

The Four Seasons River

By Dave Whitlock

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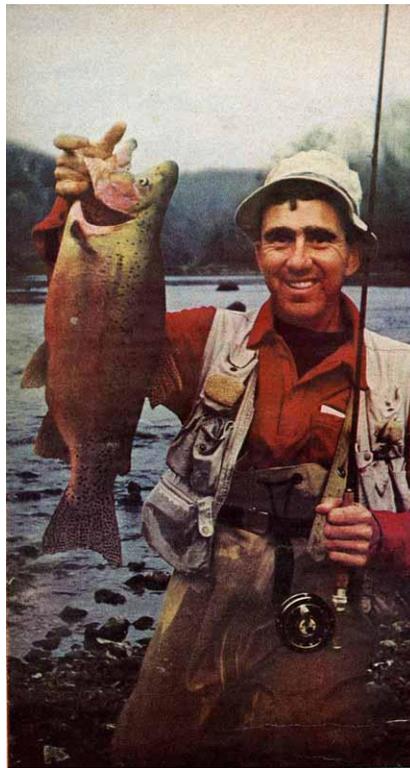
(Dave's very first article)

While most trout streams that lie further north offer mainly ice-clogged impossibilities, Arkansas' White River has top fishing. The river, hills and sky reflected late-autumn gold as I began to false-cast my second offering to the big fish holding there in midstream. He'd had two close looks at the size 14 Irresistible before losing interest. Now, as the brown Jassid settled lightly on the riffle and drifted close to his lie, it seemed as if he might refuse it too. But the last few inches of float were more than he could resist. Up moved the long green shadow, deliberately and gracefully and the Jassid disappeared in a swirl that barely disturbed the surface. I quickly raised my rod, hoping I would not snap the 5X tippet against his moving weight.

He remained down for several seconds but then he began the action that I almost feared. A strong tail thrust sent him across the riffle, then out of the water, and his broad red side glistened in the glow of the

setting sun. Downstream he charged, taking most of the line on his first run and clearing the water twice with shattering leaps. I rushed toward the shoals downstream, holding my rod at arm's length over my head as the backing knot cleared the tip guide and my reel click still buzzed. Minutes later I had him headed back into the current and was gaining my backing. I breathed a little easier. It would still be give-and-take but the best of his power had been spent. After each run he rolled and moved closer to me and the gravel. Soon the beautiful, deep-bodied fish slid onto the gravel bar. Gently I picked up the 21 inches of prime male rainbow.

After taking several pictures of my prize I sat down on the side of the john boat and waited for my two companions to return who had been fishing several hundred yards downstream. A steaming cup of coffee tasted somehow richer than usual, perhaps because of the late-November chill that settled with the afternoon shadows. I mused on our good fortune in having such fishing so late in the year when snow and frigid weather had already driven most Eastern and Northwestern fishermen from their favorite streams, to remain away for five or six months. The White River fishing was just getting hot, and there'd be many more weekends of excellent angling for us – even after we'd opened our Christmas presents.



A fine example of what the White River has to offer since 1952 when the Bull Shoals Dam began trapping clear, mineral-rich water. After the dam was built, the browns and rainbows flourished in the favorable temperatures to be found in the tail waters.

We have in fact, four seasons of trout every year here in north-central Arkansas on the White River below Bull Shoals Dam. Perhaps you have fished this area or have read about its famous float trips and tail-water trout. Maybe with jig and eel you have probed the gin-clear depths of Lake Norfolk or Bull Shoals, which feed this river, for line sides (**largemouth bass*).

Unique in a day when so many cold-water streams are dying because of watershed destruction, the White's chill waters, for more than 100 miles, offer year-round trout fishing. No matter whether you're a fly caster, a spinning-tackle addict, or a devotee of the bait-casting rod, you'll find your type of water on the White.

The White River has changed greatly since 1952, when Bull Shoals Dam began to trap its clear, mineral-rich water between high limestone bluffs. After the dam was built, browns and rainbows were stocked in the tail-waters below it. With little fishing pressure and fantastic growing conditions, year-round 50- to 60-degree temperatures, the fish thrived, growing at a rate of 1 to 1 ½ inches per month. By 1956 fishermen were harvesting trout running from 4 to 13 pounds. In 1957, spring freshets pushed the river to levels far above normal and scoured away the huge moss beds that provided protective cover. The White's big fish were exposed to hordes of anglers drift fishing from john boats and, in the next few years, thousands of fish from 4 to 15 pounds were taken. The following year, 1958, water levels were nearly normal but the river was never quite the same again. Each year after that, fewer big trout were taken. Average size dropped from nearly 4 pounds to less than a pound by the early 60's.

