

Conservation/Stream Report October 15, 2018

The fishing season of 2018 has come and gone with a sizzle rather than a bang, as here on October 15, the last day of the regular trout fishing season in New York, we remembered having a most unusual year.

It's surprising to see the conditions of nature at this writing: we still have not had a frost. The Harvest Moon at the end of September came on a cloudy night, and therefore didn't produce any frost as a typical cold, clear night would have during that full moon. I can't ever remember not having frost by October 15 - and we're still enjoying begonias and a huge bed of nasturtiums in the garden blooming merrily. In addition, we've found that fly-fishing activity this time of year has also been affected; fishing at Hazel Bridge on the Willowemoc, which is usually top-notch in late September and October, has been flat. Generally the frosts of late September bring a hatch that encourages the trout to rise, and fishing is productive in that long pool below the bridge; we've often fished it up till Veteran's Day with good luck.

Another "can't ever remember" thought is the lack of colorful fall foliage. It must have to do with all the rain we've received these past months - the trees never had chance to go dormant with the ground so saturated, and so many of the leaves are still green and starting to fall rapidly, with just a minimum of yellow, gold and brown remaining.

Continuous rain has kept rivers and streams in a spring-like flow, unusual for this time of year. Last year during the first week in October conditions were very dry, and the Beaverkill was flowing around 70 cubic feet per second at the gauging station at Cooks Falls...but at this writing, October 15, Beaverkill was flowing at 900 cubic feet per second - well above the average flow for this date of 177 cfs over 104 years of record-keeping. The East and West Branches of the Delaware River are also very high, making wading difficult and best accessible by floating. Water releases from Pepacton and Cannonsville reservoirs (of about 800 cfs and 550 cfs respectively) have kept water levels high even without the rain.

But let's take a look at the year in review to find out how we arrived at where we are today: January began with bitter cold temperatures and wind chills of 20 below zero. It proved to be a very wintery month, with almost two weeks of frigid temperatures at the beginning of the month that caused rivers to freeze across the surface, and made it impossible for the USGS water gauges at the gauging stations to record.

Early February brought more snow and cold weather, then warming temperatures and rain, keeping our rivers full, that caused some pretty dramatic ice-out events, with huge chunks of ice being carried along swollen rivers and deposited along stream banks and roadways (pictured below)



March certainly “came in like a lion” with a blizzard that brought more than 25 inches of snow. The snow kept coming during the month of March with a total of about 50 inches of snowfall in just three weeks - and even the most enthusiastic of winter lovers were starting to tire of shoveling their walks and decks.

April brought some relief although it was an up-and-down month, with a few days of unseasonably warm weather - but we were still far behind in spring blossoms; as of April 16 only a few hardy snowdrops had pushed up, with crocuses and daffodils still in the mid-stem stage and no blossoms to be seen. The earliest stone fly hatches were just starting, and Quill Gordons, that hatch when the daffodils show their cheerful faces, were late. April 30 brought yet another snowstorm, but finally the Quill Gordons made their appearance and seemed to bring some good productive fishing.

May proved to be another unusual month, with bouts of warm and cold weather. Quill Gordons and Hendricksons were seen during the first week, and by May 10, Hendricksons were out amid a tremendous caddis hatch in the middle of the day - we could see the yellow egg sacs on the females as they dipped into the water and then flew straight up toward the sky. The Shad Bush bloomed, but we seemed to have missed the Shad Fly hatch - that prolific caddis hatch with its signature green egg sac that will plaster cars driving along the roads and rivers. By May 15 Spring seemed to have come to the Catskills in all its glory, with the light-green leaves just pushing out, early wildflowers and flowering shrubs and trees lighting up the landscape. We enjoyed foraging and bringing home ramps, fiddlehead ferns, watercress and, on special occasions, trout and a wild turkey — gourmet fare fresh from our own woods and waters. But the glories of spring were short-lived as just a day or so later Livingston Manor was hit with hailstones the

size of **tennis balls**, which broke windows, damaged cars and property.... tornado winds passed through, with a twister cloud seen in Monticello, causing wild fluctuations in temperature, from 80 degrees down to the 60s in a short period of time. Most all of the cars that were parked throughout Livingston Manor school were badly dented and many homes had roofing material and siding torn off and damaged beyond repair. As a result of these spring storms, rivers were high, fly hatches were disrupted and fishing efforts were thwarted. We never saw the hemlock trees release their golden pollen that usually carpets cars, decks, and everything in its path in mid-May - no doubt due to the pelting hail and heavy downpours of that week.

