



# *North Carolina's* TROUT TRIFECTA

Three rivers just outside America's most popular national park are teeming with trout, suited for both wading and floating anglers, and surrounded by some of the best scenery in Southern Appalachia.

*By Beau Beasley*



"You have to be careful walking around here," said well-respected, fulltime fishing guide Eugene Shuler as I followed him toward the river. "Most guys think to watch their steps as they wade, but fishing in Western North Carolina means being mindful of rattlesnakes. This time of year they sometimes lie near the river's edge," continued Shuler nonchalantly. Now, I have what I consider to be a manly, reasonable, and healthy fear of snakes, so Shuler's offhanded comment had me eagerly closing the distance between us.

I know many diehard anglers who travel to the West each season to plumb such storied trout waters as the Madison, Big Horn, and South Fork of the Snake. Yes, Western rivers are typically larger than their Eastern cousins and hold excellent trout populations, and fishing them via a drift boat is every fly angler's dream. But I'm a native of the Old Dominion, so it is certainly possible that I'm coastally biased. The truth is, however, that many Eastern rivers are just flat-out undervalued, and no state better exemplifies this oversight than North Carolina.

Saltwater anglers have the edge here as far as reputations go, ranging from large Neuse River red drum to beefy stripers and speckled trout along the state's famed Outer Banks. Not to be outdone, Western North Carolina offers excellent trout fishing—and nowhere is the fishing better than what I fondly refer to as Carolina's trout trifecta: the Oconaluftee, Tuckasegee, and Nantahala rivers.

