

A woman in a waders is fly fishing in a river. She is standing in the water, holding a fishing rod. The river is surrounded by dense green trees and foliage. The water is clear and reflects the surrounding greenery. The overall scene is peaceful and scenic.

**Jimmy Jacobs**

*REVISED AND UPDATED  
4TH EDITION*

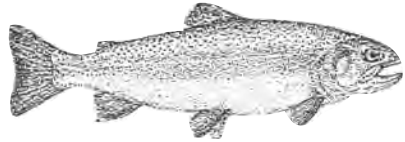
# **Trout Fishing**

**in North Georgia**

**A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO  
PUBLIC STREAMS AND RIVERS**

**Jimmy Jacobs**

# **Trout Fishing in North Georgia**



**A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO PUBLIC  
LAKES, RESERVOIRS, AND RIVERS**

  
**PEACHTREE**  
ATLANTA



Published by  
PEACHTREE PUBLISHERS  
1700 Chattahoochee Avenue  
Atlanta, Georgia 30318-2112

*www.peachtree-online.com*

Text ©1998, 2001, 2007 by Jimmy Jacobs  
Photographs ©2001 by Jimmy Jacobs, Glenda Cole, Polly Dean  
Cover photograph © 2001 by Jimmy Jacobs

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Cover design by Loraine M. Joyner  
Composition by Melanie McMahon Ives  
Maps by Douglas J. Ponte  
Interior illustrations by Robert Harris  
Photographs by Jimmy Jacobs, except where noted; photographs on pages 70, 128, and 207 by Polly Dean; photographs on page 179 by Glenda Cole

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Jacobs, Jimmy.

Trout fishing in North Georgia : a comprehensive guide to public lakes, reservoirs, and rivers / by Jimmy Jacobs. -- 4th ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 1-56145-403-6

1. Trout fishing--Georgia. I. Title.

SH688.U6J33 2007

799.17'5709758--dc22

2006031387

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## Introduction

# Discovering Georgia Trout

**ALTHOUGH I GREW UP IN ATLANTA**, deep in the heart of Dixie where the largemouth bass is king, I spent my youth reading the likes of Corey Ford and Ted Trueblood. I voraciously devoured outdoor magazine tales of rising trout, hatches matched, and hook-jawed, brutish brown trout. While my classmates neglected their studies to dream of hawg-sized bass inhaling plastic worms, my own daydreams revolved around visions of delicate trout rising to a perfectly cast gray hackle peacock in a stream barely wider than a footpath.

In spite of this natural inclination to cold-water fisheries, I one day discovered myself to be a college student without ever having actually caught or even fished for a trout. Even sadder, all my dreams had revolved around names like the Beaverkill, Yellowstone, and Au Sable. I was in my early twenties before I discovered that members of the trout family made their home barely 60 miles north of me in my home state.

Once I made this discovery, however, I dedicated myself to their pursuit with a passion. Although I had been fishing for bluegill with a fly rod since my early teens—as practice for the day I would challenge the trout for which that gear was intended—I opted to use ultralight spinning gear on my first trout ventures in Georgia.

On a bright April day in 1971, I traveled to Cooper Creek, north of Dahlonega, for the opening day of trout season and the beginning of what has become a lifelong quest for me. My first day on the





**The vast majority of Peach State trout streams are small freestone creeks in the north Georgia mountains.**

water I joined the elbow-to-elbow crowd on that heavily stocked and fished creek. The roads were like crowded parking lots, the anglers were out in force, and the fish were reluctant to strike my small spinners. By the end of the day I had managed to land one 7.25-inch brown trout. I had also fallen victim to an affliction from which I hope never to recover: I am a trout-fishing addict. For that I make no apologies.

Probably the most frustrating part of my own introduction to trout fishing in Georgia's mountain streams was the sheer lack of solid information about those waters. Even if you do find the creeks on a map, your problems are not over. All trout water in Georgia is not the same. Streams have very different personalities. Some are perfect for fly casting, while others will drive you to distraction if you tackle them with a long rod. The latter, with their canopy of overhanging foliage, just beg for an ultralight spinning rig.

