

A Stroll Along the Pigeon

Chapter 1 – the elk

Climbing a steep ridge with a backpack on quickly reminds a person of their true age. When I was younger, I could have run up this hill with a pack on my back. Unfortunately, that was a few decades ago.

When the game trail I had been following up the side of the steep ridge finally leveled out I was huffing and puffing like 'the little engine who could' from the children's story. A nearby fallen tree made a welcome seat. Once I caught my breath, I took the opportunity to tighten and retie my shoelaces.

The first hint that something was about to happen was the sound of a twig snapping in the forest near the trail. Then, without another sound, a large bull elk stepped from the woods. He stopped only part way onto the trail and swung his head towards me, clearly baffled by my presence.

When the elk stepped from the trees, I froze in place, barely 20 feet away. What little breeze there was came from the northwest and carried my scent away from him. Leaning forward, with a shoelace in each hand, I appeared to be a large bump on the log. Even though he didn't know what I was, he was still clearly puzzled. He took a step closer trying to determine just what this strange apparition might be.

A mature bull elk is a very large animal. This one was a 'Royal' with six points on each side. The polished tips of his antlers gleamed in the sunlight. They appeared to be very sharp. I suddenly realized that I could be in danger.



I was about to sit up and say, "boo" when the elk finally caught my scent. He whirled around and disappeared into the woods. He moved faster than I could believe possible for such a large animal. The sounds of his passage echoed through the forest for a seemingly long while before they faded away.

"Wow", was the only thing I could think of to say. That's when I realized I had held my breath throughout the encounter. My legs were shaky when I stood up. I blamed it on the climb, but I knew better. This was definitely a 'close encounter' of the natural kind.

Chapter 2

The encounter with the elk happened on the second day of a three-day solo-backpacking trip in the Pigeon River State Forest. The area is located in the northeastern portion of the Lower Peninsula of Michigan.

The trip had started in southeastern Michigan on a Friday afternoon. I left work at lunchtime after telling the boss I needed to take care of a personal problem. This was no lie. Personally, I was sick of the city and needed some quality time along a trout stream. I was hiking along a trail through the woods northeast of Gaylord less than four hours later.

August isn't exactly known for its premium fly hatches, but as the old saying goes - "the best time to go fishing is when you can." This was when I found time to get away to the sanctuary of the north woods.

As far as the native and stocked brookies were concerned, it might as well have been June. They had destroyed several Royal Coachmen dry flies during the first evening's fishing. I was well pleased with the start of my three-day backpacking trip.



The Pigeon River is one of many fine trout streams in northern Michigan. It rises east of Gaylord and flows generally north until it enters Mullet Lake, which is just south of Cheboygan.

The river flows through a sparsely populated, and in some cases unpopulated, forest. Wading is easy throughout much of its length, thanks to the sandy bottom and, mostly, gentle current. The habitat is perfect for mayflies, and hence, for trout. The area has several well-maintained hiking trails that follow the river in places, which makes it a great spot for backpacking.

I first fished the Pigeon as a youngster with my father and uncle. I took my son camping along the river when he was three years old. Through the years, I've visited the river many times, always bringing away a deeper appreciation of the beauty of the area. This trip was no exception.

The hike began near the Cornwall flooding and followed a main trail for about an hour until I took a side-trail that followed the course of the river more closely. When I thought I had hiked about three to four miles from the road (probably really only two miles) I looked for a place to set up camp for the night. The spot I found was near the bottom of a ridge and reached by way of a game trail. It offered a flat spot large enough for my tent and a small campfire. That's all I needed.

Chapter 3

Camp was up in about fifteen minutes, including a rain trench around the tent. At the end of another half hour, I had enough firewood gathered for my campfire that night. My fly rod was slung and ready not long after.

I had packed along a light pair of stocking waders and a pair of canvas shoes to wear while I waded. Since it was August, I didn't need to worry about staying warm. The deer flies were bad down near the stream, so I pulled a bug net over the brim of my soft golf hat. I was ready to go.

The spot where I entered the stream was like much of the Pigeon, about two feet deep with a sandy bottom. There was a fallen tree lying in the river upstream on my left and another almost straight across from me. I eased out into the stream until I had room to cast.



