

▶ **The Carmans** River is one of America's most historically significant brook trout streams. The upper reaches are narrow, with prolific weed growth and heavy hatches of aquatic insects.

▶ **JOHN FIELD**

LONG



ISLAND TRIANGLE

Three historic spring creeks you can day-trip from New York City

N EWS TRAVELS FAST. I received a long-awaited call from my friend Doug, who told me that the Brown Drake hatch was at its peak, and he and his son had caught 30 trout the night before. I drove to join him the next day, and that evening I was also in the thick of it. Together we waded upstream, watching individual Brown Drakes pop through the surface and ride the placid currents. We picked off rising trout one at a time in orderly fashion until the spinners began raining down on us—and then we fished in happy chaos. We caught fish in the fast water at the dam, and later cast to trout bulging under the overhanging branches of the long run above.

While match-the-hatch opportunities like this may be considered normal in Montana, the Catskills, or in the limestone streams of central Pennsylvania, I wasn't in a remote trout-fishing paradise. I was fishing in New York City's backyard just 50 miles from Queens, in one of Long Island's finest spring creeks.

Urban Legend

The three best trout streams on the island are the Nissequogue, flowing north to Long Island Sound on the North Shore; and the famous Connetquot and Carmans, emptying south into the Great South Bay on the South Shore, which flows into the Atlantic. These tracts, now owned by the

state and surrounded by suburbs and highways, serve as park preserves for low-impact recreation, including fly fishing. Together they are the finest trio of trout streams in one of America's oldest urban areas—a Long Island tri-angle if you will

These fisheries lie amid 1.5 million Suffolk County residents, in a region 45 to 65 miles from Manhattan. A cold groundwater aquifer seeps steadily through the sand and glacial gravel of lowlands and stream bottoms to create this unique trout habitat. These rivers rarely exceed 65 degrees F. in the summer, and their annual flows are exceedingly stable. They still exist today because of their unique natural properties, and also

partly due to the help and support of sportsmen.

Threatened Habitat

Storm runoff and sewage wastewater from new developments are the biggest environmental threats to these watersheds and their salmonid inhabitants. The high-priority issues facing the fisheries on Long Island are competition from nonnative trout, disease, overharvest, manmade barriers, impoundments, and rising stream temperatures.

These issues are complicated because fishery managers also know that numbers of big trout attract the most fishing fees, which help pay for park operating costs. The 19th century

run-of-the-river hatchery on the Connetquot used to rear 50,000 trout annually until 2007, when it was closed by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation because of the presence of Infectious Pancreatic Necrosis (IPN) virus. Affected salmonid fry can suffer up to a 90 percent mortality rate, and IPN

can have a wide array of other hosts. This highly contagious disease runs its course in one to two weeks, and adult fish can host the disease but show no symptoms. The victim either dies, or is immune. IPN is not harmful to humans.

Scientists recommend reducing populations to combat the virus.

This practice has been followed at the Connetquot River and its hatchery and today, all IPN test results are negative.

Native Species

At least four organizations are at work on Long Island to help preserve and restore trout populations. They are the Art Flick Chapter of Trout Unlimited, the Long Island Chapter of Trout Unlimited, Long Island Fly Rodders, and the Sea-Run Brook Trout Coalition.

Roles are starting to change among Trout Unlimited chapters because of a new TU stocking policy, which prohibits chapters from assisting in stocking nonnative trout in waters that either currently have viable native populations, or in suitable habitat that once held native trout. Brook trout and sea-run brook trout (salters) are the native trout here, and other groups have already been working to restore salters in geologically similar coastal areas of Massachusetts.

"For me, the elimination of stocked fish on top of wild brook trout is a priority," says Doug Swesty of the Sea-Run Brook Trout Coalition. "Obviously I would like to see the two upper dams on the Carmans come out, but even if they don't, there are plans underway for fish passage on both impoundments."

Not all anglers share this interest in restoration of native fish. According to officials, the annual revenue from fishermen and hatchery sales at Connetquot River State Park Preserve (CRSPP) was \$200,000 to \$260,000 annually before the hatchery closed in 2007. Now with a more naturally sustainable number of trout in the stream, angler turnout and revenue are greatly diminished.