Heavy stocking from the Federal Trout Hatchery at Norfolk and the establishment of 'lures-only' rules in winter were enforced by the Arkansas Game Commission. This gave the river new promise. Slowly the stream bed has rebuilt itself and aquatic life has returned to some extent. The growth rate of fish again seems excellent; fish from 2 to 5 pounds are rising to flies and bait fishermen are taking some in the 6-to-10-pound class.

Fishing the White River varies with time of year. Spring in the Ozarks offers not only excellent angling but the beauty of colorful flowering trees and shrubs. Wild plum, redbud and dogwood accent the hills and valleys. Usually winter stocking results in a river full of plump rainbows. You encounter light fishing pressure until May, most of the good riffles will be untouched when you wade out to fish them and you will find good fish in just inches of water. White River rainbows, which make up 98 percent of the catch, are not nervous fish and are hard to spook.

My favorite flies in spring are mostly nymphs and wooly worms - with dry flies my third choice. Big hatches are few and far between at this time, so the fish aren't looking up much. Flies in sizes from 4 to 12 are best; tie in some lead for deeper fishing. Since trout feed on large and meaty sculpins, crayfish and snails, you needn't hesitate to use your big patterns. Tan, dark gray and olive seem to be the favorite shades, with some gold tinsel ribbing on your nymphs and wooly worms. Cast up and across if you want good fish, downstream if you prefer the gray, hatchery fish. We avoid imparted action and always dead drift to get the hefty 14 to 24 inchers we usually encounter. Over the moss beds we use gray or tan shrimp, sizes 12 to 16, with very light tippets.

Last Easter weekend, using a tiny gray shrimp, I hooked a fish that would have scaled 6 pounds. I had been taking 10- to 12-inch fish for about thirty minutes and had lowered my guard. Just at the end of a drift, over a big moss bed, my line paused and I responded with a quick strike that caused a huge boil at my fly. I was fast to a real fish, which moved back into cover. The 3-pound tippet held as I moved the fish out. He came straight at me. When he was 15 feet away he saw me and took off downstream, going over a rough riffle at full speed. He'd taken 40 yards of backing off the reel when the tiny hook suddenly pulled out.

That weekend we took good fish, from 15 to 18 inches, on brown and gray nymphs. I broke off big fish, but landed one that pushed 4 pounds. The three of us took and released at least 100 fish in two and a half days fishing with flies only. My buddy Pat Walker had driven down from Joliet, Illinois, leaving snow and sleet to fish with us in shirt-sleeve weather.

Summer on the river is a pleasant experience of deep, shadowy, green backdrops, wisps of cool fog rising from the 50-degree water and cooling those near or on the river. Early summer usually brings wonderful fishing, though the water may be high for the float trips from the dam or Cotter. The biggest fish are taken then, especially by bait fishermen who drift hooks, baited with soft-shell crayfish, crayfish tails, or worms, into deep holes. Many of the old browns still hanging on are tempted by a 4 or 5 inch soft-shell worked close to their lair.

Not all the prizes go to the bait crowd. Many of my best fish have been taken on flies in this 'second season'. One August morning I started working a big riffle with a weighted, brown Marabou Muddler. A rather thick fog hung over the water and the sun was still well below the big bluffs to the east. My line and fly disappeared into the haze at each cast, adding to the basic uncertainty. After about ten minutes I got a strong pull, but before I could react my rod was whipping and line was tearing off my reel. I heard the fish break water with a heavy roll - then my line went limp. When I examined my leader it was short one brown Muddler. My tippet had been too light and my reel-drag too heavy. I should have retied my leader right away but hated to take the time. Since that was my last brown Marabou I chose a size 8, yellow Marabou Muddler.

I moved a little farther down to a deep pocket rimmed with limestone ledges. The fog had thinned a little and the sun's first rays were peeking over the bluffs. Jerry Allsup, my companion, had just left me to fish a cutoff behind us when I took a small trout on the first drift. About five or six casts later I was extending my floats to the end of the pocket, just lightly popping the Muddler, then letting it drift and returning it to the surface. Another hard strike shook my rod clear to the cork. Obviously, something out of the ordinary - still unseen - had inhaled my fly.

In seconds the last of my shooting line had cleared the reel and backing was going out faster and faster. I headed for shallower water and running room, regretting that I'd stayed with the 5X tippet. By the time I'd skirted the deep pocket, the 100-yard backing marker had cleared the reel and it looked as if the fish was leaving Arkansas. Then I got lucky: the line must have bowed below the moving fish because back upstream he went. I reeled desperately to regain the yards of slack. As I stumbled upstream, I called to Jerry to bring the camera.

