

## Donegal Springs Creek, PA

A Year-Round Lancaster County Fishery

By Philip Hanyok

hunching forward through the shallow water, I watched the narrow riffle for a rise. I didn't expect to see one, but I also didn't want to miss the opportunity to take a spring creek trout on a dry fly. A few more steps put me into position to drop my little nymph at the top of the riffle, where it would tumble past a few basketball-size rocks and then glide along an undercut bank and into a slightly deeper run.



*A typical rainbow trout from Donegal Springs Creek (above). The west branch near Trout Run Road (right)*

My first few casts were short of the riffle and a little out from the bank. With each cast I placed the fly closer to the undercut bank. I could sense the fly sinking near the boulders and the slower water along the bank. I mended slightly to ensure the leader stayed slack so the fly could sink freely. Five or six casts into the riffle went uninterrupted; then, as the fly drifted dangerously close to the bank and began to enter the deeper run, my leader twitched. I raised the rod tip and felt resistance—then the pleasant tug of a 10-inch wild brown trout charging into the riffle. The fish made a quick attempt to go back to the undercut bank, then tried to angle downstream. I brought it in after a few more charges. It wasn't the biggest spring creek brown I've caught, but it was my first on a section of Donegal Springs Creek that I had not fished before.

Donegal Springs Creek, a small, pastoral, limestone stream that flows through Amish farm country in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, is only a few miles long,

but it offers many different challenges. It is a stream reborn through the efforts of many local volunteers who fenced livestock away from its banks and added structures to manage the flow and create additional trout habitat.

The stream has 2.4 miles of Delayed Harvest Fly Fishing Only water and about 4 more miles of stream that are open thanks to agreements with landowners. Throughout its length, stream-bred and stocked trout mingle. The fly-fishing-only water is open year-round, making it a good destination for anglers who are looking to start the season early or want to avoid the high water that is so typical on many Pennsylvania trout streams in spring.

The Donegal doesn't have abundant hatches or big pools with cruising trout, but its small size and many undercut banks provide a special challenge nonetheless: undercut banks are where trout stubbornly hold tight unless you know how to present a nymph or streamer.

After I released that little brown, I worked my way upstream, casting my nymph close to the left shoreline. I kept the line slack and watched the leader for signs of hesitation. If the leader hesitated or twitched, I lifted the slack out of the line to move the fly just an inch or two to set the hook. Using this technique, if there is no fish, the lift makes the fly hop but keeps it down where the fish can see it. This is a common presentation technique that many Donegal anglers use with a variety of nymph patterns.

As each presentation drifted downstream I pulled in just enough line to keep pace with the current, and near the end of each drift I raised the rod tip to pick up any remaining slack. Sometimes I pulled the fly up to the surface with a twitching motion, then paused briefly just before lifting it out of the water for the next cast. The tactic sometimes causes trout to chase the rising fly. Hooking them this way is another matter. Often I have to go back at them with a small nymph or return to them later.



*Tim Bennett casts to fish holding in a run upstream from the Route 23 bridge in the fly-only water (above). A golden rainbow (palomino) trout that took a San Juan Worm (below)*

The key to fishing the Donegal's dark undercut is to keep the fly in the fish's zone of vision. While some fish along an undercut bank may see a fly on the surface and rise to take it, most fish holding deeper in the undercut will not rise to a fly, either because they don't see it or because they are what I call stubborn fish—fish that won't budge far from their lair to grab a fly. I've learned that on the Donegal—and most other Pennsylvania spring creeks—large fish mostly stay under the bank, sometimes even while anglers walk by. Like a patient grouse in forest cover, these trout let you walk right past them before they make their flight. When they go, they usually bolt downstream behind you. You might never see them.

I've confirmed this "stubborn fish" theory in a few instances. The scenario usually went something like this: I fished a prime undercut bank hard and came up empty. Then I fished it some more with a large, active fly like a Woolly Bugger or streamer in an effort to induce a predatory or territorial strike. Still nothing. Finally, in an admission of defeat, I walked right up to the undercut and slid my foot as deep as I could under the bank. Out came a nice trout that bolted downstream.

