

## Bluegrass TU's Adventures into the Driftless

In the early morning hours of Monday June 13<sup>th</sup> 2011, three very excited members of the Bluegrass Chapter of Trout Unlimited, head out. In a recently acquired rental Kia Sportage, with four cylinders of power and promise of great gas mileage, we packed more luggage and supplies than would be needed for three weeks much less five days. Gary Rose, David Blackburn and myself, (Ken Wells) hit the road north with the statement that the driver would keep driving until someone cried uncle and begged for a rest stop. Eleven hours and many stories later we pulled into the small town of Viroqua Wisconsin. Gary had been to this area with his son and was an excellent navigator. We drove out of Viroqua west on hwy 56 to County road "O" and then north toward the Bad Axe River. Just prior to the small community (wide spot in the road) of Newton we turned into the drive of the Mayfly Lodge. Mr. Steve Bentz greeted weary travelers with warm welcome and very comfortable accommodations. Steve opened up his well appointed lodge kitchen for our chef du jour to prepare a great evening meal. Having made a stop in Madison on the way in, we purchase provisions including Wisconsin summer sausage and brick (stinky) cheese, hamburger and fixins. While snacking on cheese, summer sausage, crackers and a variety of beverages a great evening meal was placed on the table and quickly devoured. After cleaning up the kitchen and despite the fact that we were all enthralled with the variety of art works on display and the natural beauty of the area, we called it a night. 5:00am CST came to early, but with the anticipation of new experiences I jumped into the shower and prepared for the day. I put on cowboy coffee while David and Gary prepared for the day. Moving faster than we anticipate, we realized we had plenty of time to find a good breakfast before we had to meet Mat Wagoner at his independent fly shop "Driftless Angler Fly Shop.

Mat opens his shop at 7:00 and we are his first clients of the day. Mat has a fully stocked fly shop with brands including Echo, Simms, Fishpond, Airflo, Lamson, Rio and many many more. The fly selections he carries are second to none and several of the flies are of his own design. Mat introduces us to our guide for our three half days of guided fishing, Pete! Pete and his mate a black lab greeted us with a warm smile and wet licks (by the lab not Pete). Pete has guided the area for eighteen years and knows the area waters very well. Pete took us south on route 14 to just outside Readstown. After parking on a pull off prepared by a collaboration between local TU Chapters and farmers, Pete gave us a strong warning about the poisonous plant life in the area. Specifically the wild parsnip which grows along most right of ways. Apparently if the fluid from the broken plant comes into contact with your skin it can leave a nasty blister that can stay for up to months at a time. Once we were suited up in our waders and boots or wading crocks we followed Pete across a fence at a crossing prepared again by local TU Chapters. Access to the farmers fields and the streams are wooden crossings made to prevent fences from being trampled down and waders torn on barbed wire. The water temperature was taken and it was a cool 53 degrees. Pete tied a #16 caddis fly on each of our lines and proceeded to put us on fish. As we three anglers began to shake off the rust from our cast, Pete critiqued each of us and offered some very useful corrections. By the end of the morning we had walked a half mile of spring fed Reads Creek. Gary caught the first trout of the trip casting upstream and striping to skate the caddis fly across the surface of the stream. David and I both had opportunities but failed to land trout on this stream. After four

very fast hours Pete called time and we headed back to the fly shop to evaluate the morning. Before lunch we made a few fly purchases for the afternoon outing and got directions to our next steam. After traveling north to the Scandinavian community of Westby, we had lunch at Borgen's Café. We all ate a healthy lunch of a salad and ice tea, then we partook in the delicious homemade pies the café is noted for.

The afternoon stream we selected was the Timber Coulee. We traveled north of Westby on 27 to County Road "P" then west past the Snow Flake Ski and Golf Club, which host an unbelievably scary ski jump. Gary and I promptly encouraged David to give it a try (he declined while reminding us of WWS agony of defeat). We turned off of County road P onto Oakdale Ave and again pulled onto a prepared pull off. We walked to a small bridge that crossed the Timber Coulee to view the stream from above. The trout were holding in the stream by the hundreds. By holding I mean the stream was not letting them go! Before we got on the stream we saw a small cottage with a sign identifying it as a rental. We all got very excited seeing this great little rental steps away from the Timber Coulee .

At this point I would like to speak to the wonderful restoration work that the Southwest TU Chapters have been doing in the Driftless Area. Many of the land owners welcome fishermen to the area. The streams are fenced on each side and seeded with pasture grasses and cattle are permitted to graze to keep the stream banks clear. The Summer 2011 TROUT magazine has a great story titled "The Yin & Yang of Cows, Can They Coexist With Trout"? This article details some of the restoration in the Driftless Area. Speaking of cows, the above mentioned cabin on the Timber Coulee was next door to a very large dairy farm and the stream flowed nearly three quarter mile thru the farm. As you enter the field there is a sign that states "beware of BULL, enter at own risk". In any area you fish you need to be aware of the wildlife and or domestic animals. After fishing for nearly an hour the dairy cattle became curious and we became conscious of our false cast so as not to land a bovine. The afore mentioned "bull" did make his presence know to me across the stream, which resulted in a staring contest and me backing away. I'm not sure he was aggressive or just curious but I was not willing to wait around to find out I might be wrong. As the cows moved back toward the barn we continued to fish with limited success, I landed a nice wild brook, while Gary was fishing the hole with hundreds of trout in it. David made a big splash while trying to relocate to another section of the stream. Luckily he was properly outfitted and has his wading belt on. David went to lawn furniture at the cabin and began to strip out of the wet shirts which dried quickly. We left a little early feeling the effects of travel and needing to prepare supper.