The Pigeon holds brown, rainbow, and brook trout. I've been a brook trout fan since I caught my first one as a boy. They are a beautiful fish and are usually easier to fool than a rainbow or brown. The brook trout in the Pigeon are generally small, although twelve-inchers and larger are not unknown.

The State of Michigan stocks the Pigeon with brook trout every year. The smaller, hatchery raised fish are relatively easy to catch. The larger, more experienced brookies and those born in the stream require a little more finesse. I decided to start with a traditional brook trout fly – the Royal Coachmen dry fly.

On my third cast, there was a flash of color and then a quick swirl at the fly as it drifted by the end of the log. A slight lift of the wrist was enough to set the hook and I was into the first fish of the trip.

Even on the light rod and 6X tippet, I could tell it wasn't a very large fish. It wasn't long before I had a beautiful eight-inch brook trout in the net. I took a few moments to admire its beauty before sliding it gently back into the stream.

Brook trout are among the most beautiful of fishes. The back is olive-green to dark brown with lighter sides and a silvery white belly. Wormlike marks and spots cover the sides.

The spots are white or red with a blue halo. The fins are often orange with a white stripe



on the leading edge and a black stripe above it. In the fall, the larger males acquire a hooked jaw and the colors are even more vivid.

By the time I was through, I had landed over a dozen brookies ranging in size from seven inches to one very nice fish of nearly twelve inches. Almost all of them hit a Royal Coachman dry fly. Two hit a small deer-hair grasshopper imitation and one took a large black ant tied on a size 18 hook. I kept one ten-inch fish for dinner and released all of the others unharmed.

Chapter 4

As soon as I got back to camp, I started a fire and soon had the trout grilling on an improvised holder made from green branches. Before going fishing, I had set some dried

mushrooms and dried peas to soak in the last of my bottled water. I would have to purify river water for everything from this point on. This is exactly what I did for the rice that accompanied the trout. Dessert was an apple turnover I had purchased at a convenience store on the way north.

Weight is always an issue in backpacking, even when only hiking a short distance as I was on this trip. That doesn't mean you can't eat good food. Spices weigh practically nothing and enhance any meal. I seasoned the trout with salt and pepper and sprinkled it with rosemary. Thyme, salt, and pepper served to flavor the rice with mushrooms, while salt and lemon pepper were perfect for the peas.



Brook trout are not only beautiful they are also tasty. Few fish surpass them, not even walleye from a northern lake or Lake Superior whitefish. No meal ever tasted finer.

The Milky Way appeared in the darkening sky while I ate. The sparks that floated into the air from my small fire seemed to be trying to join the stars in the sky. The background noises I had heard during the day, mostly the calls of birds, slowly faded away as twilight faded into night. Then, with full dark, the mosquitoes came and sent me diving for my head net. The mosquitoes only stayed for about thirty minutes and then they too faded away as the temperature dropped.

Gathering firewood near a good campsite can be a real chore, but once you are sitting around the fire in the evening all that time and effort seem minor compared to the pleasure the fire brings. Especially, when you are alone in the woods with no more protection than a whippy fly rod and an air horn to scare away any unwelcome visitors.



I sat by the fire for several hours that night, feeding it another piece of wood whenever it began to die down. It was extremely calming, except when I heard the sound of a larger animal moving near the campsite. Each time this happened, I felt a little flush of adrenaline accompanied by an increase in my pulse.

Michigan's woods are generally a safer place than a city, but wild dogs and black bears have been known to

attack lone humans on very rare occasions. My heart quickly calmed each time, because I assumed these were either raccoons looking for a meal along the stream or deer coming to the stream for a drink. I had washed my utensils and buried the remains of my dinner quite a distance from my camp, so I didn't expect to attract any large animals, namely a bear, in search of food.

Being alone in the woods, miles from the nearest road, is a very different experience than putting up a tent in a regular campground. It seems to sharpen the senses.

Even the simplest task can be life threatening when there is no help nearby. When I'm alone in the woods I don't step on top of a log that is laying across the trail, I walk around it. A slip could mean a sprained ankle or worse. I have no desire to crawl five miles with a broken leg, so I usually move cautiously and am constantly aware of everything around me. Before the trip was over I would be reminded just how quickly a situation can turn dangerous.