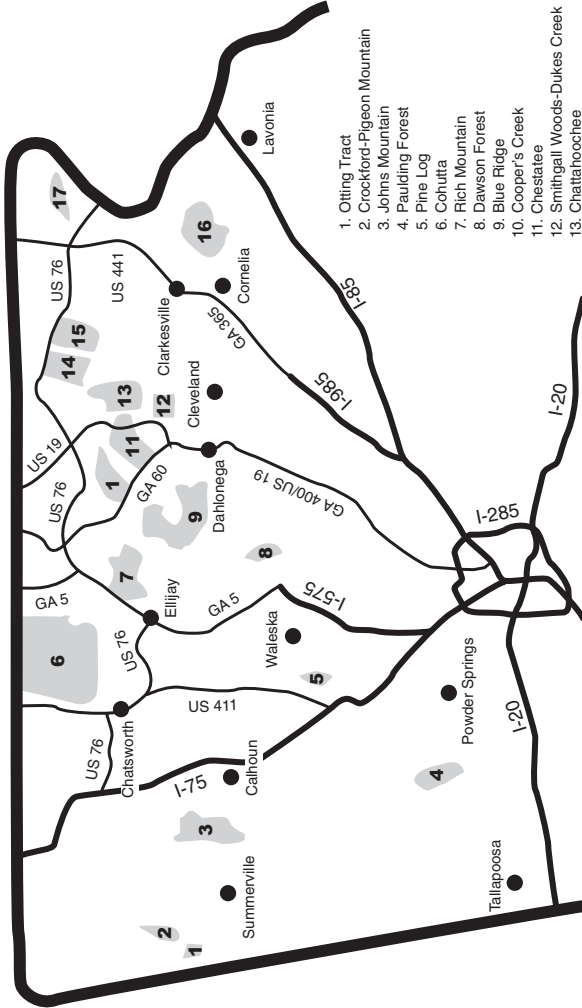
All too often, I have met folks in Georgia who profess to be trout anglers. Upon closer questioning, they finally admit to being Cooper Creek anglers or Tallulah River anglers or connoisseurs of some other single stream. Usually their single-mindedness is the result of lack of knowledge about other streams available in the state.

Early on I also stuck to a couple of favorite streams, but eventually I began to wander. On many days I spent more time looking for a certain stream I had set out to fish than actually fishing it. Other times I had to consult maps at the end of the day to figure out that I had been fishing on a creek other than the one for which I had set out.

It was in hopes of saving some other angler problems such as these that I began to put this book together.

Since the first edition of this book appeared in the spring of 1993, I have discovered two important facts about trout fishing in Georgia. The first is that nothing remains static. Highways change, landmarks disappear, new regulations are approved, and even the number of streams on public land changes. In recent years the Department of

# Georgia Trout Waters



1. Otling Tract
2. Crockford-Pigeon Mountain
3. Johns Mountain
4. Paulding Forest
5. Pine Log
6. Cohutta
7. Rich Mountain
8. Dawson Forest
9. Blue Ridge
10. Cooper's Creek
11. Chestatee
12. Smithgall Woods-Dukes Creek
13. Chattahoochee
14. Swallow Creek
15. Lake Burton
16. Lake Russell
17. Warwoman

Natural Resources has purchased a number of tracts of land for public recreation. Several of these contain trout streams that were formerly off-limits to the angling public. This edition continues the updates of the list of public trout water begun in earlier editions, and notes the changes in rules governing some of the creeks.

The second fact I became aware of was that in spite of three decades of wandering Georgia's mountains, there were still creeks I had overlooked. In traveling the state and speaking to sportsmen's clubs about this book, local anglers have also pointed out to me some streams that should have been covered.

In this fourth edition, five additional waters have been added. The conditions, management schemes, or directions for many others have been updated.

Even though I have the same natural desire as most fishing enthusiasts to keep my favorite streams to myself, I also know that wild places exist only where there is a constituency that wants them to remain wild. I hope the readers of this work will join me in appreciating these waters and protecting them for the future. That will suit me fine as long as we all do not pick the same stream to fish on the same day next season.

## **Georgia Trout Waters**

For many years the Wildlife Resources Division placed the number of miles of trout water in Georgia at 4,100, but until 1996 that figure was only an educated guess. At that time they produced a map entitled Trout Streams of Georgia, which resulted from the first in-depth research into the subject. In the process it was discovered that the Peach State actually contains more than 5,000 miles of brooklets, streams, and rivers that support trout! Of those, 1,500 miles are primary trout waters in which the fish can survive and reproduce naturally. Most of the rest are marginal waters that are stocked occasionally when conditions are conducive to supporting

## **XVI Trout Fishing in North Georgia**

trout. Geographically, the streams that contain trout for at least some part of the year are found north of an imaginary line running from Tallapoosa in Haralson County east to Powder Springs in Cobb County, then north to Waleska in Cherokee County. From there the line turns east again and continues to Lavonia in Franklin County, near Lake Hartwell.