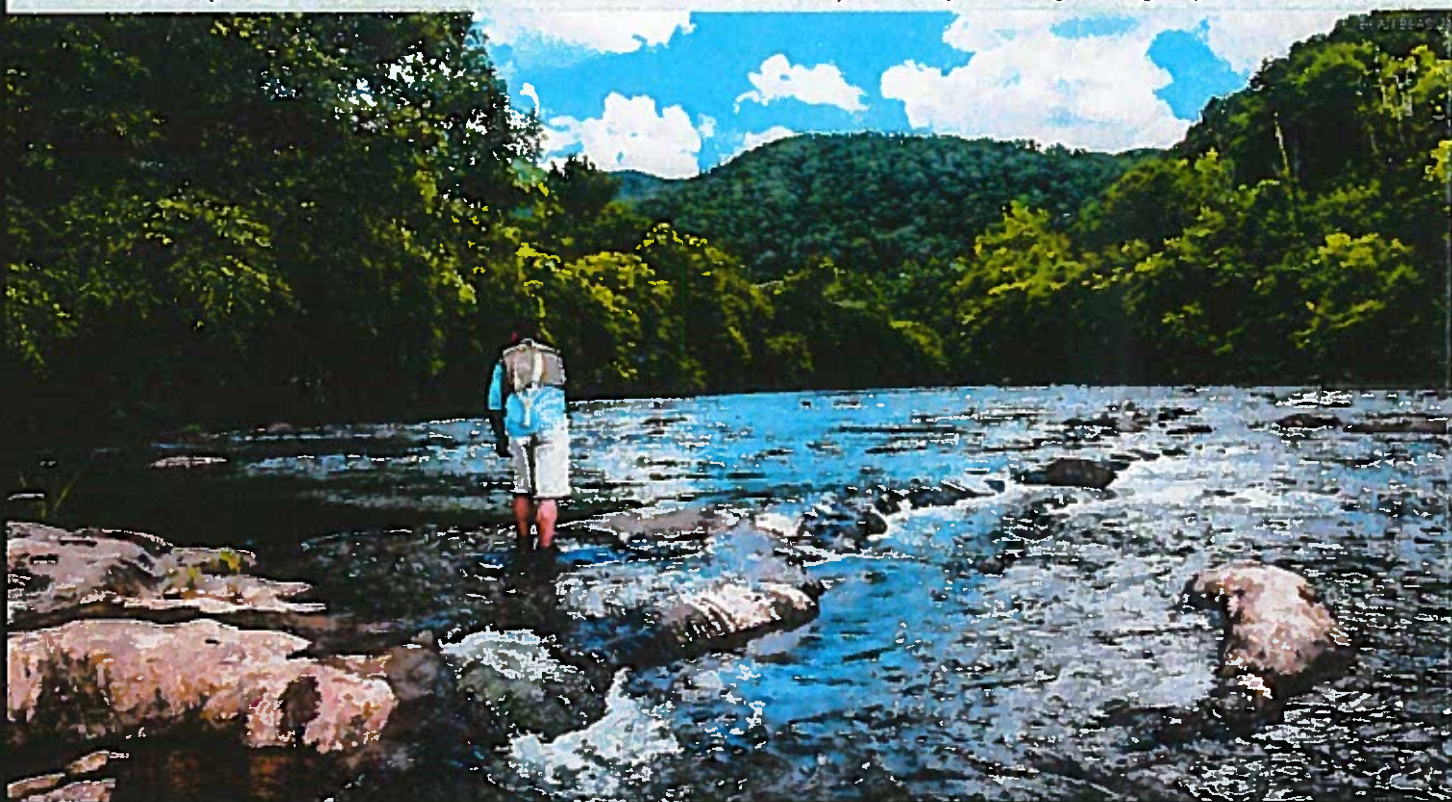
## THE OCONALUFTEE RIVER

Oconaluftee is Cherokee for "riverside," though it ought to mean "chock full o' trout." Known to the locals simply as "the Lufty," this river actually begins in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, America's most visited national park, and boasts a healthy population of native brook trout. Although the cover around the water can be tight in spots, good access exists all along U.S. 441. The river eventually connects with the Raven Fork, and here the