This heightened awareness is what always pulls me back to the woods for solo excursions. I imagine it is, in some ways, the same thing that draws people to attempt long solo journeys in a sailboat, which is something else that appeals to me.

The mockingbirds started singing around midnight. Hearing birds at night made me curious about what time it was, so I checked my watch for the first time since leaving the car. When I saw how late it was it seemed like a good time to call it a night and shortly thereafter I was sound asleep.

Chapter 5

Dawn came and went several hours before I awoke. I crawled from my bed and looked at the stream, debating whether to fish here again or move on to another camping spot. The desire to see new surroundings made the decision easy. It took a little longer to pack up then it had to set up, but I was soon ready to move on. This side of the river was against a large ridge, so I climbed the game trail to the hiking trail at the top.

It is difficult enough to climb a steep ridge without an extra thirty or forty pounds on your back, which explains why I was breathing heavily when I reached the top. A fallen pine tree was wide enough to make a comfortable seat. That's when the elk stepped from the woods.

When the encounter was over and my breathing had returned to normal (and the weakness in my knees had gone away) I started along the trail. For the most part, the path wound along the high ground above the river.

The August sun made me thankful for the breeze that moved through the trees on the top of the ridges. The breeze faded away on the lower stretches, but these were usually shaded from the sun and brought their own kind of relief.



The sweat was soon washing the stink of the city from my pores. Within minutes, my hatband was soaked and did little to keep the sweat from running into my eyes. After an estimated half hour of steady hiking, I stopped to take a breather and to tie a sweatband

around my forehead. I was glad I'd brought extra socks, because I had a feeling I would probably have to change them at least once during the day.

The river continually pulled at me with its allure of cool water and bright fish. I resisted the call, because I wanted to push my out-of-shape body for at least another hour.

Each step seemed to loosen my muscles a little more and I soon felt stronger than I had at the beginning of the day. My pace picked up as I began to fall into the pigeon-toed stride of a long distance hiker.

The tendency, when carrying a backpack, is to lean forward and let the weight of the pack push you along the trail. Knowing this, I deliberately lifted my head to look around occasionally as I moved along the sandy trail.

It is easy to miss things in the woods if you are not paying attention. There is a difference between looking and seeing. Most people will look right past something if it is immobile. Others are so caught up in their thoughts that they can't see something right under their feet. And, sometimes it is what you don't see that is significant.

Without my noticing the change, the woods had grown quieter. It took a few moments to realize what had changed. The nuthatchers and wrens that had been flitting about in the underbrush seemed to have disappeared. I looked around for a reason that would explain their vanishing. That's how I happened to spot the bald eagle.

Chapter 6

The eagle was sitting on a barren branch on the far side of the river. The white feathers



on its head shone brightly in the sun, while the body appeared almost pure black with bronze highlights. The head was turned in my direction and I wondered how long it had been watching my approach. This seemed like an excellent time to take another break, so I eased behind some brush and shrugged out of my backpack.

Eagles have amazing eyesight and I knew I wouldn't be able to watch without him(her?) knowing I was there. The only thing I could do was to move very slowly and appear as non-threatening as possible. Usually a bird in this situation would decide to move to a less crowded spot. Today though, I was in luck.

While I was behind the brush I pulled my head net over my face to cut down on the glare and then eased forward until there was only a thin screen of branches between the eagle and I. Before long, he either forgot about me or dismissed the threat I posed and returned his attention to the business at hand - fishing.

Many people don't know that a bald eagle's main diet is fish. While they are not above scavenging for their food, as Benjamin Franklin often pointed out, they are truly superb at taking fish near the surface of the water.

The farseeing eyes scanned the river for the slightest movement. The high perch allowed the masterful fish predator to see deep under the water's surface. I was close enough to see the slight movements the bird took when it spotted anything of interest in the stream.

The minutes slipped by and I was beginning to think this was all I would see. Then suddenly, the eagle hunched forward and dropped from the branch. A few flaps of the wings brought it up to speed as it swooped for the surface below.

The final strike was surprisingly clean, with only a small splash as the eagle's talons entered the water. Seconds after leaving, the branch the eagle was struggling skyward with a bright fish clenched firmly in both feet. The silvery color and slight blush of red along the side of the fish identified it as a rainbow trout.