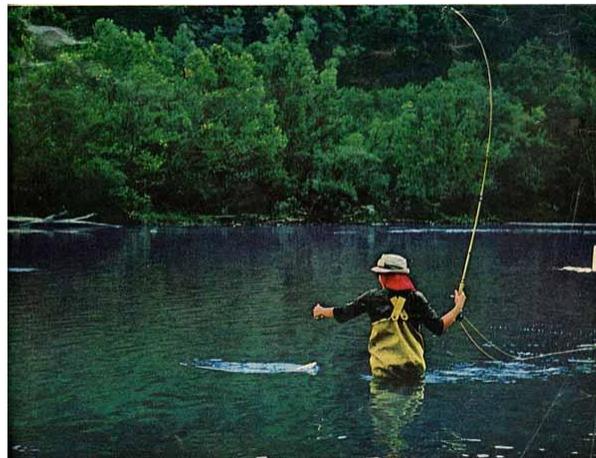
At last the fish slowed down in another deep pocket. I could hardly believe the wisp-like tippet that held through the ten-minute tug-of-war. And I still hadn't seen my antagonist. It moved like a rainbow but help deep like a brown. Finally it moved slowly upstream, and then began to circle the pocket. I kept plenty of line out to protect that poor tippet from the quick moves I expected.

The sun rose higher, burning off the last traces of the fog, and now the river was brightly lighted. I had been engaged with the fish for over an hour. I snubbed a short run, then saw it as it turned on its side and came close to the surface. "Big rainbow", Jerry and I said in unison. My heart sank a little. I had hoped it would be a brown, but I wasn't complaining. It now became evident that the fish had run out of steam. I slowly moved it toward the gravel just above the next riffle but the current caught the big trout and down over the rocky snag-laden riffle it went.

Luck was still with me. The tired rainbow floated free of the obstacles and into safer water. I got below it quickly and moved it to the next smooth stretch of gravel. This time the big fish gave a last flip and struck a sandy, shallow bar where Jerry anchored it for me. We just knelt there a minute staring at the fish and saying very little. Finally we carried it back to the boat. The tape showed the rainbow – a female – to be 27 ½ inches long by 15 ½ in girth. Landing this 8-pound rainbow on a 7 ½ foot rod and 3-pound tippet was my Mount Everest.

Summer fish are usually quite heavy for their length, looking more like lake fish, because they feed heavily on crayfish, sculpins, minnows, nymphs, and a wide variety of terrestrials. Flies that produce best imitate these foods. The Muddler and Marabou Muddler, in sizes 6 to 10, will bring good fish to creel. Small and medium streamers are effective early and late in the day. My favorite nymphs are sizes 6 to 10, tan or dark grays, tied fuzzy and weighted. Dry flies are always good if you fish low-water periods with a brown Jassid, sizes 10 to 16, Light Cahill, sizes 14 and 16, Irresistible, sizes 10 to 14, small Muddler or Joe's Hopper greased. Any good imitation of large terrestrials will get you some fine fish.

Last summer I got some good fish of 1 to 3 pounds from big, deep, long holes by casting a size 10 brown Jassid in areas where a fish rose every fifteen or twenty minutes. Apparently they were looking for an occasional beetle and not feeding on a hatch. It was like lake fishing since the water moved very slowly and ran 4 to 10 feet deep. To work such a spot, cast your dry fly down-stream, letting it float drag free, which is easy there being little current. This averts the problem of line and leader showing on the mirror-like surface before the fly is seen.



Lush environs characterize the background for some of the most unpredictable fishing available this time of year.

Fall, our third season, comes to the Ozarks late in September and runs through October and November. Fishing, which has slumped in September and October, really gets hot in November. The big carry-over rainbows move out of hiding now that river traffic has ceased. They start coloring up for spawning, which begins late in November and lasts until early February. They move into the riffles and accept your fly quite readily.

Thanksgiving weekend, three years ago, I located a cutoff where these big spawning fish were concentrated. In two days I took six fish over 3 pounds from one spot; all but one were males. I used a big, brown Woolly Worm to entice them.

On warm, clear, fall afternoons you can have a ball fishing dries. Large Jassids, with brown and dark gray hackle, are the ticket. Wildcat Shoals, about seven miles above Cotter, is supreme dry-fly water in late October and November. You will take fish that scale over 2 pounds in water not 6-feet deep on floaters. I fished this water several fall seasons with nymphs and streamers but had irregular luck. Then one warm afternoon in late October I tried dries in desperation after I'd taken only three fish under 10 inches in four hours of casting.