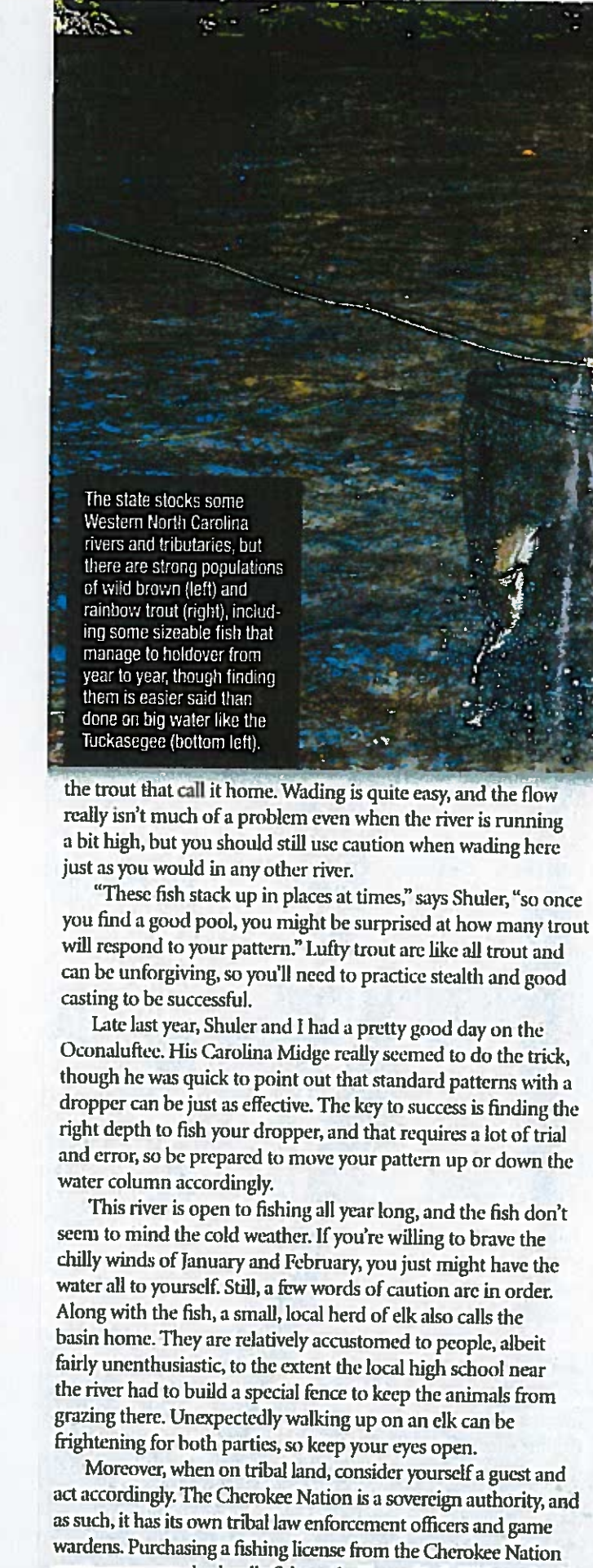


Lufty threads through Cherokee Indian Reservation property. Excellent access for visiting anglers begins near Cove Landing Road and continues all the way to the Tuckasegee. But what draws the most attention from fly anglers is the 2.2 miles of catch-and-release, fly-fishing only water that stretches from Governor's Island Bridge to the Slope Street Bridge.

The Lufty is relatively small but provides plenty of water for







The state stocks some Western North Carolina rivers and tributaries, but there are strong populations of wild brown (left) and rainbow trout (right), including some sizeable fish that manage to holdover from year to year, though finding them is easier said than done on big water like the Tuckasegee (bottom left).

the trout that call it home. Wading is quite easy, and the flow really isn't much of a problem even when the river is running a bit high, but you should still use caution when wading here just as you would in any other river.

"These fish stack up in places at times," says Shuler, "so once you find a good pool, you might be surprised at how many trout will respond to your pattern." Lufty trout are like all trout and can be unforgiving, so you'll need to practice stealth and good casting to be successful.

Late last year, Shuler and I had a pretty good day on the Oconaluftee. His Carolina Midge really seemed to do the trick, though he was quick to point out that standard patterns with a dropper can be just as effective. The key to success is finding the right depth to fish your dropper, and that requires a lot of trial and error, so be prepared to move your pattern up or down the water column accordingly.

This river is open to fishing all year long, and the fish don't seem to mind the cold weather. If you're willing to brave the chilly winds of January and February, you just might have the water all to yourself. Still, a few words of caution are in order. Along with the fish, a small, local herd of elk also calls the basin home. They are relatively accustomed to people, albeit fairly unenthusiastic, to the extent the local high school near the river had to build a special fence to keep the animals from grazing there. Unexpectedly walking up on an elk can be frightening for both parties, so keep your eyes open.

Moreover, when on tribal land, consider yourself a guest and act accordingly. The Cherokee Nation is a sovereign authority, and as such, it has its own tribal law enforcement officers and game wardens. Purchasing a fishing license from the Cherokee Nation ensures you can also legally fish on the Raven Fork. This section is

not only picturesque, but it is also stocked almost weekly. I have seen some real bruisers come out of this section, so it's definitely worth a look.

In the town of Cherokee itself, the Fly Fishing Museum of the Southern Appalachians, which opens in the summer of 2015, features exhibits from surrounding states. Do yourself a favor and stop by to educate yourself on the rich history of Southern Appalachian fly fishing.

