

Hat Creek

Restoration leads to resurrection.

It's not often I interrupt my fishing to observe another angler. After days of pretrip preparations, excitement, and anticipation, followed by a five-hour trip to my fishing destination, the last thing I want to do is stand by and watch someone else fly fish. Yet I recall this happening to me twice, and both times were on the wild-trout water of lower Hat Creek.

I was leaving the parking lot adjacent to Hat Creek Powerhouse Number 2 when I abruptly came to a halt. "Why are you stopping?" my fishing companion, Brian, asked. "I'm looking at that hippie dude with the cowboy hat and ponytail. Watch him cast!" I replied. Unbeknownst to me, there in the fast water of the Powerhouse Riffle, accompanied by a client, was the late Dave Brown of Trout Country Fly Shop. The two had one fly rod between them, and every so often, Dave would take control of the rod and demonstrate his specialized casting technique. During casts, the elbow of Dave's casting arm never left his side. His elbow appeared to be attached to his hip. And more often than not, whenever Dave took control of the fly rod, he'd hook up with a fish. As I positioned myself above the stream bank to get a better view, I told Brian "Go on ahead. I'm going to sit here for a while."

Days later, I walked into the Trout Country Fly Shop and to my surprise, behind the counter stood the "hippie dude." "I saw you guiding at the riffles last week," I said. "Yeah man, I bet you want to know the fly I used" Dave assumed. "No," I replied, "but if you have a minute I'd like to talk to you about your casting style."

Times gone by

Just as there are more published books regarding fly fishing than about all of fishing combined, I suspect there are probably more articles written about Hat Creek than any other California fishery.

In the late 1960s, Hat Creek became our state's first fishery to be managed solely for wild rainbow and brown trout. And lower Hat has been an unstocked, self-reliant fishery ever since.

However, if you speak with veteran fly fishers regarding the state of the creek, they will tell you that they have experienced firsthand a decline in both numbers and size in the famed wild-trout section. Over the years, fine sediments in the creek have increased, covering spawning gravel and affecting aquatic vegetation. And recently, drought impacted the controlled water releases, which worsened Hat Creek's condition. In other fisheries where problems have occurred, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife has often stocked rainbow and brown trout in an attempt to keep the fishing good. Yet on lower Hat Creek, this isn't necessary. Here's why.

Once California's best spring-creek fishery, lower Hat Creek is steadily making its way back to its former glory. In 2013, a three-year project began that focused on stabilizing stream banks and restoring in-stream habitat and native vegetation. Fly fishers are just now beginning to experience the benefits of this labor.

The new bridge at Carbon Flats makes crossing Hat Creek both safer and less damaging to the stream.



Today, the wild-trout section is as challenging as ever. The skills required on the stretch of water below the Powerhouse Riffle demand a fly fisher's absolute best. It is a place where passionate fly fishers like to spend their time. Mixed within the few riffle sections of this spring creek are some of most striking meadow water around. It's said that if an

angler can master the 3.2 mile wild-trout section of lower Hat Creek from Powerhouse Number 2 to Lake Britton, he or she can fish successfully anywhere.

Early morning: The Powerhouse Number 2 Riffle

If you choose to fish the Powerhouse Riffle, get there early. It's a popular spot. Primarily because of its easy access, broken water, and less technical nature, this is the most heavily fished stretch on lower Hat Creek.

Additionally, this is an area where anglers who are less than expert can consistently catch fish. I like to take anglers new to fly fishing there, since they can easily wade while learning to fish fast-moving water. When I plan to fish Hat Creek for an entire day, I begin my morning there, before any crowds show up. My outfit consists of a 9-foot 5-weight fly rod set up with weight-forward floating line. I attach to my line a 9-foot fluorocarbon leader with a 6X tippet, and to the tippet, I tie on a size 18 red midge pupa. The red midge pupa is an all-season fly that works on all Hat Creek water all the time. It is especially successful at the Powerhouse Riffle. I then fasten two size 6 split shot about eight inches above the fly. Successful anglers prefer to feel the weight as it moves along the bottom of the creek and continually adjust their presentations by adding or removing split shot until they do so. Other fly patterns I have had success dead drifting here include red Copper Johns and Flashback Pheasant Tail Nymphs.

Beginning at the riffle's island, I short-line nymph my way across the creek. Short-line nymphing involves making casts no more than 15 to 20 feet upstream, lifting slack line off the water, then following the drifting line downstream with your rod tip.

