

## **Battenkill**

by Bill Cairns

Part three of three

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Everyone is aware by now of the states proposed Trout Management Plan for the Battenkill which, if adopted, would also call for the stocking of a 1,000 sterile rainbow trout. The hope would be to improve angling quality over the time needed to rebuild the wild brown trout population.

It was noted by the department that rainbows were stocked in the river between 1941 and the mid 1950's with no apparent harm or lasting effect. I wasn't here in those years but I did talk with some who were, at least in the 50's and the consensus of opinion was that it flat-out didn't work. Most of the rainbows moved downriver to become New York State's blessing or problem, depending on your viewpoint. The Battenkill is not good rainbow trout water, the odd ball rainbow that is occasionally caught in the river is an escapee from one of the private ponds in the area.

The rainbows proposed for stocking are triploids. Achieving triploid eggs calls for thermo-shocking with hot water which must occur precisely between the two-cell and four-cell stage of mitotic cellular division, about 10 minutes post-fertilization, which results in the fish retaining an extra set of chromosomes. The extra set renders the trout sterile, allowing them to conserve energy that otherwise would be spent on the development of sexual organs or mating. And because they continue to grow after the normal trout (diploids with the usual number of two sets of chromosomes) slow down to begin sexual development at about two years, triploids become attractive as potential trophy fish.

A few years ago I was invited to spend several weeks conducting clinics, demonstrating, and fishing in South Africa. At one store I noticed all the photos tacked to the bulletin board seemed to be of giant rainbow trout. These were triploids and in time I had a chance to see and fish for them as a guest at a commercial "pay to fish" managed pond. In the hour or so I was there I caught two triploids, one about seven pounds, the other about eleven pounds.

My impression is strongly this: If they survive the first season in the river they will out-compete the resident browns and brookies hands down. They grow very rapidly and since there is no interruption in their lifestyle for spawning and reproduction they become "eating machines." It's been said they will occupy a different part of the river. I assume this to mean the browns will seek bankside, overhead cover etc. while faster runs or deeper waters will hold the rainbows. It's not that simple. Electroshocking the deeper runs of the Battenkill is virtually impossible and the same can be said for the more rapid stream sections in West Arlington. I know these later water types already contain some husky browns and yet few fish for them

I spoke with a biologist in another eastern state where browns and rainbows are well established in a popular stream. They are finding in the winter season with colder water upstream the rainbows are tending to migrate downstream in search of bigger, somewhat warmer water. And they stay there. If that happens on the 'kill - good luck New York.

There are benefits to sterile trout and I can see Vermont having many uses for them in ponds, lakes and rivers, just not the Battenkill at this critical time in it's recovery. Or, in fact never in the Battenkill.

I share the feeling with many others that the fish and game department was slow to come to grips with the declining productivity of the river. To their credit however, once the extent of the problem was realized I believe they have done a thorough job. They are not alone however in their efforts. There are also many individuals, contributing organizations, and interested volunteers—too many to list here. None of them signed on for the introduction of rainbows, they signed on and devoted their efforts to the restoration of the brown trout fishery.

As a result my personal feeling is Fish and Wildlife must realize it is time to bite the bullet and recognize this is a brook trout and brown trout watershed only. The river must be managed with a resource first attitude. That's what the cooperating agencies and supporting individuals deserve and it's what the angling public deserves. I believe we've been too patient, too long. From what I can see the current restoration plans are sound, are being implemented with bank stabilization underway, and the department has political and financial support. Don't give that away because you'll have a hell of a time getting it back.

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