

Fly Fishing the Lower Chattahoochee River

By: Lucas Walrod

I was the first one to arrive at the park behind the Phenix City, Alabama court house. Soon though joggers, river combers, and people just out enjoying the crisp fall air would be joining me. As I backed my truck into its usual spot, the sun began its slow ascent illuminating the sparse fog rising from the surface of the Chattahoochee river, or 'Hooch as its often referred to as. I live for mornings like this. My oldest son Kaden and I climbed out of the truck and fell into our familiar routine. Walking to the back of my pick up I lowered the tail gate and began setting my gear onto it as he did the same. We stole glances at the river, gauging its height today as well as looking for any other



anglers that may have beaten us there. Finding the water at the perfect wading depth and devoid of anyone else we began to assemble our rods. Across the calm surface just below the rapids we could see fish rising up to feed. We have learned through trial and error that either a 5 or 6 weight set up was the perfect medicine for the lower Chattahoochee, though depending on what you are targeting a rod size in either direction can work as well. The 5/6 combination allowed us to throw everything from small foam grasshoppers to bead-chain clouser minnows, both of which were sure winners depending on the season. Hip waders on, rods assembled, and flies attached, we began the short trip down to the water's edge. We usually fish close to one another not only for safety, but in the event one of us needs help landing a good fish.

The Chattahoochee river starts its journey at the southern foot hills of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Northern Georgia and snakes its way south through the cities of Atlanta and Columbus before carving through the landscape down to the western Florida pan handle where it forms one third of the Apalachicola – Chattahoochee – Flint River, or ACF, River Basin. While the northern section of the river is prized for its near year-round trout fishing opportunities, not far south of Atlanta the water temperatures rise too high to maintain Salmonidae fisheries. The river slows as it makes its way towards Columbus, Georgia and Phenix City, Alabama where it serves as the state line border, with one notable exception, The Whitewater Express. Comprised of 2.5 miles of whitewater rafting and kayaking, the Whitewater Express is the longest urban whitewater trail in the world. While you can't find any trout in this section of the river, there are plenty of game fish that keep anglers falling in love with these waters and coming back for more. Large-mouth bass, spotted bass, white bass, hybrids, stripers, shad, gar, and several other fish call these waters home, and with the right assortment of flies you will never grow bored fishing for them.

As Kaden and I approached the quiet edge of the river we gazed out to our favorite wading pools of slack water. I tied on a white Zonker #8 and Kaden begins his morning with a small bait fish fly. I stripped some line from my Battenkill reel as I eyed up a small back channel pool close to the shoreline. Walking up stealthily, I sent a few false casts to get the line out over the water. As soon as my fly hit the water I began the rapid strips that the fish here find so irresistible. When nothing takes an interest, I turn my attention to my son to see where he started his day. Predictably, I find him at the mouth of the small feeder creek that runs under the bridge of the River Walk, a long exercise trail that skirts the river on both sides. This spot has produced larger spotted bass in the past as they loiter in the calm water where the creek meets the main river picking off smaller fish that wander down the swollen creek. Kaden had already caught one, a juvenile spotted bass that was hanging out on the far side of the mouth against the grassy bank. It wasn't large, but they don't have to be with the fight they always put up. I've compared the energy that the spotted bass fights with that of its cousin, the small-mouth; both fish seem to punch above their weight. I knew he was happy as he always liked to get the first fish out of the way early on. This relieved the pressure from him as in his mind nothing could be worse than being skunked on such a big water.

After a quick picture, as I was tucking my phone into its waterproof bag, I congratulated him and moved past, leaving him to his favorite hole. I began heading for a cluster of rocks the size of large Sport Utility Vehicles that lay exposed in the low water like sleeping giants. Not willing to give up on my Zonker just yet, I made a cast across the smooth surfaced pool and began my usual strip. This time I felt the tell-tale knock of a predator fish slam into my fly, but I was mid grip with my stripping hand and missed the set. Undeterred, I sent the Zonker back out again and found my rhythm of that of a small fish searching for safety in coming morning light. Keeping the rod tip low into the water I soon felt another strike and this time my hand was on the line. I set the



hook and could immediately tell the fish was on. I squeezed the line lightly between my fingers hoping the fish would turn into deeper water so that I could bring him in without allowing himself to bash wildly on the rocks. Much to my delight he did exactly as I hoped and made his way for the safety of the deep main channel. Arresting his escape, I began short strips to bring him in without allowing him to get too tired to recover afterwards. I could tell that he was a good size but I had still yet to lay eyes on him. When the fish was 15 feet away, he finally broke the surface briefly. I couldn't believe my luck, a white bass. Hands down they are my second favorite fish to catch on the

Chattahoochee river with regularity. Most of the ones I have caught have been small, but their shimmering white bodies with distinct horizontal black lines make them stand out in a world of greenish hues so common to warm water fish. Unhooking my net from my belt loop and letting it hang freely, I kept pressure on the line and brought the fish in closer. When my leader hit the top guide of my rod I elevated the rod higher and scooped the fish up with my net. After quickly removing the hook I looked around for Kaden hoping to share in the glory, but he had moved deeper into the creek, preferring to limit the hiding places of his quarry to a manageable size. Looking across the river into Columbus, Georgia I could see people jogging, biking, and walking on their side of the River Walk, unaware of the happiest man on the river at the time, staring joyfully into his net. I released the fish after making sure he had fully recovered and began making my way to the next pool. The day was young and I had already caught my first, perhaps it was a sign of what was to come.

If you are ever in the area, whether visiting the Fort Benning Army Base or attending one of the many events the city of Columbus, Georgia hosts each year, be sure to bring your rod and gear. While small boats can cover a lot of ground, wading in along many sections of the river walk or fishing from the banks is also highly doable, just be mindful of the water levels and speeds as Georgia Power opens the dams upriver at scheduled times. If you do forget your gear at home however, you can always stop into the Whitewater Express shop where they are an authorized dealer of Orvis equipment. We may not have any trout this far down the 'Hooch, but we surely have plenty of fun available with a fly rod!