The Friends of Connetquot (FOC) is a 617-member charitable organization whose purpose is to protect and preserve the CRSPP for a variety of uses, including fishing. According to Bob Lebuski, FOC president, they have raised \$250,000 to modify the hatchery to control IPN and get it running again at 20 percent of the pre-2007 production. A fishing club called Idle Hour Fly Fishers has been advising FOC, fundraising, and applying political pressure.

Richard Remmer, former president of FOC, says the new plan to prevent IPN infection is to drill a well to supply groundwater for the hatchery, instead of using possibly contaminated



► **The Connetquot** is the smallest of the three Long Island spring creeks but is stocked with larger trout, and also has good opportunities in the fall for sea-run browns in the lower river near tide water.

Photo Jim Levison

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river water. They fear this plan might be rejected by the state because it would increase the downstream flows, deplete groundwater, and add effluent, degrading the already moderately impacted river water quality.

Carmans River

The Carmans River is named after tavern, gristmill, general store owner, and angler Samuel Carman. His friend Sen. Daniel Webster of Massachusetts was a frequent guest, and together they fly fished for the big salters of their day. One of them caught what is likely the most famous brook trout in American history, said to have weighed 14 pounds, 8 ounces. [You can read all about Daniel Webster's "Devil Trout" in *Brook Trout* by Nick Karas. THE EDITOR.]

Today, much of the historically significant river is within Southaven County Park, and the resident brookies average 7 inches—but fishermen do catch individuals up to 17 inches. There are now four dams on the river, and most people agree that without these barriers, more trout would seek the salt water for more food and thermal refuge, and return larger than non-anadromous resident trout.

This river flows at an average of 30 cubic feet per second (cfs). The Carmans hosts the best water quality of the three rivers, and also the most insects and native brookies. The river begins north of the town of Yaphank and flows approximately 11 miles through

several impoundments. The water warms in these impoundments, but as it flows downstream, groundwater inflows cool it enough to support trout.

Only catch-and-release angling is permitted above the park, beginning roughly upstream of a power line crossing. The upper reaches have water flowing through flooded swamp loose-strife, where both insects and brookies proliferate. This part of the river is narrow with long, lime-colored grass undulating along the bottom. As you wade downstream, several islands disperse the flow, and the stream widens above a cement dam called C Dam.

Below C Dam, several plunge pools with back eddies and fast water hold browns and brookies. This is a prime spot for rising fish. Downstream, there are straighter wide shallow runs with deeper edges with overhanging tree limbs and small midstream islands. DEC has discovered fingerling brown trout, evidence of reproduction of this competing nonnative.

Above C Dam, in stretches shared by native brookies, DEC stocks only small browns and rainbows from 5 to 12 inches, to reduce native trout predation. Below C Dam—where DEC believes there are few native brook trout left—it also stocks some 14- to 17-inch browns and rainbows. Three stockings total about 2,000 fish annually. The park closes at 6 P.M. inside the gated area, but you can fish as late as you want upstream.

Below the park, the Carmans flows through Wertheim National Wildlife Refuge, operated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Within this park, several tributaries join the river as it turns from fresh to salt water. This is where you have your best shot at sea-run fish.

Nissequogue River

In 1963, New York State bought the famous Wyandanch Club property containing the Nissequogue, and opened it as a 543-acre state park in 1974, naming it Caleb Smith State Park Preserve, after the Revolutionary patriot.

This 8.3-mile-long river flows at an average of 49 cfs. This preserve has 13 fishing sites and they are longer than those on the Connetquot. Wading is allowed on sites 2 through 9. Sites 10 through 13 are located on Vail Pond with platform fishing only. Sites 2 and 3 are on a narrow stretch of water with brook trout and an overhead canopy of trees. Site 4 usually holds a school of large rainbows to tease you. Sites 5 through 7 have undercuts and bends with a dam in the middle of site 7 with a plunge pool and riffle immediately below. Site 8 has a midstream island, and deeper channels on each side. Site 9 has a major bend with brushy banks.

Tidal water starts at White's Pool, accessible from the Jericho Turnpike.