It's surprising how deep an undercut bank can go. Perhaps a really stubborn fish could remain under some banks even after my foot poked around his home. Such a fish would likely be large and nocturnal, I suppose. Unfortunately, it's illegal to fish much of the Donegal at night. That's just as well, though. Night fishing there would probably be unnerving and more than a little dangerous

because of a healthy population of bats that come out in the evening, numerous groundhog and muskrat holes along the stream, and the omnipresent electric fencing.

### Three Sections

Donegal Creek has three distinct sections: the main stem (Donegal Creek), a portion of which has the fly-fishing-only regulations; the east branch (Charles Run), which flows through largely developed land; and the west branch (Donegal Springs), which provides quality water and a propagation area to rear wild trout.

The Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission and the Donegal Fish and Conservation Association (DFCA) stock various portions of the creek with trout during the spring and fall. You can expect to

catch a mix of stocked and wild rainbows and browns plus an occasional golden trout (locally known as palomino trout). The typical fish measures 8 to 14 inches, but anglers sometimes report hooking much larger fish.

On the west branch, large headwater springs provide a dependable flow of cold, clear water, creating a classic limestone spring creek. This section holds more small wild rainbows and browns (progeny from egg plantings). The east branch suffers from the effects of suburban and farm runoff, and it holds fewer fish after the initial stockings in spring. The main stem holds stocked trout plus stream-bred browns. The upper half of the main stem has a typical limestone-stream character, while the lower has more freestone-stream characteristics.

In the lower reaches of the east and west branches—open water with general fishing regulations—the usual



fishy spots hold stocked trout in spring, but by summer's end places that look like they should have large browns don't. You could fish a long time to catch just one nice fish, but it might be a large trout that managed to stay in the water, despite the odds.

The main stem's 2.4 miles of Delayed Harvest Fly Fishing Only water begin 275 yards below State Route 772 and ends downstream at Road T-334. This water runs through a mix of meadows and wooded areas. Rocky areas and places where the DFCA has installed rock structures to manage the flow provide good holding water and habitat for bugs and baitfish.

Spring seeps enter the stream at numerous places, and in these areas you'll find watercress and other aquatic weeds that hold many cress bugs and shrimp, but not many mayflies. Throughout the stream, the grassy undercut banks, logs, and pockets that provide cover for trout are in situations where it is difficult to make a good presentation. It takes a good caster to maneuver the fly into position on such a small stream while avoiding the high grass and electric fences along the bank. The jolt from a live fence won't send you to the hospital, but if you are wet it will likely make you shout.

Thunderstorms or heavy rains can raise the stream dramatically in a few hours, but it usually returns to normal quickly. Expect it to be fishable within a day after big storms. In 2004, high water throughout the year kept the stream full, and a few times it left its banks.

Fence stiles (ladders) over the electric fences provide easy access to the water. Since nearly all of the Donegal flows through private property, with access thanks to the generosity of landowners, it's important to return the favor. Please, pick up any trash you find along the stream—even what's not yours—and be careful around the fences.

### Nymphs and Streamers

Although the Donegal does not have significant hatches like other spring creeks, you may find a few sporadic caddisfly hatches. A few Blue-Wing Olives (*Baetis*) and sulphurs hatch in May. The trout will take dry flies, but size-14 to -18 nymph (including bead-head) imitations work better. If you must fish a dry fly, try an Adams, mosquito imitation,

caddis pattern, housefly imitation, or a terrestrial pattern.

I've fished small leggy nymphs with a bit of grease on them. In calm currents, these greased nymphs drift on or just below the surface and a few fish will rise to them. In riffles and broken runs, the same nymphs sink just enough to get more interest from fish that don't normally rise.

Most of the time I fish these nymphs with a gentle cast placed on the water with a bit of slack so that they stay wet and sink a bit. When I see a rise, I pluck the nymph from the water with a sharp lift of the rod and make a quick backcast to shake the fly dry, then gently drop it a few feet above the rise with enough slack to dead-drift the fly on the surface over the rise. If the fish doesn't take, I can let the fly drift naturally or twitch it to draw it under, so it continues downstream like a natural nymph tumbling in the currents.