Once the eagle had cleared the treetops, it went into a climbing turn that took it north. I stood and watched until fish and bird vanished from sight. It was easy to picture the avaricious eaglets waiting anxiously for their next meal. I determined to keep my eyes open for the nest, so I could avoid disturbing the parents as I passed by. In the end, I never did see the nest or catch sight of the eagle or its mate again.

Chapter 7

With the excuse for my break gone, I shrugged into my backpack and started north along the trail in the wake of the eagle. I was soon wishing I had wings to fly over the ground instead of plodding along one step at a time. It wasn't long before I could no longer resist the pull of the river so I started looking for that day's campsite.

The trail had split shortly after I started hiking again, with the high trail wandering away from the river. The lower trail looked like it would be tough going through boggy ground and thickets of tag alders, so I stayed up above. This soon proved to be a mistake as the high trail wound further and further away from the stream.



After fifteen or twenty minutes of steady walking, there was still no sign that the trail would curve back to the river. It was time to make a decision. The smart thing would have been to backtrack to the fork in the trail and proceed downriver from there. Of course, I usually choose the hard way to do anything so I decided to strike west off the trail until I reached the river. Oh, what fun.

At first, it wasn't too bad, although the ground did slope away beneath my feet, which forced me to balance the pack with the strength of my legs. I was soon to wish that was

the worst of what I had to go through. When I reached the bottom of the hill and moved forward through the woods I noticed that the ground was becoming softer and soon found myself on the edge of a cedar swamp. This was another chance for someone to make the right decision, but not me.

I didn't relish the climb back up the hill and a twenty-minute hike just to get back to where I'd been a half hour ago. I decided to push ahead - after all, I'd hunted in cedar swamps many times. Mistake number three.

The Pigeon is spring fed and it was soon apparent that I had stumbled upon one of the areas of springs. The ground soon became soft and I found myself hopping from high spot to high spot with a heavy pack on my back. Occasionally, I would slip or misjudge the distance and was soon covered to my knees with evil-smelling black muck.

It seemed like hours, but was probably no more than a half hour before I saw the light increase ahead of me. I doubt I traveled more than a quarter mile in that time, because of the crooked trail I took through the swamp. The tag alders I had to force through when I neared the stream were only a minor obstacle after what I had just endured.

Thankfully, there was no fellow angler near to observe my terrible fishing etiquette as I splashed into the stream fully clothed. I bent my knees and scooped up handfuls of clear, cold water to bath my sweating face. I was glad I didn't have a mirror or I might have been frightened by the red glare I knew my face must have been giving off.

Once the muck had washed from my pants, I moved to the bank, sat with my feet in the water, and tallied up my progress over the last hour or so. On flat land, with no pack, I usually cover about four miles an hour. I doubt I do more than half that on an up and down trail with a pack on my back. I realized it was very possible that I was no more than a half-mile from where the trail had forked - certainly no more than three-quarters of a mile. What a waste of time and effort. Oh well, I had wanted some exercise.

Chapter 8

The worst part, now that the swamp was behind me, was that there was no suitable place to camp in sight. The trail down this side of the river had vanished and I didn't feel like fighting through the vegetation along the bank until I found it again. That left the opposite bank.

Since my clothes and hiking boots were already wet, I saw no reason why I shouldn't just find a spot to wade across the stream and then follow the far bank until I found a suitable camping spot. Mistake number four.

As I mentioned earlier, the Pigeon is mostly shallow, with a sandy bottom. That's true of most areas, but I had just moved through a muck filled swamp and should have known that this was a bad place to cross. What made it tempting was the same thing that made it hazardous, the stream had widened and slowed through this stretch.

After tightening the straps on my pack, I moved cautiously out into the current. I could see the bottom through the clear water so there was little danger of losing my footing on an unseen rock or log. I cautiously pushed one foot ahead of the other and was soon in midstream with the water near the top of my thighs.

Everything was going well until suddenly my forward foot sank past the ankle. Luckily, I caught my balance before falling face first into the stream. The suction of the sand and water had my foot in a tight grip that didn't seem like it would ever let go. I had a brief flash of humor at my situation and pictured some lone angler stumbling upon my skeleton sometime in the future. I might die with my boots on, like an old-time gunfighter.