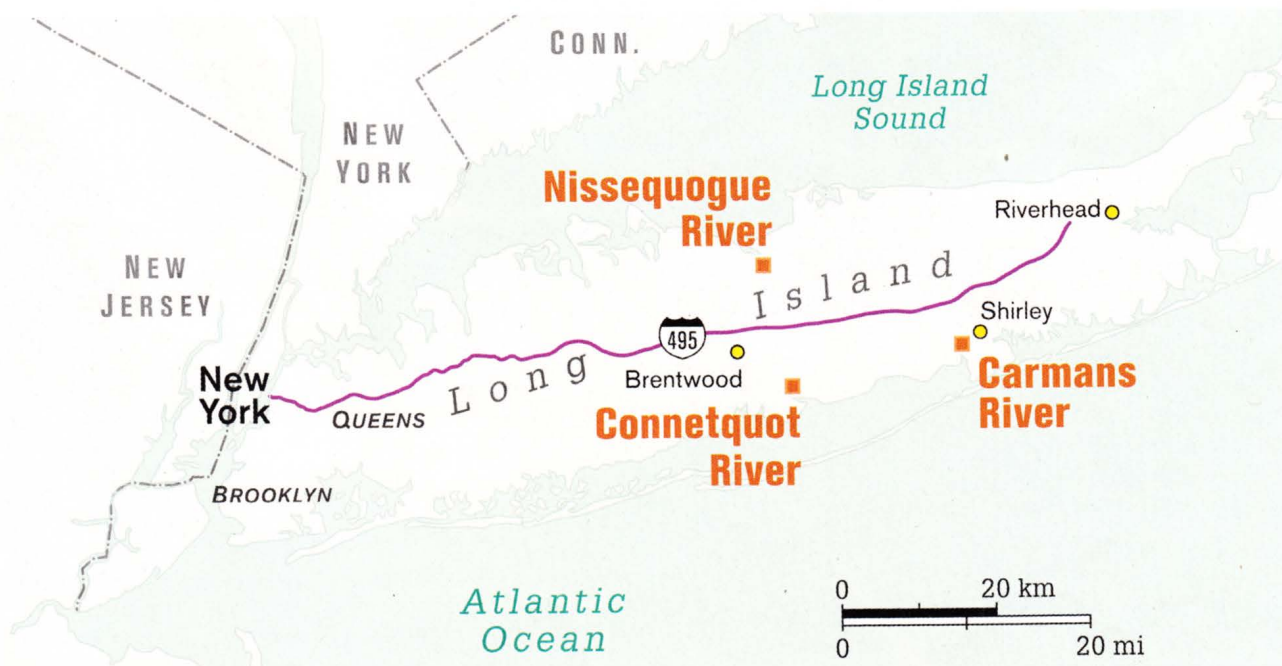


Illustration David Deis

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Downstream, the river forms wide salt flats with a main channel continuing north approximately 2 miles to Long Island Sound.

Preserve manager Clarence Ware showed me around the historic main building, which hosts the Nature Museum and the Nissequogue Fly Fishing School, which are both aimed at youth education. Clarence manages his fishery in a realistic manner without overstocking. DEC provides rainbows averaging 16 inches but some carry over and can reach 24 inches, especially in some of the ponds. According to the DEC, both browns and brookies reproduce naturally in the river.

Connetquot River

In 1963, the state of New York obtained 3,473 acres of property including the South Side Sportsmen's Club,

and opened the Connetquot River State Park Preserve to the public.

The Connie is the smallest of the three Long Island spring creeks, with 11 cfs average flow, and a length of 6 miles. The preserve has 32 fishing sites; 7 are located on Lower Pond and Upper Pond. Main Pond has both lake-run holdovers and sea-run fish. It has rowboats for fishing, and sites 5 through 7 have fishing docks.

From sites 8 through 15 downstream of the hatchery, wading is permitted with hip waders only, and they cannot have felt soles. No wading is permitted above the hatchery, but you can fish from platforms.

The first pools below the hatchery barrier hold some sea-run fish in the fall. Rattlesnake Creek, the outlet

between Main Pond and East Pond, is used in spring and fall by sea-run browns, 'bows, and brookies.

East Pond flows to the bay without barriers, and Bubble Falls downstream is another famous sea-run barrier pool down toward the bay. The tidal section starts at Sunrise Highway below the park. There is a DEC public access on the eastbound side of the highway.

Park manager Gil Bergen told me, "We are buying the biggest possible rainbows, brook trout, or brown trout from the Cold Spring Harbor Hatchery, or DEC, depending on budget and availability."

