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# St. Croix Valley

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# Casting the Croix

Anglers take to the waters to experience the joys of springtime fly-fishing in the valley

STORY AND PHOTOS BY GREG SEITZ

They say that trout don't live in ugly places. Luckily, the St. Croix Valley hosts many streams and rivers beautiful enough for these colorful fish to call home.

As the winter melts, local fly anglers are returning to the Kinnickinnic, Willow, Rush and other rivers for the first time since last September. Whether they passed the fishless days reading the sport's broad canon of literature or at the tying bench filling their fly boxes, another season on the stream finally has begun.

## GLORY DAYS

The best fishing of the season is just ahead, says Mike Alwin, proprietor of Bob Mitchell's Fly Shop (651.770.5854, [www.bob-mitchellsflyshop.com](http://www.bob-mitchellsflyshop.com)) in Lake Elmo. He claims the finest months for trout are April, May and June. "That's when the most insects are hatching," Alwin says.

Hatching insects mean rising fish, the sight

of which are enough to make any fly fisherman shiver with excitement. Most of the accessible trout streams in the valley are on the Wisconsin side, where the popular catch-and-release season for trout already opened the first Saturday of March.

Getting out during those first weeks often means braving the cold, but it also gives the angler the opportunity to witness spring's arrival, helping one appreciate the season's warm days to come.

Greg Dietl, president of Hudson's Trout Unlimited chapter Kiap-TU-Wish ([www.lamb.com.net/kiaptuwish](http://www.lamb.com.net/kiaptuwish)), says he especially enjoys the early season because it means "a ritual return to familiar stretches of river.

"It's fun to see how rivers change from season to season," he says. "And it's also wonderful to watch the world come back to life."

**THE GEAR >** Rod, reel and net rest along the banks of the river.

**FISHING HOLE** Just like matching the hatch or making a difficult cast, most fly anglers consider exploring and discovering trout water an important part of the sport. An angler looking for a new fishing hole might stop by Bob Mitchell's Fly Shop, join Trout Unlimited and attend a meeting, or pick up Joe Humphrey and Bill Shogren's book *Trout Streams of Wisconsin and Minnesota*. —GS

## PEACEFUL PLACES

The trout streams of the valley generally wind through uplands, hewing narrow ribbons of green and blue through farm fields before descending through wooded canyons. The rivers are fed by springs that maintain the year-round cold water that is necessary for thriving trout.

The lush valleys are hubs of life, home to beavers, muskrats, hedgehogs and deer. Anglers also regularly see bald eagles, turkeys and osprey, as well as countless varieties of songbirds. "The streams are quiet, peaceful places," Hudson resident and fly fisherman Scott Augustin says. "That's one of the great things about the fishing, that you're doing it in a really nice place."

With fishing hole names like Swinging Gate, The Blue Hole and Wonderland, the valley's trout streams also have long, interesting histories. That history is represented today in the tight community of anglers in the region. They congregate over cups of coffee on Saturday mornings at Bob Mitchell's Fly Shop, at Bob Smith's Sports Club in Hudson for monthly Kiap-TU-Wish meetings, at volunteer days performing habitat improvements on local streams or on the tailgates of pickup trucks parked by quiet bridges before or after a day of fishing.





### ELEGANT ECOSYSTEM

Ed Haydin of Milwaukee drove all the way across Wisconsin last summer to fish the valley's trout streams for the first time. He says that it was a pleasure to pursue the area's big, smart fish, but it's never just about the catching. For Haydin, fly-fishing is about figuring something out. "For me, fishing is primarily about understanding an elegant system," he says.

That system is composed of water,

**THE ANGLER >** Stillwater native Gabe Schubert snares a sweet brown trout before returning it to the river.

insects the fish eat, weather, the season, the time of day and countless other intangibles that make every day on the stream a rewarding experience.

Fly anglers also might fish just for an excuse to get out and enjoy the beauty of the surroundings, the camaraderie of old friends, the memories of a familiar stretch of water or the history of those who plied the streams before them.

And, yes, some even go out for the fish.

When asked why he fishes, fly shop owner Alwin says, "The only reason to do anything is because it's fun. This is the most fun you can have standing up ... in cold water." ●

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Greg Seitz is a Stillwater native and local freelance writer who enjoys fly-fishing in the valley.

## ST. CROIX SMALLIES

Conveniently, smallmouth bass fishing on the St. Croix River and in its watershed gets good about the same time trout fishing's glory days wind down, and smallies are a lot of fun on the fly rod.

"July and August are really the prime time," says Tim Holschlag, author of *Smallmouth Fly Fishing* and a guide on the St. Croix and other rivers ([www.smallmouthangler.com](http://www.smallmouthangler.com)). "When the water levels drop and the air temperature rises, it can be great to fish a section of river in shorts and sandals, getting out and wading."

From the river's rocky upper extremities to placid Lake St. Croix, there are more than 130 miles of water filled with fish ready to take the angler's fly. —GS

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