If I'm fortunate enough to be on the water while a hatch is taking place, I switch over to a size 20 female Trico pattern. Female Tricos are often olive in the abdomen and dark brown in the thorax. I simply remove the nymph and weight I've been previously fishing and tie on the Trico. I use these at the Powerhouse Riffle during morning spinner falls from July to the end of the season.

The Middle of the Day: The Barrier to the Park

My trips to lower Hat Creek tend to play out something like this. About the time the powerhouse parking lot begins to fill-up, I have already left the fishery, returned to camp, and had breakfast. By midmorning, my wife drops me off at the opposite side of Highway 299 near the Lake Britton barrier (which keeps rough fish from the wild-trout section), and four hours later she picks me up at Hat Creek Park. I prefer to move upstream whenever I fish Hat Creek, and four hours provides me enough time to work the water I target.

The water from the Barrier Run to the Island Bend and then from the Foundation to the Diversion Dam Run produces trout, albeit small ones. In fact, whenever I am questioned by a fellow angler regarding fishing this section of Hat Creek, my response goes something along the lines of, "It's not always about the size of fish, but about the

experience. You'll have a wonderful experience fly fishing there." It's not that I haven't caught big fish - I have. However, for the most part, the trout I catch from the Barrier to Hat Creek Park are small. On a more positive note, catching small fish is a good sign that trout are naturally reproducing.

I fish this water similarly to the way I fish the Powerhouse Riffle, only here, during midday, I swing a midge pupa or nymph wet-fly style through the runs. Flies I like include Flashback Pheasant Tail Nymphs, size 16, olive Mercer's Micro Mayfly, size 18 and 20, black beaded Zebra Midges, size 18, and olive WD-40s, size 18. On this section of Hat, I'll bypass the flats if I see no fish.

Current seams on Hat Creek are a prime area to look for fish. A current seam is where two currents of differing speeds meet. Water deflecting around rocks will cause current seams that offer ideal holding places for fish. The rock can be fully submerged and still offer this protection. I cast at a 45-degree angle across and downstream. Allowing the current to take the bow of the line, I let the line swing out through the current until it is straight below me. Then I pick up and do it again.

With its gravelly bottom, the fast water makes for easy wading and hosts incredible hatches. When hatches occur, I've had success fishing a size 16 dark olive Paradun dry fly. This mayfly emerges not only in Hat Creek, but in the Fall River, Baum Lake, and Cassel area from May through October. The size of the bugs gets smaller as the days get warmer. Emergence typically occurs from midmorning to early afternoon. I also favor a size 16 Mahogany Paradun, a mayfly that emerges on Hat Creek at midafternoon early in the season and again late in the season.

Evening Approaches: The Flats

My final trip of the day to the lower Hat typically takes place at dusk, when I head back to the Powerhouse parking lot to stalk the flats. I like to fish the area downstream from Wendell's Bend to Carbon Point. I first fished there years ago with my friend Gary Cox. I'm grateful to Gary for pointing out the numerous muskrat holes throughout the Carbon Flats area as I walked unsuspectingly through the tall grasses. Please use caution when walking through there, especially at dusk. Muskrat burrows are wide and deep, and can cause you injury.

Gary also taught me that to catch fish at the flats, anglers should use light tippet, small flies, and have the ability to make precise presentations. Unfortunately, at the time, meeting two out of three requirements didn't work for me. While my casts sometimes caught fish, other times they put them down. However, Gary's casts that evening were spot on, and his drifts were drag free. That was the second time I've stopped fishing to observe another angler.

Dry-fly fishing is why most anglers get into fly fishing, and the dry-fly fishing on the flats at dusk is ideal. It's fun and very visual. Trout rise only 10 percent of the time, but when they do, it can be magical. They rise to winged aquatic insects that may be hatching -

mayflies, caddis flies, stoneflies - or to terrestrials that fall in the water, such as ants, beetles, or crickets. The two dominant hatches that occur on Hat Creek are mayflies and caddisflies. It's important to understand the life cycles of these insects so as to know when hatches will occur and when the fish will rise.

Subtle rises on the flats are clues that a trout's food is not going anywhere. They usually indicate that there are mayfly duns or a spinners drifting passively in the current. In this situation, even a five-pound rainbow might not make much of a disturbance. It knows it doesn't need to make a rush at its food in fear of losing it.

