



*Luxuriant shoreline vegetation and downed trees make for picturesque pools where the author targets brown and rainbow trout.*



*Noontootla Creek harbors colorful and eager wild rainbows.*



*Noontootla Creek's big browns lurk in deep, shadowy pools.*

AUSTIN McDONALD PHOTO



*The rising sun rolls out the welcome mat along Forest Road 58, the gateway to Noontootla Creek.*

## Noontootla Creek, GA Tooting the Horn for Wild Trout

*By Chris Duerksen*

**D**uring my annual spring migration from the Florida Everglades to Colorado's Rocky Mountains, I decided to take the northern route through Georgia and North Carolina to sample the trout fishing in the scenic Great Smoky Mountains that some of my Southern fishing buddies liked to tout. North Georgia's Chattahoochee National Forest covers more than 750,000 acres, much of it designated wilderness. You might think there would be miles of secluded wild trout waters to explore, my cup of tea, but my online reconnoitering revealed that several factors, such as highly acidic waters that are not conducive to sustaining wild trout, mean that much of the stream fishing is put-and-take action for hatchery fish.

What to do?

Fortunately, before wetting a line, I stopped in at the Cohutta Fishing Company, a well-appointed fly-fishing shop in the north Georgia town of Blue Ridge. There, two of the shop's amiable and knowledgeable guides, Austin McDonald and Drew Friedrich, put me on the right track. I told them I wanted to explore the area's wild trout waters; although they were tied up the next few days, they graciously steered me to a little gem called Noontootla Creek, which they know intimately, located about a half hour's drive away deep in the national forest. This stream has better water quality, amply capable of sustaining wild trout. McDonald fixed me up with a handful of local-favorite flies that I had never heard of, such





*Gorgeous mountain laurels and rhododendrons add splashes of color along the creek.*



*Navigating steep trails down to the creek pays off with secluded fishing spots.*

CHRIS DUERKSEN PHOTOS

as the Olive Holy Grail Caddis and the Swing Caddis, plus some old reliables, such as the Royal Stimulator. Then I was off to do some scouting before fishing the next day.

According to *Georgia Place-Names* by Kenneth K. Krakow, Noontootla is Cherokee, meaning “land of the shining water,” or is a corruption of “Nantahala,” meaning “middle sun.” The creek flows for almost a dozen miles from its headwaters at Three Forks on the Appalachian Trail to where it joins the Toccoa River to the northwest. For reference, this area of north Georgia is about 100 miles north of Atlanta. Much of the stream flows through public land within the 20,900-acre Blue Ridge Wildlife Management Area (WMA), which is subject to regulations tailored to maintain the fishery—such as restricting fishing to the use of flies or artificial lures and requiring that any trout less than 16 inches be immediately released.

The history of how the creek was protected starts in the 1960s. In those days, anglers were reportedly pressuring

the state to stock more trout as was being done in other streams throughout the area. However, when fisheries crews conducted electroshocking surveys on the stream, they discovered a healthy population of wild rainbow trout—rather than the expected native brook trout—that been planted years before. Further stocking of Noontootla Creek was deemed unnecessary, and it hasn’t been stocked again. Eventually, special fishing rules were applied. McDonald and Friedrich told me there were plenty of 10- to 12-inch wild rainbows throughout the WMA stretch, as well as some behemoth brown trout and larger rainbows hiding in the deeper holes. They had the photos to prove as much. However, the two guides warned me that these wild trout were hardly dummies. And they offered one more valuable tip, telling me that the uppermost headwater tributaries above Three Forks, where the Noontootla is formed by the confluence of Stover, Chester, and Long Creeks, are home to native brook trout.





a repeat of that first spot—a car or two at every one, with anglers working stretches of the creek that were relatively easy to reach. My scouting foray had paid dividends: I decided that the next day I would keep on trucking farther up the road and look for empty turnouts that would require navigating down steep slopes and some bushwhacking to reach the water. Whether in Colorado or Georgia, one thing about fly fishing remains consistent: you can often find unpressured water if you're willing to work a little harder than other anglers.