Fly hatches struggled along, including Caddis, Blue Winged Olives and some remaining Hendricksons; but with the blooming of the fragrant lilacs, the Gray Foxes and March Browns emerged, along with sweetest-smelling honeysuckle blossoms which, on a sunrise walk along the river, lit up the foggy morning with their bright pink, cream and white spiky flowers.

On the evening of June 1 as we drove along the North Branch Callicoon Creek we began to notice flies hitting our windshield. The hatch continued to intensify long after the road left the river, and it was apparent that what we were witnessing was the 'missing' Shad Fly hatch of a month earlier, by the proliferation of green egg sacs that were stuck on the grille.

Green drakes provided good fishing in June. This much-beloved hatch is a favorite of fly fishers, as the very large greenish-tinged mayflies tend to bring up the largest fish in the river to feed, and hatches at about the same time as the wild strawberries appear. I found some wild strawberries while walking the dog in the early morning as the Green Drake hatch was occurring on the Beaverkill, East and West Branches of the Delaware.

In July we experienced the only period of low water conditions to occur all year, and it was to see surprising how quickly the water levels had dropped after so much precipitation during the winter and spring. Higher-than-normal temperatures with a heat wave of up to 100 degrees ushered in the July 4 weekend. As a result, the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation ran a press release warning trout fishers of the dangers of fishing during such low and warm water conditions. Trout are cold water sport fish, and can experience serious physical stress whenever water temperatures climb above 70° Fahrenheit. Heat stressed fish often seek pockets of cold water created by upwelling groundwater, small feeder streams, or water released from the reservoirs. These refuges allow trout to avoid or recover from potentially fatal levels of heat stress. Anglers should avoid catch and release fishing for heat stressed trout, as those already weakened by heat stress are at risk of death no matter how carefully they are handled; and trout gathered in unusually high numbers should not be disturbed. Because these fish are likely to be

suffering from heat stress and seeking relief, responsible anglers should not take unfair advantage of their distress. Fishing early in the morning when stream temperatures are at their coolest, as well as bringing along a thermometer to check the water temperature before starting to fish was also recommended. If temperatures are up in the 70s, have an alternate fishing plan such as a lake or pond, or below NYC reservoirs in the Tailwater Fisheries. Pictured below is Crystal Lake, taken from our canoe (during one Fall Outing a few years ago the WFFC visited Crystal Lake, a beautiful though small trout lake open to the public, and hiked around its perimeter.)



Water temperatures suffered during late July, with the Beaverkill reaching above 82 degrees and the East Branch Delaware River at Fishs Eddy 78 degrees! This was VERY upsetting, as the East Branch is supposed to be a “Tailwater Fishery” and provide cold water releases from the bottom of Pepacton Reservoir to protect the trout. This did not happen, and yet a check with the NYC DEP webpage showed that the Catskill reservoirs were exactly at the “Normal” range for their Total Storage - in fact a bit more water, with the % capacity at 91.4% as compared to the “Normal” historic level of 91.2% full.

August brought some relief with consistent rainfall, which raised water levels and sent temperatures back down, but trout fishing suffered another blow, when on August 9, a 63-car train traveling west from New Jersey to Binghamton along the West Branch of the Delaware derailed near Hale Eddy Road, and up to 4,000 gallons of diesel fuel was spilled into the West Branch, sending at least two rail cars into the river. Reportedly one car contained corrosive material and 13 cars contained hazardous contaminated soil. The train derailment was believed to have been caused by railroad tracks and a culvert washing out due to heavy storms and flooding. The fast-moving flood water made it difficult to capture the oil and as a result, wildlife and water quality was affected, with oil slicks being seen and smelled downstream of Lordville on the main stem Delaware just a few days after the derailment. Fortunately this situation was cleaned up as best as could be done and we have not heard of any residual effects. However, aquatic insects may have been impacted, which may not be apparent until next year.

September began with the heat index back up to 100 degrees for a couple of days, but consistent rains that had begun in August raised water levels to a higher than average flow, where they remain today, in mid-October.

Fly hatches for this time of year include Isonychia, (watch for the Isonychia and stonefly cases on the rocks along the banks) various sizes and colors of Caddis flies, and tiny Blue-Winged Olives. For those autumn fly fishers who are not yet ready to put away their equipment, there is still plenty of fishing to enjoy, as the Special Regulations Catch-and-Release areas are open year-round, and other areas remain open until November 30. Be sure to check your fishing syllabus or go online to the NYS DEC website (<https://www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/7917.html>) before embarking on a fishing trip - and be sure your fishing license is current.

The violent weather we experienced in 2018 appears to coincide with the hazards of global warming, and if there are still any doubts about climate change, this year proved to be a good example that something in nature is awry.`

Respectfully submitted,
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