The humor of the situation soon vanished as I struggled to pull my foot free. No matter what I tried, it wouldn't come loose. I must have been a real sight standing in the middle of the stream with my arms flailing about and cursing a blue streak that would have made a drill sergeant envious. The pack on my back and the current flowing against my legs made it difficult to keep my balance. That's when I made mistake number five.

Frustrated at the absurdity of my situation I gave a strong pull and lunged back at the same time. The tight grip on my boot loosened, but so did my hold on my balance. Over I went. Now my situation was reversed. My legs were in the air above me while my head was under water.

I twisted until I was face down and scrambled for footing on the loose bottom. By the time I managed to slow my journey downstream I had drifted several yards. The water was never more than waist-deep and at no time did I feel like I was in any danger. The only real damage was to my ego.

This was one of those times I was truly thankful not to have a companion with me on the hike. No one had witnessed my humiliation, except for a few birds and fish. That is, the ones I hadn't scared away with my blundering. I felt humiliated, put upon, and stupid all at the same time.

As soon as I had found my footing, I splashed the rest of the way to the far bank and crawled out of the river like a half-drowned rat. I rolled onto my back with the pack propping me up and stared at the river. I glared at the water as if somehow it had been at fault for the absurd situation. My angry mutterings soon trailed off and I gave a snort of laughter. "Some great woodsman you are, old man," I said aloud.

Chapter 9

It may seem strange, but I've noticed that my reaction to a narrow escape is usually a period of hilarity after the fact. Moments after leaving the water the forest was ringing with my laughter. I shook with uncontrollable laughter until it finally trailed away into gulps for air. That's when I finally began to think about the consequences of my risky behavior.

Here I was, soaking wet, with wet gear, and still no place to spend the night. Thankfully, it was early afternoon and I had plenty of time until the sun went down. A quick check of my gear showed that little of consequence had gotten wet (especially the half roll of toilet paper) thanks to the plastic bags I had used for waterproofing. I quickly changed into dry clothes and put on the canvas shoes I used for wading.



My hat was long gone. I hoped it was caught against this bank somewhere downstream. It would be slow going while I searched for it. The sleeping bag was in a waterproof nylon bag. What little water managed to find its way inside would soon dry if I could find a place to spread it in the sun. Everything else had come through fine, except for my ego and the camera.

I removed the batteries from the camera and stuffed it back into the pack. Further maintenance would have to wait until I had some distilled water to use as a rinse and an oven to dry it in - I hoped it would be all right. I packed everything away and started in search of my hat.

The mood of the day had changed. The sun still shone in the cloudless summer sky, the birds still chirped and twittered in the woods, and the trout still swam in the stream, but my enjoyment of the surroundings had dampened along with the rest of me. The travails of the last couple of hours were enough to sour even an eternal optimist, such as myself.

The next day and a half no longer seemed like such a great adventure. I almost wished I had stayed at the last campground and spent the day fishing. I stopped mid-pace and stared off into space and then I literally shook that mood off. An observer might have likened me to a dog shaking water out of his coat. Once again, I started forward, this time with a renewed enthusiasm.

That enthusiasm justified. I found my hat snagged against the near bank on the next bend in the river. After wringing it out, I put it on my head. The cool dampness was a welcome relief from the mid-day sun. Once more I set forth, this time looking about for the perfect place to camp.

The land in this area was uninviting, flat and, in places, wet. Even the river had become flat and uninteresting. There were probably suitable places further back in the woods, but I wanted to be close enough to hear the water gurgling as I drifted into sleep. I also wanted better looking fishing water. There was nothing to do but forge ahead.

Fifteen minutes later, the ground on my side of the river began to rise. Soon I came to a spot that was ten to fifteen feet above the river. This site had obviously been used for a campsite before I found it. There were traces of a fire and other signs that someone had been there before me. I scuffed at the ground looking for rocks or tree roots and found none. I turned in a circle and surveyed the surroundings. Everything looked perfect. Time to settle down for the day.



Chapter 10

It took longer to set up camp this time. I had to spread all of my wet gear in the sun. After emptying my pack, I removed it from the frame and turned it inside out. The area soon resembled the aftermath of a tornado, with things strewn willy-nilly around my small tent. The chores were dealt with in short order. Now I could turn my attention to the fishing.