Tackle & Hatches

In general, the Nissie is now a big rainbow and native brook trout fishery, the Carmans is a fine native water upstream, with browns downstream,

► **The upper** Carmans River is stocked mostly with smaller 7- to 12-inch rainbows and browns to avoid predation on native brook trout. The Carmans has the best water quality, and more aquatic insects hatches and native trout than the other two Long Island spring creeks.



Photo
Brendan McCarthy

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and the Connie is a stocked trout fishery managed toward larger hold-over or sea-run fish. Knowing your quarry and habitat helps you form an angling strategy. There are no professional guides working these streams, so learning is a personal challenge.

The native brookies are spooky during the day, but not highly fly selective. A 9-foot rod is best on the Carmans River, the ponds, and all the estuaries. Shorter rods are more suited for the other rivers with diminutive size and often brushy canopy. With a short rod, you can also make short tight-line nymph drifts with only the fly and leader over the fish. I recommend 75- to 9-foot leaders, starting at 5X for nymphs, down to 7X for the smallest dries. I use sinking tips and streamers such as Conehead Rabbit Leeches, Woolly Buggers, and Matukas for the ponds and estuaries where I expect sea-run fish, and I use 3X tippet.

On warm afternoons the first two weeks of April, you can successfully imitate the Early Dark Stoneflies with a variety of skating dries, like the #14 Dancing Gray Stonefly. By mid-month, Quill Gordons make afternoon appearances, and I like using the Catskill original. March Browns and the Grannom Caddis follow the Quill Gordons.


The premier hatches on Long Island are the nearly simultaneous Green Drakes and Brown Drakes, occurring exclusively on the Carmans River. Evening egg laying and spinner falls start around May 15 and end by June 1.

Many Eastern fly fishers are not familiar with the Brown Drake (*Ephemera*

simulans), which is a size smaller than in the West. To imitate it, I tie an extended-body imitation on a #12 short-shank hook, or a parachute on a #14 long-shank hook, similar to René Harrop's dressing of the CDC Biot Parachute. [See Harrop's story "Brown Drakes" in the June/July 2011 issue for details on 10 of his favorite patterns for that hatch. THE EDITOR.]

June brings the Sulphurs; the size 14 Pale Evening Dun during the afternoon and size 18 Sulphur (*Ephemera dorothea dorothea*) in the evenings. Most common Sulphur parachute patterns work here.

The White Fly makes strong evening appearances on the Carmans starting in late August, lasting until the end of September. Fish will take a White Wulff or a light-colored The Usual. You should have Blue-winged Olives and midge patterns from #16 down to #22 all season. As long as there are green leaves along the banks, you can successfully fish beetles and ants in a variety of sizes.

The most productive subsurface flies are #14 pink or green scuds, #16 Partridge and Oranges, #18-22 Pheasant Tails, and #16 Iris Caddis. 

John Field has volunteered as president of the New York City Chapter of Trout Unlimited and is now president of the American Casting Association. His last story for FLY FISHERMAN was "Squid in the Rips" in the June/July 2012 issue.

Licenses & Permits

A NYSDEC freshwater fishing license is required to fish these rivers. You'll also need a private permit for the parks and preserves. Fishing is open all year in the tidal areas.

Southaven County Park (Middle Carmans River)

Victory Ave., Brookhaven, NY
Fishing permits can be purchased at the park office for \$2 daily or \$30 seasonal.

Phone: (631) 854-1414

Wertheim National Wildlife Refuge (Lower Carmans River)

340 Smith Rd., Shirley, NY
Operated by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. You may fish for free at an access below the Montauk Highway or from a boat.

E-mail: longislandrefuges@fws.gov

Phone: (631) 286-0485

Caleb Smith State Park (Nissequogue River)

581 W. Jericho Turnpike,
Smithtown, NY
Two 4-hour sessions for \$20
Phone (631) 265-1054

Connetquot River State Park Preserve

Box 505 Sunrise Highway,
Oakdale, NY
Phone number: (631) 581-1005

Local Fly Shops

Camp-Site Sport Shop, Huntington

campsitesportshop.com
(631) 271-4969

Orvis, Greenvale

orvis.com
(516) 484-1860

Orvis, NYC

orvis.com
(212) 827-0698

Urban Angler, NYC

urbanangler.com
(800) 255-5488,



Photo • Brendan McCarthy

Green and Brown Drakes are the premier hatches on the Carmans River. They occur simultaneously during the last two weeks of May, and provide the most exciting and dependable dry-fly fishing of the year.