



## BLUE RIDGE, UNITED STATES

Blue Ridge is a hip Appalachian town, either “the backyard of Atlanta” or “the trout capital of Georgia,” depending on who you ask. For those seeking the latter, like fly-fisher Bill Oyster, the rivers here provide year-round sport—and the meditative mind-set that comes with it.

# Fly-Fishing in Georgia

By the late eighteenth century, the healing waters of northern Georgia’s Appalachian mountain springs were drawing tourists to the town of Blue Ridge and its surrounds. Today, visitors may come to the riverbanks for another reason: to fly-fish.

The Toccoa River runs from south Tennessee into Georgia along the edge of Blue Ridge. The water is temperate for all twelve months of the year, which lures a steady stream of anglers from around the world to come here to cast for rainbow and brown trout.

“It’s not like trawling behind a boat where you can go out with a captain, just sit in the chair and reel in a potential world record your first time out: you tend to get what you deserve,”

says local angler and world-renowned fly rod artisan Bill Oyster. “With fly-fishing, the more you put into it, the more you get back.”

On Blue Ridge’s Main Street, Oyster’s two-story workshop and storefront, Oyster Fine Bamboo Fly Rods, is a welcoming waypoint for locals and visitors alike. Downstairs, anglers commune around a fireplace, and upstairs, a quiet four-room inn hosts friends, guests and clientele of the owners. Although the building was purpose-built, its style matches those in the town’s historic center and is evocative of the region’s railroad history—the trains that still run behind it, once carrying

timber and mining supplies, now carry sightseers along the Toccoa’s scenic banks.

This Main Street shop is where Oyster, a South Carolina-born Georgia transplant, builds his traditional fly rods with techniques that date back to the nineteenth century. Crafted meticulously from strips of bamboo planed thinner than a human hair, bound with silken thread and adorned with engraved nickel silver hardware, they can take between forty and two hundred and fifty hours to complete and cost thousands of dollars. Some are custom-made for ardent anglers who live double lives as celebrities, novelists, billionaires or heads of state, from the British royal family to former US president (and Georgia native) Jimmy Carter. Oyster also teaches classes where students can build their own rods, which book out more than a year in advance.

Oyster has fished around the globe, from Patagonia (brown trout) to the Bahamas (tarpon), but he says that fly-fishing around Blue Ridge, in woods bursting with rhododendron and mountain laurel, offers a magic all its own.

Some anglers prefer to “float and fish” from a drift boat, while others wade into the smaller network of streams, some stocked and managed and some wild. Those just starting

out—and those who'd like an insider's introduction to favored spots—will benefit from a guide, Oyster says. One can also learn the basics, as he did, by studying books (or today, YouTube videos). Important skills to acquire include the graceful flick and whip of the line in a cast, and how to choose a fly—feather, fur and fabric creations assembled to look like the larvae and insects trout might be chasing in that particular season, weather or even light. Seven days a week, the Blue Ridge Fly Fishing School offers three-hour introductory courses and full-day guided outings for beginners, gear included. Guides can also be hired via the Cohutta Fishing Company fly shop, which shares a nineteenth-century brick wall with Oyster's storefront.

Beyond a grasp of the basics and a tackle (one's kit of gear), anglers will need a fishing license, and to keep an eye on local dam water release schedules that affect the waterways. Then

there is the river etiquette: namely, ensuring fellow anglers can fish undisturbed. "You have your experience, and you make sure everybody else gets to have theirs the way they want to have it," Oyster says.

As important is the community's shared ethos of catch and release: "Once you've taken that fish from the environment, not only is it bad for the fish, but it also means that enjoyment is not there for the next person coming behind you," he says. "If you caught that fish and you kept it, then your son or daughter can't go out there and have that same experience that you had."

To Oyster and many of his neighbors, this is "the perfect hobby," not just because it fosters thoughtful, environmentally conscientious sportsmanship, but because one can learn it quickly and affordably, and no matter how many years one puts into it from there, it's a sport that is never mastered. "Every time you go, you learn something new, and for every new thing you learn, there's another thing to learn behind that—always some new challenge," he says. With that guaranteed unattainability of perfection comes an ability to just relax and take in the views.

"No one gets into fly-fishing because it's the easiest, or the simplest, or the most efficient, or the cheapest way to catch a fish," Oyster says. "As an artist by trade and by nature, I appreciate its artistry—just that it's beautiful."



#### Opposite

Noontootla Creek is just outside of the mountain city of Blue Ridge. Beyond its convenient location for outdoor pursuits, the city has a strong artistic community as well as breweries and restaurants.

#### Above

The Noontootla Creek has special regulations that require almost all fish to be released after catching. This means the trout grow to heftier sizes than the average wild fish and makes it a quieter spot to fish than most.



Above

Trout flies are artificial lures designed to mimic insects the fish might eat. Traditionally, they are made of materials including feathers, hair and fur.

Opposite

Once the trout has been hooked, a landing net is used to safely get the fish to the bank without causing it additional stress.





Opposite

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Lake Ocoee, on the border between Tennessee and Georgia in Cherokee National Forest, is another popular fishing spot in the region.

Above

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Under Georgia's strict regulations, anglers are allowed to keep only a small number of the trout they catch: one fish daily, and a maximum of three each year.





## MORE PLACES TO FLY-FISH

### DELGER RIVER, MONGOLIA

Taimen, the largest member of the salmonoid family, can live up to fifty years and reach up to five feet (1.5 meters) in length. If you're up for the challenge, Mongolia's Delger River is the ne plus ultra for taimen fishing. The fun part is how aggressively these monsters will go after the fly—hang on tight.

### TSIMANE, BOLIVIA

Bolivia's premier fly-fishing destination is Tsimane, which offers fishers the opportunity to catch trophy fish like massive golden dorado. At the confluence of the Amazon rain forest and the Andes mountains, the views from Tsimane's streams aren't bad either.

### GAULA RIVER, NORWAY

If you're after trophy-class salmon, Norway's Gaula River might fulfill your fantasies. Fish over twenty pounds (9 kg) are not uncommon catches, and some lucky fishers even pull in salmon over forty pounds (18 kg). The best time of year for large specimens is just after the season starts in June.



### TARRALEAH, AUSTRALIA

Tasmania's Tarraleah area features dozens of waterways connected by canals. You won't find giants here, but it's a great place to learn to cast. Only trout inhabit these waters—there are no eels to gobble up the lures, as you typically find fishing elsewhere in Tasmania.

### LAKE NASSER, EGYPT

Lake Nasser was created in the 1960s as the result of a massive dam project along the Nile River in Aswan, southern Egypt. In the largest man-made lake in the world, perch grow to gargantuan sizes; rumor has it that some individuals lurking in its depths are over two hundred pounds (91 kg).

### LAKE AKAN, JAPAN

Remote Lake Akan, in the eastern part of Japan's wildest island Hokkaido, is a treasure trove of white spotted char and kokanee salmon. The area also has natural hot springs, or rotenburo, which beckon weary fishers after hours of standing in cold water.