On the other hand, you might see a splashy disturbance on the surface. Splashy rises are a reliable indicator that trout are pursuing food items toward the surface. Trout are chasing the food because it can get away. It might be a caddis pupa, which rises rapidly to the surface. Once there, the adult caddis immediately pops out and flies off. Trout know this and will strike hard and fast.

In either case, you'll need to make a drag-free drift presentation. To catch fish on the flats, be alert and have quick reflexes. Evening rise forms are subtle.

As I noted earlier, on lower Hat Creek I usually start fishing with a 9-foot fluorocarbon leader and 6X tippet. If this is not working or the fish are spooky, I lengthen my leader to 12 feet, which usually makes the difference.

In the evening, I'll begin with a size 16 orange Paradun, and I switch this light colored mayfly off and on with a size 18 Rusty Spinner, which may be the best fly for lower Hat Creek during morning and evening spinner falls. I've also had success fishing the Rusty Spinner in size 16 in the early season and again at the end of season. One other thing I'll say about fishing the flats: the trout I have caught that reside in the flats appear to be larger than those from other sections of lower Hat Creek.

Most evenings, Carbon Flats trout can be seen taking mayflies, and with patience, anglers may see a line of fish feeding. The trick to catching trout anywhere on a dry fly, but especially at the flats, is to get the right drift. Any movement on the fly will spoil your chances.

Although hooking into a Carbon Flats rainbow at dusk can be a memorable event, I encourage anglers to fish from shore. The flats' gritty and crusted bottom will initially provide waders with a false sense of security, but once its surface is compromised, exiting the water can be extremely difficult, if not near impossible. Around his campfire one evening, retired Camp Britton caretaker Fred Foerester told the story of a fly fisher who became stuck in the muck while wading Carbon Flats. The angler, fishing alone, was near the center of the creek, and, the more he struggled to free himself, the deeper he sank. Ultimately, he refrained from trying to break loose and instead chose to wait for help. Evening came and went, and unfortunately, help did not arrive until the following morning, by way of two women hikers who heard his cries. Emergency service personnel stated after interviewing the angler that what scared him most was not fear of

hypothermia from the water's cold temperature but fear of drowning. Throughout the night, the water level of the creek had risen and fallen in proportion with operation of the Hat Number 2 Powerhouse. The angler claimed that at one point, the creek's water level reached just beneath his chin. If Fred's intention was to scare the hell out of every fly fisher within earshot and keep us from wading his cherished flats, it worked.

Many overzealous flats fly fishers at Hat have experienced, to some degree, the feeling of getting stuck while wading there. Prior to Fred's story, it happened to me. My advice: stay calm. Stretch out on your back to increase your body's surface area on the water, then move your legs around in a circular motion until they pop free. Eventually, you'll float.

A lower Hat Creek rainbow trout caught at Carbon Flats.



Is the Hat Really Back?

A full day on lower Hat Creek such as the one I've just outlined can be exhilarating and sometimes exhausting. Regardless of how challenging it may be, I always look forward to returning there. At times, looking back at the day's end, it's as though I completed the ultimate "Hat trick" if I happened to be fortunate enough to catch trout during each of my three visits to the creek that day.

So the answer to "Is the Hat really back?" is yes, if you believe, as I do, that catching small fish is a positive sign that trout are naturally reproducing. Through the efforts of California Trout, California's first Wild Trout Management Area is steadily recovering. Both conservationists and fly fishers will be pleased with the caliber of restoration efforts

taking place there. Notable improvements include the planting of native trees, grasses, and shrubs, the upgrading of existing trails, and the construction of a new pedestrian bridge. As recovery efforts continue to focus on improving in-stream habitat, there is little doubt that CalTrout will achieve its mission to restore the wild-trout waters of Hat Creek to former glory. For more information, visit the California Trout Web site at caltrout.org.

Hiking upstream from the southerly side of Hat Creek above the new bridge at Carbon Flats towards Powerhouse Number 2.



If You Go . . .

Lower Hat Creek is a 7.5-mile drive east of Burney along Highway 299. The stretch of water between Baum Lake and Lake Britton is a designated wild-trout stream with special angling restrictions. Only artificial lures with single barbless hooks may be used.

As fly fishers enjoy great hatches, their nonangling companions can find the surrounding area worth exploring. Activities include camping and hiking at McArthur-Burney Falls State Park and golfing at the Fall River Golf Course, to name a few.