But I wasn't giving up on my scouting foray just yet. Before long, I came to a turnout that wasn't taken and then several more that were empty of vehicles. That was the cue to don my chest waders and undertake some recon on several likely looking stretches of the creek. I used my wading staff to ease gingerly down the incline below the road, grabbing at branches to slow my descent several times. Finally, I reached an opening in the thicket and discovered that although the creek is only 15 to 20 feet wide, clear, and not very deep, the slick rocks and fallen trees made wading an adventure. Despite the difficulty, I saw plenty of alluring deep spots that promised trout and nary a boot mark anywhere. A few caddisflies were flitting about, but surprisingly when I turned

over rocks in the water, I didn't find many caddisfly larvae or mayfly nymphs. Maybe a dearth of food explains the fact that most of the rainbows don't grow more than a foot or so.

The next morning, after a good night's sleep at a friend's home in the area, I was up early and driving the gravel road through the WMA just as the sun came into view. I started at one of the spots I'd scouted, eager to explore with an 8.5-foot, 4-weight rod; 5X tippet would suffice and I figured it would be strong enough to handle one of those big browns if I was lucky enough to hook one. I tied on a size 16 Royal Stimulator to represent the caddisflies I'd seen the day before, and added an Olive Holy Grail, which McDonald had recommended, as a dropper. I eased into a "can't miss" pool. A half dozen casts later, I was getting apprehensive at the lack of action. I hauled my aging body over a big, downed log and tried the next pool with a similar lack of results. Finally, in the third pool, a spunky 4-inch rainbow trout intercepted the Holy Grail and after a tussle, the colorful Lilliputian came to hand for a quick photo and release.

I continued upstream, picking up a rainbow or two in most pools, mostly on the Holy Grail dropper. Then as the sun hit the water and the air warmed, the easy switch was snapped on. I came to a long, deep pool and cast to its upstream end. As the Stimulator floated jauntily down a foam line, half a dozen larger rainbows eagerly pursued it.

Armed with great local intel, off I went to scout, driving southwest from Blue Ridge on the winding, scenic, paved Aska and Newport Roads. On the way I slowed to admire the gorgeous mountain laurels and rhododendrons lining the roadways. Then about an hour into the drive, just after passing the Fellowship Primitive Baptist Church, I turned south onto gravel Forest Road 58, passed a few houses, and entered the WMA. The elevation here is about 3,000 feet.

I was intrigued by the heavy, luxuriant flora along the road. Unlike the high-country creeks of the Colorado Rockies that I fish so often, Noontootla Creek was frequently obscured from view by thickets of big rhododendrons and a mix of pine and hardwood trees, including hickory, oak, and loblolly. The few places that afforded views of the creek below stoked my fishing fever. Soon I came to a turnout where two cars were already parked. I decided to investigate and quietly ambled down a well-trodden path to the creek. Sure enough, a pair of anglers was hard at work in a productive-looking pool that, based on the abundant boot tracks along the trail, probably received lots of fishing pressure. I watched for a while, then climbed back up the trail. Both vehicles had license plates indicating they came from the Atlanta area. Later, I read that almost half the anglers who fish Noontootla Creek are from that big metropolis, only a couple of hours away. Could I find trout and solitude?

I drove on, and the scene at the next four turnouts was

## Noontootla Creek NOTEBOOK



One gulped down the Stimulator, but I missed the connection. However, one of his buddies then jetted forward and intercepted the fly before I could lift it from the water. This one was bigger, pushing 12 inches, and dove back toward the logjam at the head of the pool. I put the brakes on, my rod bending ominously, and succeeded in coaxing the fish back downstream. He was a beauty, dazzling in characteristic rainbow colors.