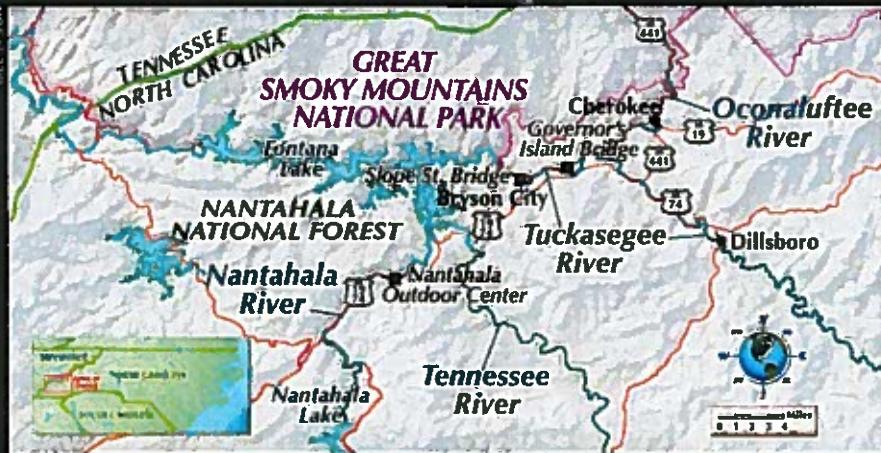
## THE TUCKASEGEE RIVER

The Tuckasegee River is one of the best-known trout rivers in the entire Southeast, and it comes by that reputation honestly. Its name means "place of turtles" in Cherokee—a fairly inauspicious moniker for a grand dame of a water big enough to be at home in the American West. "The Tuck," which runs just outside the borders of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, has a long and colorful history that still binds local residents to the water. The Cherokee, for example, believe the ancient earthwork mound and settlement of Kituwah on the Tuckasegee near Bryson City is the original birthplace of the Cherokee Nation, and it served as their spiritual center many ages ago.

The Tuck is a tailwater fishery that begins at the outflow of Cedar Cliff Reservoir and eventually empties into Fontana Lake. Between the two, anglers can find many miles of unsurpassed water. Just south of the town of Sylva, anglers can launch their boats from an access off South River Road, a few hundred yards downstream of the state route 107 bridge. This is good water and the beginning of the delayed-harvest section. Anglers will find plenty of rainbow and brook trout, but the bulk of the fish in the river are browns.

Brown trout positively thrive in the Tuckasegee, and since the state puts over 20,000 trout in the delayed-harvest section





## If You Go

WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA CAN BE A FLY ANGLERS DREAM, BUT DON'T make the mistake of visiting alone. There are plenty of things for the entire family to do. For example, Bryson City is home to the Great Smoky Mountain Railroad ([www.gsmt.com](http://www.gsmt.com)), which offers open air rides on a real locomotive. After your train ride, grab a bite to eat and a beer at the Nantahala Brew Pub (828-488-2337, [www.nantahala.com](http://www.nantahala.com)).

Nearby Cherokee has a wonderful Cherokee Indian Museum ([www.cherokeemuseum.org/](http://www.cherokeemuseum.org/)), which is well worth the visit. Also don't miss seeing the outdoor drama, *Unto These Hills*, which is a favorite with young and old alike.

Dillsboro has some good restaurants and great little specialty shops showcasing everything from antiques to candy. Spend the night at the Dillsboro Inn (866-586-3898, [www.dillsboroinn.com](http://www.dillsboroinn.com)), or if you're in town for only a few hours, get a BBQ meal at Dillsboro Smokehouse ([www.dillsbosmokehouse.com](http://www.dillsbosmokehouse.com)).

Both Swain County (Great Smokies Fishing) and Jackson County (Western NC Fly Fishing Trail) support websites with detailed information on multiple locations where anglers can fish well beyond the three fisheries highlighted in this article.

### GUIDES

**Fly Fishing the Smokies**  
[www.flyfishingthesmokies.net](http://www.flyfishingthesmokies.net)  
828-488-7665

**Mac Brown Fly Fishing**  
[www.macbrownflyfish.com](http://www.macbrownflyfish.com)  
828-736-1496

**Smoky Mountain Outdoors Unlimited**  
[www.smokymountainoutdoorsunlimited.com](http://www.smokymountainoutdoorsunlimited.com)  
828-488-9711

**Smoky Mountain Adventures**  
[www.steveclaxton.com](http://www.steveclaxton.com)  
828-736-7501

**AB's Fly Fishing Guide Service**  
[www.abfish.org](http://www.abfish.org)  
826-226-3833

### FLY SHOPS

**Tuckasegee Fly Shop**  
Bryson City, North Carolina  
[www.tuckflyshop.com](http://www.tuckflyshop.com)  
828-488-3333

**Rivers Edge Outfitters Fly Shop**  
Cherokee, North Carolina  
[www.riversedgeoutfittersnc.com](http://www.riversedgeoutfittersnc.com)  
828-497-9300