Most reaches have scud, sowbug, and bloodworm populations. Various shrimp and cress-bug patterns adequately imitate these abundant bugs. A San Juan Worm is also a deadly imitation when dead-drifted past undercuts and along the bottom of deep runs and riffles. A split shot attached to the tippet 6 to 12 inches above a nymph or worm keeps it in the zone. Tim Bennett, who fishes the creek often, says the San Juan Worm is his go-to pattern when other flies don't work on difficult fish. He also uses flashy, short synthetic-body Woolly Buggers with barbells eyes, nymphs, and crickets.

In summer and fall, don't overlook terrestrials. They take fish on the surface and below it. I know a guy who fishes ants, beetles, and other terrestrials wet just below the surface, and sometimes weighted, with good success on the Donegal and other eastern spring creeks.

The Green Weenie, which has been attributed to various central Pennsylvania fly fishers, is one of the best sunk patterns. Kurt Enck, president of the DFCA, uses the pattern often in summer. He fishes the fly dead-drifted like other nymphs in riffles and deeper water, and says over the years it has taken many large fish—up to about 20 inches. He lives near the stream and has plenty of days on the water locating fish and going back to the best spots.

As with most Pennsylvania spring creeks, it pays to



get to know the water. The fish have plenty of places to hide and sometimes won't come out in bright daylight or if they sense someone stomping overhead. Tread lightly, wade quietly, and wear polarized glasses and clothing that blends into the vegetation.

Streamers work well for reaching into the rocks, undercut banks, root wads, and structure where trout hide. Woolly Buggers, minnows, and leeches imitate the stream's reddsides dace, blacknose dace, mottled sculpins, and leeches. I prefer a yellow-and-black Woolly Bugger or an all-black Bugger. The yellow Bugger has teased fish out of undercut banks, roots, and downed trees like no other pattern I've used. With a little weight 2 to 6 inches in front of the fly, the thing dives to the fish, then hops back toward the surface with every twitch of the rod tip—it's enticing! Without weight, it darts almost horizontally with every rod twitch or line strip.

If a fish slashes at it, as they often do, I either drop the rod tip to allow the fly to dead-drift or I yank it away and go right back to the fish, placing the fly 4 or 5 feet upstream of where the fish slashed the fly. If that doesn't work, a small, weighted nymph or a San Juan Worm dead-drifted deep through the area might do the trick. If not, I note the spot and return to it some other time.

### Repairing a Gem

The Donegal Fish and Conservation Association, founded in 1965 and including mostly anglers, has done much to maintain and improve Donegal Creek.

The effects of increased farming and suburban development severely degraded the stream by the 1990s. In 1994, the DFCA teamed up with the Lancaster County Conservation District to reverse the trend. In that year, few wild trout could be found there. Most of the stream suffered from an increase in cows and other livestock that trampled the banks. Other problems included sedimentation, nutrient overloading, high wa-



*Tim Bennett fishes grassy runs near an old brick barn along Trout Run Road.*

ter temperatures, lack of habitat, storm-water surges, and reduced groundwater recharge in areas where homes were being built.

By some estimates, more than \$200,000 has been spent on improving the stream since 1996, when the DFCA received a grant from the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). The groups involved in the restoration effort include the DFCA, DEP, the Donegal Chapter of Trout Unlimited (TU), Federation of Fly Fishers, Pennsylvania Trout, and many other organizations, businesses, and individuals.

About two dozen landowners along almost 7 miles of stream agreed to participate in the effort. Verbal

"gentlemen's agreements" were all that were needed—and for the most part this arrangement has worked out well.

So far, volunteers have installed about 7 miles of fencing (counting both sides of the stream) on about a dozen farms and reestablished or enhanced about 13 acres of buffer along nearly 7 miles of stream. They have also built about 90 log and rock deflectors, mudsills, and other structures to steer the flows around critical areas and provide fish cover.

Most of the fences are powered by 12-volt solar chargers; some are electrified through switches in nearby barns. They keep the cattle out of the stream—except for a few watering stations and ford crossings—so that the stream banks remain stable. The fences also ensure that in-stream improvements are not destroyed and livestock isn't injured by them.

In the upper west branch, volunteers have also used Whitlock-Vibert boxes to plant trout eggs in prepared gravel beds. These have enabled stream-bred trout to thrive in certain sections. A no-fishing/propagation area in the west-branch headwaters where the egg boxes are planted helps the wild trout population succeed in its annual procreation effort.