The fast action continued for an hour in that pool and several farther upstream, in a stretch where I had to exit the water, scramble up the slope, and then bushwhack along a game trail to return to the creek. But the effort was rewarded as scrappy rainbows feasted on both the dry and the Holy Grail dangling subsurface. As the sun started to inch below the treetops, I came to a deep, mysterious run that had the makings of the kind of big-brown-trout honey hole McDonald had conjured up when we met. I made two casts with no luck, then went for broke and executed a side arm cast that somehow avoided the overhanging branches and dropped the flies right below a big fallen log.

Immediately, I saw a flash of gold and a big swirl beneath the Stimulator, but no take. I launched another cast to the same spot, but no dice, then continued to thrash the water to no avail. I was sure I'd just had a close encounter with one of those leviathan browns that McDonald had spoken of in reverent tones. I smiled: that one brief encounter, not to mention the abundant 'bows and the native brookies I didn't have time to pursue, had given me ample reason to return to Noontootla Creek and further explore its mysteries. ■

American Fly Fishing contributor *Chris Duerksen* divides his time between Colorado and Florida, with plenty of side trips to other locales.

### Olive Holy Grail Caddis



**Hook:** Daiichi 1130, sizes 12–18

**Thread:** Bright green, size 6/0

**Head:** Gold 7/64- to 3/32-in. tungsten bead

**Body:** Hare's ear dubbing

**Rib:** Small Veevus tinsel

**Wing case/thorax:** Pheasant tail

**Hackle/legs:** Partridge

**When:** Fishable year-round; best April–October.

**Where:** Northwest GA, in the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest, approximately 30 min. by paved and gravel roads from Blue Ridge, GA. Drive southeast from Blue Ridge on Aska and Newport Rds. for approximately 18 mi. At intersection of Newport Road and Doublehead Gap Road, turn left (east), drive past Fellowship Primitive Baptist Church, and turn right (south) onto FR 58; after 1 mi. enter Blue Ridge Wildlife Management Area.

**Access:** Walk-and-wade fishing to appr. 11 mi. of the creek along FR 58. Park in turnouts and hike down to creek; expect to navigate steep slopes and do some bushwhacking through thick vegetation.

**Headquarters:** Blue Ridge and Ellijay offer a wide variety of services and lodging options. For information on the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest, visit [www.fs.usda.gov/main/conf/](http://www.fs.usda.gov/main/conf/).

**Appropriate gear:** 3- to 5-wt. rods, floating and sinking-tip lines, 9- to 12-ft. leaders, 4X–6X tippets.

**Useful fly patterns:** Olive Holy Grail Caddis, Swing Caddis, Royal Stimulator, Yellow Sally, Parachute Adams, Elk Hair Caddis, Pheasant Tail Nymph, BH Hare's Ear Nymph, Pat's Rubber Legs, BH Woolly Bugger.

**Necessary accessories:** Polarized sunglasses, insect repellent, good hiking/wading boots, hiking/wading staff, water purification system/tablets.

**Nonresident licenses:** \$10/1 day plus \$3 each additional day, \$50/annual. Trout (required): \$10/1 day plus \$2 each additional day, \$25/annual.

**Fly shops/guides:** *Blue Ridge:* Cohutta Fishing Company (Austin Macdonald and Drew Friedrich), (706) 946-3044, [www.cohuttafishingco.com](http://www.cohuttafishingco.com). *Ellijay:* Blue Ridge Mountain Outfitters, (706) 276-3050, [www.blueridgemountainoutfitters.com](http://www.blueridgemountainoutfitters.com).

**Books/maps:** *Trout Fishing in North Georgia* by Jimmy Jacobs; *Fly Fishing Georgia: A No Nonsense Guide to Top Waters* by David Cannon. Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest maps, [www.fs.usda.gov/main/conf/maps-pubs](http://www.fs.usda.gov/main/conf/maps-pubs).