**Hookers Fly Shop**  
Sylva, North Carolina  
[www.hookersflyshop.com](http://www.hookersflyshop.com)  
828-587-4665

**Black Rock Outdoor Company**  
Sylva, North Carolina  
828-631-4453

### OTHER RESOURCES

**Great Smokies Fishing**  
Bryson City, North Carolina  
[www.greatsmokiesfishing.com](http://www.greatsmokiesfishing.com)  
800-867-9246

**Western North Carolina Fly Fishing Trail**  
Jackson County, North Carolina  
<http://www.flyfishingtrail.com/3/miscellaneous1.htm>  
800-962-1911

period, anglers can harvest up to seven trout, all of which must be at least seven inches long. In many cases, these are not dumb stockers. Plenty of fish summer over and become naturalized.

The next good access point is about two miles downstream near Webster's Bridge, and from there anglers floating downstream will be happy to hear that a major impediment to their travels has recently been removed. The old Dillsboro Dam has been taken down, and all that remains are rock structures below the waterline and along the banks to reduce bank erosion. Local fish use the Tuck's many rock

structures, easily seen during low-water periods, as ambush points. Another boat landing is available where Scott Creek intersects the river just below the old dam site.

Anglers will find top notch trout fishing in the Tuck, but that's not all. The river warms as it winds its way downstream, and eventually, bass reign supreme. Smallmouth appear in decent numbers below Barker's Creek and their numbers are strong all the way to Fontana Lake.

The town of Dillsboro offers a good base of operations if you're fishing this stretch of the Tuck. I recommend the Dillsboro Inn; it's my favorite place to stay when visiting the area. Once you're in town, visit Hookers Fly Shop in nearby Sylva for any last minute items, a fishing report, and an inside scoop on the Tuck from some guys who know it best.

Eventually the Tuck runs right through the middle of Bryson City, which is quickly becoming a booming fly-fishing destination, as the town's recently opened Tuckasegee Fly Shop attests. A great source of information and local patterns, the shop is beside Mountain Perks, a family-owned coffee shop, so you can kill two birds with one stop in the morning before hitting the water.

## THE NANTAHALA RIVER

The Nantahala River is undoubtedly one of the largest and best-known rivers in all of North Carolina, and not just because it offers great trout fishing. The "Natty" derives its name from the Cherokee word for "land of the noonday sun," perhaps a reference to the thick forests surrounding the water that prevent sunlight from penetrating until the afternoon on most days. The downside for anglers is the Natty's popularity with tubers and kayakers. Visiting anglers are likely to see big yellow school buses along the road carrying white-water enthusiasts upstream en masse. You'll see those folks again as they float by later in the day. Indeed, you can't avoid the "kayak hatch" on good-weather days, so hit the Natty early or float the river yourself to avoid any interference.

Fly fishing guide Mac Brown knows the river well and fishes it nearly year-round.

"The water fluctuates a lot here because of power generation upstream," says Brown. "As a result, the fish are constantly moving. Finding where the fish are holding and presenting your pattern correctly to them is the key to success here, but presents a real challenge. You must be willing to move and try new tactics. Anglers who just throw standard patterns all day long without also considering how they wade, the drift of their pattern, or its depth, are likely in for a very long day."

each year, it's not hard to see why it is so popular with anglers. As a matter of fact, in the early spring you may find dozens of cars parked along the river's neighboring roads.