Now the DFCA maintains all stream-bank fencing as



- House Fly**
- Hook:** Mustad 95480, sizes 14–18
  - Thread:** Black 8/0
  - Body:** Peacock herl
  - Rib:** Fine gold wire
  - Wing:** Fine gray deer hair
  - Head:** Peacock herl

well as other stream improvements and duties, including cutting weeds along fences, maintaining signs along the stream, and overseeding eight strategically placed monitoring stations to provide data on the stream.

Strong storms and high water in summer 2004 changed the stream a bit. Numerous trees fell into the water, creating new structure for fish but also work for volunteers, who must clear some of the trees to manage the stream flow and allow float stocking in spring and fall. The high water also appears to have done some good. A few previously silted areas were washed clean and some holes seemed to become deeper or larger. Hopefully the net results will be positive for the creek and its trout.

For more information about the Donegal's restoration and the DFCA, or to volunteer to help on the stream, contact Kurt Enck, (717) 492-1928, or Donegal TU, (717) 733-4939.



### Don't Take a Dunk

The Donegal's banks are often soft and slippery. Years of cows stomping around the stream have created many steep dirt banks that become slippery when wet boots step on them. There are also soft areas where grass grows over recently deposited silt. It's easier than you might think to fall into this little stream.

The experience of a fishing companion aptly illustrates my point. He had hooked a fish and was preparing to net it from a grassy point above a deep riffle. As he reached the net into the water, the bank gave away. Suddenly, he was in the drink, face first, with the water pushing at his back. I called to him as I laughed, then realized he wasn't coming up for air. I was ready to jump in when he regained his balance and footing and stood up with rod in hand—and the fish still on the line. He landed a nice fish, which swam out of the net while he dumped water from his pockets. Fortunately, the hot August air dried things out in no time. Don't try this on a cold spring day. ➔

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## DONEGAL SPRINGS CREEK NOTEBOOK

**When:** Year-round on the 2.4 mi. of water from 275 yds. below the Rte. 772 bridge downstream to Road T-334. Other sections are open from mid-April to the end of February.

**Where:** A few miles west of Lancaster, between Mount Joy and Marietta. From Lancaster, take Rte. 23 (Marietta Pike) west to the creek, or Rte. 230 west to Mount Joy, then Rte. 772 (Mount Joy Pike) south to the creek. From Harrisburg, take Rte. 283 south to the Mount Joy exit, follow the signs to Mount Joy, then Rte. 772 south to the creek.

**Headquarters:** Mount Joy, Marietta, Columbia, and most of the other nearby towns have hotels, B&B inns, restaurants, and other services. Lancaster is a much larger city with all services. Contact the Pennsylvania Dutch Convention & Visitors Bureau, [www.padutchcountry.com](http://www.padutchcountry.com), for area information.

**Appropriate gear:** 2- to 6-wt. rods, floating lines, 9- to 15-ft. leaders, 4X to 6X tippets, and any quality reel. Hip waders are sufficient most times. Chest waders allow you to crouch and kneel for a more effective low-profile approach and presentation.

**Useful fly patterns:** Cress Bugs, emergers, Adamses, mosquito, House Fly, terrestrials, fuzzy nymphs, Bead Head Nymphs, attractor dries—all sizes 14–20. Streamers, Woolly Buggers, leeches, Muddlers—all size 6 and larger.

**Necessary accessories:** Camouflage clothing, polarized glasses.

**Nonresident license:** \$15/3 days, \$30/7 days, \$35/season. Available online at <http://www.theoutdoorshop.state.pa.us>.

**Special regulations:** Delayed Harvest Fly Fishing Only. It's catch-and-release except June 15–Labor Day. Regulations are posted along the stream.

**Fly shops/guide services/motels:** Lancaster: The Evening Rise Fly Fishing Outfitters, (717) 509-3636; [www.theeveningrise.com](http://www.theeveningrise.com). Ephrata: Trout Run Sports, (717) 738-2525.

**Maps/report:** *Pennsylvania Atlas & Gazetteer* by DeLorme Mapping; *Pennsylvania Seamless USGS Topographical Maps* by National Geographic. A Department of Environmental Protection report on the Donegal, by Mark A. Metzler, is available at <http://www.dep.state.pa.us/dep/deputate/watermgt/wq/wqstandards/tmdl/DONEGAL.pdf>.