Within this range, the primary trout streams can be found in a more confined area along the northern rim of the state. Roughly speaking, these waters are north of a line from the Alabama border, through Summerville in Chattooga County and Calhoun in Gordon County, to Dahlonega in Lumpkin County and Cleveland in White County, ending at the US 76 bridge over the Chattooga River in Rabun County at the border with South Carolina. As with any arbitrarily drawn boundary, there may be some exceptions to these generalizations, but they are few.

Aside from the classes of streams already mentioned, there is one other variety of moving water that holds trout in Georgia and does not adhere to these imaginary boundaries. The state has three tailwater fisheries—waters below hydroelectric plants—for trout that produce fish year-round, two of which are found south of the lines already detailed. The water below Buford Dam at Lake Lanier is very well known in the state as an excellent trout stream reaching all the way down to the northern city limits of Atlanta. Lesser known streams of this type are the waters below Blue Ridge Lake on the Toccoa River in northwest Georgia and the flow below Lake Hartwell on the Savannah River along the border with South Carolina.

These tailwater rivers contain trout year-round, but they lack the type of water necessary for the fish to spawn. Large numbers of hatchery fish are released in these rivers, and many trout will carry over to the next season if not caught.

With this wide variety of trout rivers, streams, creeks, brooklets, and ponds in north Georgia, trout anglers are blessed with a large

number of options as to where and how to fish for their favored prey. In fact, it would be impossible to cram information about all of the state's trout waters—public and private—into one book. There are just too many places to wet a hook.

## **Recommended Destinations**

Because information about waters on private land is useless to the average angler, this book concentrates on the streams of north Georgia that are on public land or are open to the public for fishing. Many of these are within the boundaries of the Chattahoochee National Forest (NF), which stretches across more than 700,000 acres of mountain land north of Atlanta. Most attention is focused on the creeks that lie in the Chattahoochee National Forest and are also contained in one of the state's Wildlife Management Areas (WMA). After more than three decades of trout fishing, I have concluded that the public trout waters of Georgia contain more than a lifetime of angling opportunity for those who wish to pursue this sport.

In looking for an orderly manner in which to discuss the most important trout fishing on Georgia's managed lands, several criteria have been considered. The most obvious is accessibility to the public. For that reason, and for ease of organizing the information, the following chapters are broken down by WMA. In general, public access to these lands is excellent.

Another criterion that comes into play when looking at any particular management area is the size of the waters. Virtually all of the streams discussed have small feeder creeks that enter them. These brooklets often contain some excellent and untouched trout fishing. Because of their small size, however, they would be crowded if more than one person fished them on any given day. For that reason, we will leave it to the more industrious anglers to find these creeks on their own, and confine discussion to waters that are large enough to handle more than one angler at a time. In some cases where several of these small feeders are in close proximity to each other, they

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will be mentioned because, as a group, they offer enough angling water to accommodate several rods.

Ordinarily, the first few seasons of trouting in a new area can be very frustrating as one searches in a hit-or-miss fashion for accessible waters. Especially for the newcomer to trout angling, but also for the veteran, the following chapters should make trout fishing in Georgia more productive and fun.

Part One

# Basic Trout Angling





## Chapter 1

---

# The Trout



### The Brook Trout

When the first European settlers set foot in the southern Appalachian Mountains, the fish they found inhabiting the high-altitude, cold-water streams of the area were native brook trout. In spite of their name, the small, brightly colored fish are not a true trout. They are actually a member of the char family. Regardless of their pedigree, to the early mountaineers they were specs, natives, or simply trout.

Varying in color from dark olive to almost black on their backs, brookies are easily identifiable by the vermicular, or “worm-track,” design of the markings on the upper portion of the body. The spots along the side are also helpful in identifying the species. They include a number of red spots surrounded by a halo of color (aureoles) that can range from light blue to almost lavender.

Over the years, arguments have flared up about whether the southern Appalachian branch of the eastern brook trout (*Salvelinus fontinalis*) family should be classified as a separate subspecies. While there are very noticeable differences in coloration and number of spots between the native fish and hatchery-reared brookies, that question is much too complicated to be dealt with here.

From their original position of dominance in the streams of the southern highlands, brook trout have suffered a fate that closely parallels that of the native people inhabiting these same mountains.