The higher ground along the banks had narrowed the stream, which caused it to both deepen and quicken. From my higher vantage point, I could see a fair sized hole at the next bend and numerous sunken logs that made excellent cover for any trout who decided to set up housekeeping in this stretch. Time to put the rod together and start fishing.

The day before I had concentrated on catching brook trout, today I decided to go after the more discriminating, and therefore harder to catch, rainbows and browns that inhabit the Pigeon. This might require some careful thought, given the time of day and the time of year.



It was highly unlikely that I would take many trout on a dry fly during the middle of the afternoon in August. A quick perusal of my fly box showed that my options were fairly limited.

The grasshopper imitation might work, because of the lower ground upstream from this section. A large

black ant might also work if I could get it back under overhanging branches. Of course, there was the ever-useful Muddler Minnow or the always-productive Hare's Ear nymph, but I wanted to try to coax the trout to the surface.

Before going any further, I should make it clear that I'm not a fishing snob. I don't use a fly rod, because of fishing history or prejudice. I often choose to use a fly rod simply because it is so much fun to catch a fish on a fly. It can also be the most effective method to take fish.

Just last spring, my son and I were fishing a small lake near Fenton, Michigan. It was early in bass season and the bluegills were in the shallows. I strung my fly rod and quickly landed a dozen or more eating size 'gills in a short stretch of reeds. In that situation, it was simply the best tool for the job - catching shallow water bluegills. At another time or place, you might have found me using a bobber and (gasp) worm.

The decision to use a dry fly on this day was mostly for the challenge. I only needed one medium size fish for my dinner and I didn't really care if I spent the rest of the day trying to catch it. After all, it wasn't as if I had a bus to catch.

A small deer-hair hopper seemed like the right lure to start with, so I quickly tied one on, then strolled down the side of the hill and eased into the water.

While watching the water from above, I had spotted what I thought were two trout hiding under logs on the far side of the stream. It was an easy cast. The first cast fell exactly

where I was aiming and I beamed with pleasure. The smile soon faded as cast after cast ended without any sign of fish.

After ten casts, or so, I started thinking about changing flies. That's when I realized the previous evening's fishing had spoiled me. Here I was, fishing a dry fly in August and I expected a strike minutes after I had started fishing. I shrugged my shoulders to settle the straps on my waders and settled down for a serious bout of fishing.

Thirty minutes later, I had fished down to the bend and decided to leave the stream and walk downstream. I had been too casual when I started, now I decided to use everything I knew to work the water. The best option would be to take a hike downstream and then work back upstream to the camp. That way the fly would always be working fresh water as I cast quartering upstream. A quick hike downstream put me in position.

Chapter 11 – the bumblebee

Since the hopper had proven unproductive, it was time to change flies. There must be something about fishing that affects the memory. Perhaps that is why fishing stories change as time goes by. The contents of my fly box hadn't changed in the last half hour, yet I stared at the flies as if I'd never seen them before. Finally, I plucked out my favorite fly, an Adams, and tied it on the tippet.

Feeling a little more confident, I laid out the first cast. Thirty of forty casts later there was still no strike. Not even a swirl below the fly. Time to change tactics.

I was reluctant to give up on dry flies so easily, but I was fast running out of ideas. There was one fly I had looked at and dismissed earlier that I decided to try - a bumblebee imitation. I'd never had any luck with one before, but what the heck, it was worth a shot. I tied it on and then eased into a new casting spot.



The first cast fell short of my target, back under some low-lying branches along the far bank. After a short float, I tried again. This time the fly reached further under the branches, but was still short of my target. The next cast was near perfect. A slow line-mending drift produced nothing, like every other cast this day. I fired another cast back into the shade.

The black and yellow fly almost landed on the bank and then hung up briefly on some ferns trailing in the water before drifting through the run. That's when the first strike of the day quickened my pulse. The strike was short of the mark and then another strike came just as I set the hook on the first one. My reaction was a split second too fast, which caused the trout to miss. Now I was getting excited.

It was unlikely both strikes had come from the same fish, since they were so close together. A more likely explanation was that the first strike was by a smaller fish that had been thrown off its mark by a larger fish. The larger fish would have been the second strike.

