugging with all his might to free the hook from its mouth. I continued to reel the fish in, until it was close enough to grab. I softly placed my hand around its shiny little body, and admired its sheer sides. Green on top, with very bright red stripes running his length, all marked with spots tinted with blue. The fins were red like blood, marked with a black stripe and a white edge. I looked up onto the dock to see my Uncle Bill give me a nod of his head, and a sly little grin, all while peering over his eyeglasses at me. “Nice fish,” he said. He turned up the hill, and walked up to the cabin. I continued to fish until dark, catching fish that I am certain Uncle Bill put there just for me.

Now that I look back at that memory, I figure that grin was my uncle's way of saying to himself that he had enriched my life. The truth is, he has. With that lesson to fly fish, my uncle opened a whole new world to me.

and conversation with my Uncle Bill and my Aunt Marilyn. I always made time to fish, just not as frequently. When I got into high school, my trips to the cabin all but ceased, and with their rising age, and the upkeep required for the cabin, they sold the property.

It gave me the freedom to explore. Every trip to the cabin, I ventured further away from the feeder creek and into the mainstream. Regardless how far away I walked, I always stayed within eyesight of the cabin, and often, I saw Uncle Bill standing on top of the hill watching over me.

I learned how to read a river. A river will talk to you, if you are willing to listen. She will show you things. The current pressing harder against my legs told me that I should choose another path. The breaks in the current showed me where to look for the places fish will hide to ambush their prey. The banks, under-swept by years of running water, provided safe refuge for the fish of my dreams. I learned beauty, long before I knew what it really was. Those expeditions onto the river taught me the importance of congruence with nature. If you were not part of it, you were against it, because trout are finicky fish. If your fly drags in the water, or floats by in a manner any different from the insect you are trying to mimic, the fish will not eat it. You need to know the way the river moves, and works, and if you are there to listen, she will tell you.

As I grew older, my trips to the cabin became fewer and fewer. The times that I did make it up there, most of my time was spent on the river. If I was not fishing, then I would be watching, listening, and soaking in all that she was willing to give. Eventually I started spending more time inside the cabin, sharing meals

about the fish. I long for the days when I was younger, paying attention to the subtle signs the river would give, to reveal the locations of the fish I dreamed of. I longed for the colorful little fish, trying to pull my arms right from their sockets, only to reluctantly give in. Every chance that I get to float a fly on the surface of the water is a soul-cleansing experience. Bass and bluegill require less perfection than trout, but they still require a great amount of skill. They still require you to be in tune with the bigger scheme of things. There is no faking it when you are fly-fishing.

In my late twenties, I moved to Florida and made friends with a couple people with offshore fishing boats. I fell in love with the ocean quickly, and caught big and powerful ocean fish that would eat those brook trout I was catching on the river in one bite. I have caught large bass, up to nine pounds on ultra-lite tackle freshwater fishing in Florida.

I still miss the days on the river. Pure and innocent I was then. Over the years, I have become more jaded. The rigors of earning a living, keeping schedules, and making deadlines have tarnished the person that I was back then, a wide-eyed child, looking for another hole to work. I pull the fly rod from its case, and search for relief. I fix the reel to the reel seat, and run the line through the guides, remembering that back and forth motion. Much like life, fly-fishing is made up of a series of back and forth motions, performed on a silent cadence, with the finish coming soft and subtly.

I reach out and begin the rearward motion, drawing the line towards me, building energy, loading. I feel the rod flex in my hands as the line reaches the end of the stroke, ready to launch forward to its target. I move the rod forward, feeling the line's momentum swing into a big arch behind me, moving forward before me, and watch the finish, softly, subtly, onto the water. If I do not catch fish this time, it is fine by me, because I can almost see my uncle there, on the hill, watching me over the frames of his glasses, whispering, “back and forth Ben, back and forth.”

To quote the movie *A River Runs Through It*, “I am haunted by waters.”