Like the Cherokee Indians, the brook trout have been pushed out of their ancestral home by encroaching immigrants. The European brown trout and the rainbow trout from the West Coast of North America, introduced to the area during the twentieth century, have found the region's streams quite hospitable.

These two interlopers have also proven to be much better suited to the creeks of Appalachia, including those in Georgia, in the sense that they are more adaptable to the changing conditions of this century. Warmer water temperatures and greater silting due to the removal of virgin, first-growth timber are situations that rainbow trout are able to endure better than brookies. At the same time, brown trout are much better than brookies at holding their own against competing warm-water fish in streams at lower elevations.



**Brook trout are the native fish and the “crown jewels” of Georgia’s highland streams.**

Brook trout, which spawn between September and December each year, must have water that remains below 70°F year-round to thrive. In fact, temperatures of 77°F and higher are lethal to these fish. The ideal range of water temperatures for brookies is from 57° to 60°F. These conditions are found today only in headwater streams, above 2,000 feet in elevation in Georgia.

Brook trout not only have strict water-temperature requirements, but they also have other disadvantages. They rarely attain a great size because of their relatively short four- to seven-year life span, and a fish over four years of age is rare. Of every ten thousand brookies fry hatched, merely twenty-five will reach four years old, and of these, only a single fish will live to the age of six years.

Brookies are more prone to feed on insects than are other trout species, and they are not wary feeders. Thus, they are easily caught while still juveniles. This is especially true of hatchery-reared fish, which, research has shown, often take as long as four months in the stream before they begin to seek cover or hug the bottom like wild fish.

One other comment on their feeding habits is probably in order at this point. Although brook trout have a reputation for being basically subsurface feeders, they show no reluctance to rise to floating insects. Probably the fact that they inhabit small headwaters where substantial insect hatches are nonexistent explains this misconception. They simply do not have the opportunity that other trout do for surface feeding, but the brook trout take advantage of floating food sources when they are available.

The modern range of the brook trout in Georgia is, in rough terms, east of Ellijay and north of an imaginary line from Dahlonega to Clarkesville. The only exception to those boundaries is the Cohutta Mountains in the watersheds of the Jacks and Conasauga Rivers. There are some native brookies to be found there in small, isolated headwater rivulets.

During the late 1960s the native brook trout appeared to be headed for extinction in the Peach State. Because of the problems noted earlier with other invading species and degradation of the streams, the outlook was not bright. At that point the Georgia Game and Fish Commission (the predecessor of the Wildlife Resources Division) began a program to reverse the trend.

The agency first identified several streams that were ideal brook-trout water but no longer contained the species. Another criterion that the creeks had to meet was that their watershed be entirely on public lands. It would be useless to reestablish the brookies in an appropriate stream unless the fisheries' managers could control the surrounding woodlands to ensure the continued survival of the newly reintroduced populations. These target streams had to have a

major barrier falls on them as well to prevent rainbows and browns from migrating back into the streams after the renovation. If no existing barrier was present, then one was constructed.

Once a stream meeting all the criteria was identified, the targeted stretch of water was treated with rotenone. This poison affects only gilled life-forms, so it eliminated competing species of fish already in the stream, but left the food chain intact. During this poisoning process, an antidote was released into the stream below the barrier falls to protect the downstream fish populations. Once the process was completed, electroshock fish samples were taken to confirm the absence of any competing fish species. After the competitors were eliminated and the poison had dissipated, brook trout from one of the remaining stronghold streams were transplanted into the renovated waters. This transplanting of fish from the wild—as opposed to using hatchery-raised brookies—was undertaken to ensure survival of the true native fish stock.

In all, six streams in the Chattahoochee National Forest underwent this treatment. The Coleman River, plus its feeders Tate Branch and Mill Creek, were renovated. Tuckaluge Creek on Warwoman WMA and Dicks Creek on Lake Burton WMA were both included in the program. The headwaters of the Chattahoochee River above Helen on the Chattahoochee WMA were the last waters to become a brook-trout haven. The program has been a success with the exception of the Dicks Creek stocking, where it appears someone has reintroduced rainbows above the barrier.

The current state record for a brook trout is 5 pounds, 10 ounces, taken by Russell Braden from Waters Creek in Lumpkin County on May 29, 1986. Because Waters Creek is a trophy stream under special regulations, the huge size of this fish is a bit misleading. Under ordinary circumstances, a brook trout of even 1 pound would be considered a giant.

