



Colby Troy with a 22-inch brown caught on a Crowe Beetle splashed beneath a sycamore tree

# The Thrill of Mossy Creek

by

Dan Genest

Photo courtesy of Mossy Creek Fly Shop

The scream from upstream got me running. It wasn't a scream of pain or fright but the whoop of a man who had just been yanked from the monotony of cast after cast, by the thump of a big fish at the end of a fly line. John Ross, author of *Trout Unlimited's 100 Top U.S. Trout Streams*, took time out from his battle to shoot me a big grin. "It is a brute," he called as the fish made another lap around

the small pool on Mossy Creek. A slash of cream and streak of gold roiled beneath the surface, and the fish was gone. Ross ducked as the large streamer pulled free from the brown and shot back at his head. Neither Ross nor I came close to landing another fish that day.

"That's the thrill of Mossy," he said as he broke down his three-piece

bamboo rod and slipped it into the case. "You can make a thousand casts and nothing, but on any of those casts, there's always the chance that something big is going to hit." That's Mossy Creek, an enigma meandering through a meadow.

There are not many trout streams in Virginia that can lay claim to being a "destination" stream, and by that I mean a

river or creek that has the fame and the legacy to lure anglers from across the country. Mossy Creek near Bridgewater may be the only one. The Verona office of the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries issues the permits required to fish Mossy. “We give out more than a thousand a year,” said Paul Bugas, a biologist with VDGIF. “About 30% of those are for anglers from out of state. And you would be amazed at the number of requests we get from foreign countries. Mossy has really developed an international reputation.”

The state’s only “fly-fishing-only” stream, Mossy is a spring creek famous for large browns that are hard to catch. And more than the potential size of

the fish, it may be the challenge that lures and frustrates so many anglers. Of the legions who fish the 3-mile trophy section each year, most go home skunked, some have mastered the art of landing the little 10-inch-and-under browns, and a few get lucky and land a big one.

And there *are* big fish in Mossy. Bugas says that annual sampling has produced browns of 25 inches and that there are hundreds of trout in the 15-20-inch range. Still, those who can boast that they have mastered Mossy, who can go out and catch big browns with some regularity, are in rare company. Jim Finn, Chuck Kraft, Bob Cramer, Billy Kingsly and Brian and Colby Trow are all guides who have put in the time and the effort to learn Mossy’s

secrets. Time on the water may be the biggest key to success at Mossy.

“It is not an easy creek,” said Brian Trow, who with his brother owns Mossy Creek Fly Shop in Harrisonburg. “You need to put in the time and really learn Mossy. First-timers see a veteran Mossy angler pull out a 20-inch brown, and they think it’s easy. They don’t realize the guys catching the trout have been fishing Mossy for two decades.”

That may seem like strange advice, considering that the Trows, twin brothers who are originally from Richmond, are only 25 years old. But when you learn that they have been fishing Mossy since they were 12 and see the pic-

**Matt Erickson from Maine is one of the hundreds of out-of-state anglers who travel to try their hand at Mossy Creek.**



tures of the browns they have caught displayed in their shop, you realize they know what they are talking about.

To have better-than-house odds at catching a trophy, the experts say the best times to fish Mossy are those rainy or snowy days when the water is high and stained. "If you think it is too miserable outside to fish, that is probably the day you should be fishing Mossy," said Kingsly, who owns the Blue Ridge Angler Fly Shop in Harrisonburg. The reason is that big browns tend to be more nocturnal feeders. When the daylight hours are dark and overcast and the water has gone from clear to cloudy, the big fish come out from their holes under the bank and go on the prowl.

And what should be fished under those conditions? I'm betting that if you had Cramer, Kraft, Kingsly and the Trows in one room and asked that question, they would all shout at the same time: *big 'n' ugly*.

Colby likes to throw big streamers. "I like something that has a lot of movement, that gets down where the fish are and is big - a sculpin pattern any time, crayfish in the summer."

But big is relative. "I see a lot of people out here saying they are throwing big streamers, but it turns out they are using a size 8 Woolly Bugger," said Kingsly. "I am talking about something that might be 4 or 5 inches long. That's a big streamer."

If the water is stained, make your streamer choice dark - purple or black. If it is clearer, go with something in natural colors, olive and even white. Zonkers, sculpins, bunnies, madtom imitations and Muddler Minnows are all good Mossy Creek streamer patterns. Fish the streamers down and across, letting them swing into undercut banks and pulling them out

by stripping. Colby recommends varying your retrieve until you find what the trout want. Kingsly says casting straight upstream and bouncing the fly back along the bottom can also be a deadly technique.

Since these guys are throwing big, heavy flies, they tend to go with heavier rods and tippets. I generally use a 9-foot, 6-weight rod but have been known to ply the waters with a 7-weight. Tippet size for streamers can be 3x or even larger if the water is stained.

Spring and summer on Mossy are the times for topwater flies. The creek is renowned for its trico hatches that occur in the mornings from late April through late October and sometimes into November.

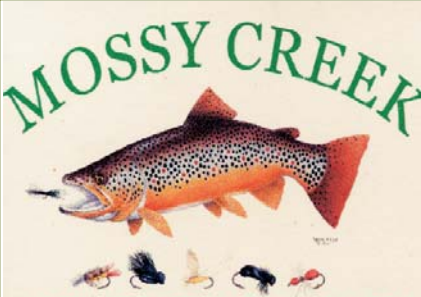
While many anglers fish the spinner fall of these size 22 mayflies and catch good numbers of smaller fish, Brian Trow says the hatch is overrated. "I really have better luck throwing something big out there among all those tiny bugs," he said. "I like to toss out a nice, juicy-looking Crowe Beetle that can entice the bigger fish."

Kingsly agrees his favorite summer pattern is also a big beetle. "Splat it down, under a sycamore with a hard cast and watch the big boys come running." Lighter weight rods and tippets can be used when fishing terrestrials, such as beetles and hoppers.

To obtain a permit for Mossy Creek, enclose a pre-addressed stamped envelope in an envelope addressed to:

Virginia Department of Game  
and Inland Fisheries  
Mossy Creek Permits  
517 Lee Highway  
Verona, VA 24482

A Virginia fishing license is required, but a trout stamp is not needed.



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