Supper consisted of locally grown 2 inch cut ribeye steaks and baked potatoes ,having located a local butcher and meat market just north of Viroqua. We purchased Cheboygan brats and the steak.

Early the next morning we again met up with Pete at the Fly Shop and he lead us east on hwy 56 to the community of Viola. As we traveled on 56 we spied a beautiful stream that flowed thru the pastoral setting to the right of the road. Lo and behold this was our next destination, a wonderfully restored stream of Camp Creek. Pete again put us on good sections of the stream and exciting fish. The fish were wild and all had PHD's (meaning, most were smarter than me). The hill side was covered with beef cattle of unknown breed; they were high on the hills due to the constant rain we endured this morning. The rain enhanced the beauty of the area as the green of the hay pastures and corn fields became more

intense. The fishing was slow but productive as was the continued instruction from a very capable guide. I am no longer breaking my wrist on my back cast and am only taking my rod to 11:00 just behind my ear. We again were casting upstream and high sticking to skip the dry flies across the surface of the water to imitate a skittering bug. Once again after an extremely fast four hours Pete called it a morning. After another meal in Westby (and another slice of homemade pie) we decided to fish the stream that we had been looking at for the last couple of days outside the lodge windows, the Bad Axe. The Bad Axe was not quite as clear as the other streams we had fished however Steve had given a very nice report of the stream that we were excited to explore. The banks of the Bad Axe made it very difficult to get into the stream to cast. We were forced to cast while standing in waist high grasses. The rain subsided in the evening and the fishing became very nice. I landed one nice brook and one small brown, although Gary thought the brown was a quick release. Just as an evening thunder storm rolled down the valley I started fishing some swift white water. I was fishing an #16 olive caddis letting it drift into the white water downstream from where I was standing. My perception paid off with a large strike, lifting a large brown from the frothy waves. Alas it was not meant to be as he flipped off. A second cast, the brown struck again (at least a brown of similar size) again I was not successful in my efforts to land this fine specimen. As the thunder rolled closer Gary said we needed to move out as not to get caught in the storm. I didn't want to give up on this hole, so I told Gary I was going to make one last cast. Again a nice 15" brown took the olive caddis. As Gary and I both got excited by the size and beauty of this fish, I was determined to keep the tension on the line and finally land it. As I brought it toward the bank and lifted it to be netted by Gary, the beast pulled the loop off the end of my fly line and slipped back into the froth with my fly, tippet, leader and loop in its mouth. We walked back to the car and drove to the lodge talking of what could have been, not sad at the results but invigorated to continue our adventure.

After an evening meal of brats, salad and fried potatoes we discussed the evening of fishing on the Bad Axe with the lodge owner and relaxed while watching a baseball game and enjoyed the setting sun in an around the storm clouds. The next morning we fished on our own choosing a branch of Coon Creek in the Bohemian Valley. Taking Hwy 27 west out of Westby to County Road "P" we drove further than we had before to County Hwy G and then onto County Hwy H. This was one of the most picturesque streams we had fished to date. This morning the trout we could see from the bridge over the stream, were not holding they were frantically darting as if spooked. The stream was flowing away from us so we chose to hike about a mile downstream thru a well restored riparian. We fished back upstream throwing a myriad of flies with no success for any of us. Again while frustrated at the lack of fish we were still excited by the environment and marveled in the great stream restoration that had been performed on this stream.

Before heading out for lunch we drove into the Nordic village of Coon Valley. Ask Gary about the lemonade stand. We had heard of a top notch Italian restaurant that we had to try and with limited seating, reservations were suggested. We tried the door to find it locked but the cook heard us and rushed to the door to find out what we needed. Gary introduced himself as Pete Rose's brother and made reservations for late that evening. We then headed out for lunch at you guessed it, our now favorite Café in Westby. The staff welcomed us as if we were locals. We finally met the pie maker as she passed out free samples of a delicious molasses cookie she had baked. After we ate and said our

final goodbyes to the waiters and owner , we headed back to Viroqua and the Driftless Angler. Pete had a couple of streams lined up for our evening fishing. We went back to the Timber Coulee past the interesting rental we had found to County road X and fished the treasure chest. This area is called the treasure chest because it sits close to the road right below a road sign for County road "X" and X marks the spot on the map. This area was formerly a highly eroded area of the Timber Coulee that had been restored with major bank stabilization and riparian rebuilding. The cattle had not been on this pasture this spring and the grasses were chest high. The trout were rising and the evening light was getting perfect. We fished for two and a half hours in this section with moderate success. Pete then led us to a city park in Coon Valley across the street from our evening dining at the Italian restaurant. This park was set up with handicap accessible pads that went up to the edge of Coon Creek. While we were setting up with streamers and drop flies, four screaming and giggling teen age girls decided they wanted to swim. This section of Coon Creek doubled as the local swimming hole as well as a fine trout stream. We moved on downstream to allow the young ladies access to the swimming hole. We were casting to the far side of the stream and allowing the drift to carry the flies downstream. This was David's stream. He landed and hooked up on several browns. Gary had several hookups and I landed a nice brook trout. We fished till dark trying to make it last as long as possible. But alas all great things come to an end, but before we packed up and headed back to Kentucky we had one last culinary feast to enjoy. Pete Rose's brother and his friends went to DiSciascio's for one of the most memorable dining experiences.

The next morning we headed back to Lexington but not before we made a stop in Madison at the Bavarian Sausage factory to buy cheeses and brats to enjoy with our family upon our return.

If you have never traveled with fellow anglers on one of the chapters outings, I encourage you to find the time and sign up for one of the best times you will enjoy ever in your life.

Submitted by

Kenneth R. Wells,

Programs Chair.