All of the brookies that were found in Waters Creek are from hatchery stock. The same can be said of the fish in the Toccoa

## **6 Basic Trout Angling**

River tailwater, where the previous state record fish of more than 4 pounds was taken. Other large brood-stock female brook trout were released in various Georgia waters from time to time and subsequently caught by anglers. Some impressive individuals also turned up among the hatchery-released brook trout in the tailwater of the Chattahoochee River below Lake Lanier.

Presently the Wildlife Resources Division does not stock brook trout in the state. The state of South Carolina, however, does stock brookies in the Chattoga River and they occasionally turn up in feeder creeks on the Georgia side of the stream as well. The rest of Georgia's brook trout are from native stock and generally average only 5 inches in length. A wild, native brook trout of 12 inches is an impressive fish, and one reaching 14 inches would be considered a most highly prized trophy.

### **The Rainbow Trout**

As the native brook trout were pushed into the high-altitude brooklets, the vacancy in the stream's hierarchy was filled by stocked rainbow and brown trout. The rainbow is the more prevalent of the two. This hardy native of America's northwest shores was introduced to Georgia waters as early as 1890 and has adapted well. A large number of the primary trout streams of the state now support reproducing wild populations of these colorful immigrants, which spawn each year between January and June. With few exceptions they are the dominant cold-water species in most Georgia trout streams.

The coloration of rainbow trout caught in north Georgia ranges from blue to green on their backs, and they are heavily covered with black spots. In mature fish, particularly the stream-bred wild ones, a vivid red band runs down the side from gill to tail. In some cases, the area just forward of the gill plate also shows a splotch of coloration from bright red to scarlet. On the other hand, many hatchery-stocked fish show no sign of the red hues on any portion of their bodies.

The range of rainbow trout in Georgia can be said to cover all the cold-water streams of the state. Unless special management programs have been used to keep a stream a pure brook or brown trout fishery, there are rainbows present. These fish are the common denominator of Georgia trout angling. Part of their success, as was mentioned earlier, has to do with their ability to tolerate warmer water temperatures than either brook or brown trout, as well as being able to live in waters other than siltless, crystal-clear mountain rivulets. They can withstand water temperatures in the mid-80s for short periods, though 56° to 60° F is the ideal range.



**The most plentiful fish in Georgia's trout waters are rainbow trout.**

Other factors in the rainbow's success story are its longer (seven to eleven years) life span as compared to the brook trout, and the species' preference for moving water. The age factor allows individual rainbows the chance to get larger and become the dominant fish in a pool. Their affinity for swift-moving water with its broken surface acts as an added protection from predators while the fish are small. The moving surface is a safety feature lacking in the still waters of pools that are preferred by brook trout.

The current state record for rainbow trout is a 28.25-inch, 17-pound, 8-ounce fish caught by Mark Cochran of Clarkesville from a private stretch of the Soque River on May 7, 2004. The previous state record of 15 pounds was also taken from a private pond. While these records are *bona fide*, it is equally true that these fish reached such proportions in part because they were not subjected to the fishing pressure applied on public waters.

## **8 Basic Trout Angling**

Before those record fish, the state mark was held by a 12-pound rainbow taken from public water. This fish, however, was a brood-stock trout that had been released from one of the hatcheries into the Coosawattee River in Gilmer County. Again, the special circumstances of this catch make it unrepresentative of how large rainbow trout usually grow in Georgia streams. Waters Creek, also, has produced rainbows in excess of 10 pounds.

In spite of these monster trout, in the average Georgia freestone trout creek, a wild 15-inch fish earns bragging rights for most days of fishing. Fish in the 20-inch-plus class, weighing 2 to 3 pounds, show up from these creeks each season, but in very limited numbers. Realistically speaking, anything over 18 inches from most of the area's cold-water streams is a trophy rainbow.

Stocked rainbows average 8 to 11 inches in most creeks, and the wild variety run from 6 to 10 inches. Wild fish of 10 to 12 inches are possible from most of the streams, but anything larger takes patience and persistence to find and fool.

### **The Brown Trout**

The final member of Georgia's trout triumvirate is the European brown, commonly known simply as the brown trout or brownie. The brown was first introduced to America from Germany in the 1880s, and other importations soon followed from England and Scotland in the same decade. Browns have been present in Georgia streams since at least the 1930s and possibly even earlier.