I used a size 14 Jassid to fish back upstream to the car. It had hardly settled on the water when, to my great surprise, a good fish rose. After a lively tussle, I lifted a 15-inch rainbow from the water. Minutes later I was fast to an even better one in a riffle that I'd fished thirty minutes earlier with no success. So it went for the next two hours, till it was time to head home. Six fish from 15 to 19 inches had taken my brown Jassids. Each fall since then we have taken these vividly colored trout on dries when nothing else seemed to interest them. Yet there were no hatches nor did we find many terrestrials in the fish' stomachs.

If you do not like to wade, john boats and guides are available the length of the river and are excellent casting platforms whether you fish adrift or at anchor. Many like this method because it is less tiring than wearing heavy waders and fighting strong currents.

Winter on the White River is very mild. Your line will seldom freeze in the guides as you fish the clear, sunny days that are usual from Decembers through February. Light, insulated clothing and a good wind-breaker will keep you warm and not cramp your movements.

Fishing techniques now change since less food is available and the fish are not very active. Until the 1965-66 season, Arkansas closed the river to live-bait fishing, but has now opened it to bait-casters from November to March.

We fly fish with most forms of wet flies and have excellent success, but the nymph and woolly worm, fished deep and slow, are the best takers. I like lots of color and flash tied to my woolly worms for this winter season. Fluorescent colors are also very productive. If the fish are still spawning, a big streamer fished in shoals just above a shallow riffle can hook you up to the biggest trout in the area.

Spinners and spoons, used with ultra-light spinning rigs, pay off for those who like them. Gold and copper spoons of about 1/8 to 3/8 ounces are recommended. Very small marabou jigs are deadly all winter – especially yellow, white and yellow and black. Combinations of gold spinners and woolly worms, cast with a fly rod, account for some very nice catches.

I use both floating and sinking lines in winter – they seem equally effective – but prefer floating. Using shooting heads with monofilament shooting line keeps my hands much drier, hence warmer, since little water clings to the greased mono.

Just as the Yellowstone and Missouri rivers have snow-fly hatches in midwinter, on sunny afternoons the White has a midge hatch. From late January through February, hatches occur on all but the coldest of

days. Then a size 16 to 22, dark-blue dun midge, fished dry or just in the surface, will interest some fine trout. Actually this period is one of the few when the fish rise well on the White to dry flies.

If you wish to fly fish during ideal low water conditions you'll have to do some planning. Each day the water level rises when the power generators at the dam are in operation, usually from 8am to 5pm on weekdays. We use this 'tide' to our advantage. Low or rising water is best for flies, so we fish the areas that have it during daylight hours. Early morning we are at Wildcat Shoals, about eleven miles below the dam. Here the tide doesn't rise till 10:30 or 11:30am. When it does we eat lunch and then drive to Rim Shoals where there is low water until 3:30 to 5:30pm. If you want to fish later, you drive another ten miles to the Buffalo Shoals area, where you will have low water until dark. On ideal days, when no great amount of water has been released, you can spend all day at Rim Shoals. Without doubt this area offers you two miles of the best riffles and pockets.

The right tackle always makes your chances better, but this, of course, is a matter of personal preference. We have found the best all-round rig for our fly-casting on the White: an 8-foot rod that handles a No. 6 or 7 line usually is sufficient for the fly sizes I have recommended. We like 9- to 12-foot leaders with 2X or 5X tippets. Your reel should be a smooth-running, single-action model with 100 yards of backing. These White River rainbow often move fast and cover lots of yardage. I like much lighter tackle when I dry-fly fish or work the midge rises. When we drift-fish from a john boat during high water, or cast big streamers, an 8 ½ or 9-foot rig is preferable.

Accommodations are varied and plentiful: excellent campsites, family hotels, modern luxury resorts, and motels. Many of the dock operators have campgrounds and housekeeping cabins overlooking the river. Rates are astonishingly low. You can stay at the Commercial Hotel in Cotter, whose spotless rooms rent at \$1.50 a night. Family-style meals cost 75 cents for all you can eat. At resorts, you pay from \$5 to \$15 for modern cabins with kitchens, wood-burning fireplaces, and air conditioning. (**things have changed a bit!*)

The best in-town accommodations are found at Bull Shoals, Cotter and Mountain Home, all of which are near the river. Each has excellent restaurants and many sight-seeing attractions for the family. US Highway 62 is intersected by good-to-excellent access roads that lead to all parts of the river. There is a new hard-surface landing strip at Flippin for fly-in fishermen.

All in all, there's no reason for you to endure cold weather and closed seasons. Come to Arkansas's four-season trout river – the White. You may never go home.

*(*We hope you've enjoyed this little piece of history. You'll have to forgive the way Dave is holding his rainbow ... this is before we knew better)*

*(*author's note)*