There was no reason to hurry the next cast, so I let the fish rest for a couple of minutes before making another cast. This one fell short of the bank by a foot. The drift was close to, but not exactly the same as the first cast - nothing, not even a swirl. I hoped I hadn't put down the only fish I had seen today.

The next cast reached further under the branches, again almost touching the bank. It had drifted no more than three feet before there was a surge at the fly. A quick lift of my forearm and I was into what felt like a nice fish.

After a short fight, I slid the net under a nice, eleven or twelve inch brown trout. The fly was hooked firmly in the corner of his jaw. It was too early in the day to think about keeping a fish for dinner, so I released him with no more damage than a small hole in his jaw and a blow to his ego.

Hooking that trout had made me realize that I had been fishing the wrong part of the stream. The casts I had made over bottom structure had yielded no strikes, because the current undercut the banks in this stretch. Brown trout love undercut banks when there is enough current to supply them with oxygen.

With my faith in my fishing prowess restored, I set out to catch his big brother.

Chapter 12

Two hours later, I was remembering the Bible quote - "Pride goeth before a fall". Those two hours had produced nary a bite. I was beginning to think that I would be eating dried jerky for dinner. Jerky is not exactly my favorite dinner entrée.

I had thrown everything I had in my fly box at the fish, with no takers. A couple of times, when I sat on the bank for a short break, I even found myself eyeing the forest floor for worms. Luckily, for the sake of my fly fishing ego, nothing suitable for bait made an appearance.

As the day wore on the sky began to cloud over and the breeze picked up strength. It began to look like the cold front the weatherman had forecast was going to arrive a day early. I hoped I was wrong, but continued to keep an eye on the sky as I fished.

The old saying about a silver lining in every cloud proved true within an hour of the appearance of the first clouds. Either the dimmer light or a sudden urge to eat before a storm seemed to trigger a feeding spree for the trout.

The brown trout I had caught earlier was the only fish I landed in over three hours of fishing. Once the clouds covered the sky, I caught four fish in a twenty-minute span. The fourth fish was sliding back into the water when the first raindrops hit the back of my neck. It turned into a downpour before I reached the bank.

Camp was only a short hike back upstream and I made good time moving along the bank of the stream.

Thankfully, I had returned to camp earlier in the day and moved the air-dried clothes and sleeping bag into the tent. At the time, I was more concerned with ticks and bugs getting

into them than I was about rain. If I'd left them out until the rain started, I would have had to spend a miserable night huddled in my tent.

Ever spend twelve hours in a small tent by yourself? It gets boring *very* quick. It was possible to read at first, but the light faded quickly and I found myself lying on my back staring at the roof of the tent for several hours. About all I could do was lie there and think.



Dinner turned out to be some jerky and a granola bar washed down with purified stream water. The only light I had was a small flashlight, not really suitable for reading, although I did try for a while.

Before long the rain eased up a little from the original downpour. It sounded like it might last for quite a while. I don't really know when I drifted off to sleep. I do know that when I awoke during the night, because of a full bladder, that it was still raining. I struggled into my parka, braved the weather for a couple of minutes, and then crawled back into my sleeping bag. I was back asleep almost immediately - a side benefit from all of the exercise I had gotten the last two days.

The next morning dawned cold, wet, and gray. Breakfast was the last granola bar - strawberry, if I remember rightly. I packed everything inside of the tent and then crawled out to face the day.

Ten minutes later, I was striding down the trail towards the car. The hike back would take at least four hours, not a pleasant prospect in the rain.

This day found me plodding along with my face turned down. There were no animals moving in the forest and no birds flitting among the undergrowth. There was just the wet forest, the rain, and the trail - for hour after hour.

For entertainment, I kept running the events of the last couple of days through my mind. Surprisingly, by the time I reached the car, I was looking forward to the next time I could get away like this.

The highlight of the trip was definitely the encounter with the elk. To this day, whenever I am in the woods and hear a twig snap my thoughts flash back to that encounter. In my mind, I can see the tips of his antlers glinting in the sun just as clearly as I could on that day, five years ago. The vision of a wild bull elk standing only feet away is burned into my memory for life.

the end