In appearance the brown trout lives up to its name. The overall hue of its body is brown to golden brown, with a multitude of black spots along the sides. These spots usually are surrounded by a lighter ring of coloration, ranging from gold to light tan. A number of red spots also are visible on most mature fish. The belly region is light tan to white, and stream-reared fish often have distinct orange tips on their fins, especially from October through February, when spawning takes place.

Though many creeks are home to these hearty survivors, there are only a few streams in Georgia where the brown trout is the dominant species. The upper Chattooga River above Burrells Ford in the Ellicott Rock Wilderness Area and Jones Creek on the Blue Ridge WMA are predominantly brown trout waters. In most other streams, at least a few browns are present, and they usually are some of the largest fish in the stream. This is especially true in marginal trout areas at lower altitudes with warmer water.

Although rainbows are more tolerant of high water temperatures, the competition from warm-water species, such as bluegill, redeye bass, and spotted bass, generally forces rainbows out of the marginal areas. The brown trout—in spite of its greater sensitivity to the temperature of its habitat (temperatures in the



**Brown trout are present in limited numbers in most trout streams and usually account for the bulk of larger fish.**

mid-80s are lethal, with 54° to 63° F being ideal)—has developed a surefire method of overcoming the competition of other species. Once the brown has progressed beyond the juvenile state, it becomes a very effective predator and simply eliminates the competition by eating it. After attaining 12 inches in length, the brown trout's diet is made up largely of crawfish, spring lizards, and other fish.

Another reason that brownies generally compose an inordinate percentage of larger fish in a stream is that they are very adept at escaping their main predator, the trout angler. Studies on the streams of Georgia and other areas of the country have shown that the wily brown trout is much more difficult to entice than either brook or rainbow trout. In Maine it was found that five brook trout are landed for each brown caught. Likewise, in Oregon the ratio of rainbows caught to brown trout taken was four to one.



As brown trout get older, their feeding patterns change, and they become even less vulnerable to the angler's offerings. The streamwise, veteran brownie who has seen four or five seasons pass is prone to live in slow pools and become a nocturnal feeder, concentrating on minnows and other denizens of the creek depths. For this reason, even when an angler fishes the pool a brown trout inhabits, the bait offered usually is of little interest to this fish, or it is offered at a time of day when this old-timer simply is not interested in eating. Given this scenario, it is easy to see why brown trout get larger than the other species. They generally have more time to grow before they make that fatal mistake of grabbing the wrong morsel floating down their creek.

Although the state record for brown trout in Georgia is only slightly larger than that for rainbows, the majority of trophy-proportion trout taken in the state each year are browns. This is partially due to a long life expectancy of seven to eleven years, with fish up to eighteen years old recorded. For years, the record brownie, however, was another anomaly. On May 6, 1967, while fishing in Rock Creek on the Blue Ridge WMA, William M. Lowery hooked and landed an 18-pound, 2-ounce brown. The fish was an escaped brooder from the Chattahoochee National Fish Hatchery, which lies on the creek's feeder stream, Mill Creek.

Lowery's record was finally broken on November 12, 2001. On that date Charlie Ford of Rome wrestled an 18-pound, 6.72-ounce brown from the Chattahoochee River while fishing between State Route 20 bridge and Medlock Bridge.

A number of creeks in the mountains have produced stream-reared fish in the 4- to 5-pound range, and a few bigger streams such as the Chattooga, Conasauga, and Jacks Rivers have yielded browns of 7 to 9 pounds. The champion stream for consistently large brown trout in Georgia is the tailwater of the Chattahoochee River. While impressive, a 5-pound brown from these waters would not cause a stir among knowledgeable anglers.

Prior to Charlie Ford's state-record catch, the largest brown trout recorded from the Chattahoochee was a 15-pound, 13-ounce monster caught by Marietta angler John Abernathy back in 1975.

Anyone dedicated to angling the smaller streams of the mountains must forget the gargantuan critters just described and come back down to earth, or Georgia, as the case may be. The average brown trout likely to be encountered will run from 9 to 11 inches in length, with fish of 12 to 15 inches being a real possibility on almost any stream.

As mentioned earlier, the larger fish are present, but they are also wary and hard to catch. Even if an angler does everything right in stalking, casting, and baiting, there is no guarantee that these browns will bite. Still, it is comforting and exciting to know that these prize fish are in the streams. That next deep, dark pool at the bend of the creek—the one with the undercut bank and tangle of tree roots—may be the home of one of those 2-foot, “magnum” brown trout that every angler envisions hanging above the fireplace.