The river is catch-and-release only from the first of October until the first Saturday in June, when the delayed-harvest section turns into an all-tackle section. The pressure remains intense until the last day of September, but then subsides. During the popular summer





### Rainbow Warrior

**HOOK:** Tiemco 2457 or standard nymph hook, sizes 14 to 20.

**THREAD:** Red 8/0 Uni-Thread.

**BEAD:** Wapsi silver tungsten bead, sized to hook.

**TAIL:** Pheasant-tail fibers.

**ABDOMEN:** Medium UTC pearl tinsel.

**WINGCASE:** Tag of pearl tinsel folded over thorax.

**THORAX:** Wapsi Rainbow Sow Scud Dubbing.



### Frenchy

**HOOK:** Syndicate 400BK, sizes 12 to 16.

**THREAD:** Bright orange 140 denier waxed Flymaster Plus.

**BEAD:** Brown 3.5mm Syndicate slotted tungsten bead.

**TAIL:** Pheasant-tail fibers.

**BODY:** Pheasant-tail fibers.

**THORAX:** Brown stone Kaufmann SLF Dubbing.



### Shuler's Midge

**HOOK:** Dai-Riki 135, sizes 18 to 24.

**THREAD:** Fluorescent cherise 70 denier Ultra Thread.

**BEAD:** Clear Killer Caddis Glass Bead.

**TAIL:** Light pardo Coq De Leon.

**BODY:** Royal blue and sky blue Flashabou.

**RIB:** .09mm light blue Siman Colour Wire.

**THORAX:** Purple UV Hareline Ice Dub.

Anglers can easily reach the Nantahala from U.S. 19, as the road generally parallels the river. One popular access point is near the Nantahala Outdoor Center. You can park at the generating station and take a footbridge across the river. You'll find places to park along the road and at the Nantahala Outdoor Center, which also has a restaurant and a well-provisioned store (though no fly-fishing gear is available).

One sure way to increase your odds on this river is to change patterns often. If you haven't gotten a bite on the Natty in 10 minutes, change flies and keep changing until you find what the fish want. Once you find the right pattern, be ready to set the hook quickly. Finally, although the "tube hatch" is aggravating at times, it subsides almost completely after Labor Day and won't start in earnest again until the middle of the following May, so anglers can have the run of the river during the shoulders of the season.

The chance to catch wild, native brook trout is just one more reason to visit the rivers of Western North Carolina.



## TOOLS OF THE TRADE

The Oconaluftee, Tuckasegee, and Nantahala sport nearly identical hatches, though local shops can tell you which patterns are the most effective for whenever and wherever you plan to fish. In general, anglers fishing in the winter (January through March) may expect to see black caddis, winter black stoneflies, dark sedges, quill gordons, dark Hendricksons, golden stoneflies, and of course midges ranging in sizes 16 to 24.

Throughout the spring (April through June) the hatches change and expand. Expect to see march browns, yellow sallies, blue quills, cinnamon and olive caddis, sulphurs, and green and brown drakes in sizes 10 through 18.


Summer (July through September) brings tricos as well as summer sedges and various terrestrials like ants. Tossing a pattern like a

Green Weenie to mimic an inchworm that's fallen into the river can also be effective. Summer pattern sizes range from size 8 through 18.

By fall, the hatches revert back to many winter patterns. If you're lucky, you can catch a good October Caddis hatch while you take in the splendid fall colors. Autumn molted sedge patterns often work in the middle of fall, as do dark caddis, little winter stoneflies, midges, and blue-winged olives.

Gear for all three fisheries is practically interchangeable. While most fly anglers fishing the Great Smoky Mountains National Park use 3- to 4-weight rods in 7- to 8-foot lengths, rods for all three of the aforementioned rivers can be in the 5- or even 6-weight class, and stretch from 9- to 9½-feet long. Leaders should be around 12-feet long but could be as long as 15 (especially on the Nantahala) or as short as nine (on the other rivers). While most anglers won't be accustomed to using such long leaders, it helps maintain a reasonable distance from wary fish while simultaneously fishing patterns deeper without an indicator.

Tippets are what you might expect, with 4X through 6X being the dominant class. You can go larger when throwing streamers during high-water events. The key here is to be methodical and observant. If there aren't any bugs coming off, and switching to terrestrials or blue-winged olive patterns doesn't work, try something like a crayfish or even a Woolly Bugger. Local patterns like Shuler's Midge or a nymph like a Rainbow Warrior are also effective. You can also try what locals call a Frenchy, a nymph pattern discovered by Fly Fishing Team USA while competing in the Fly Fishing World Championship. A Frenchy looks much like a pheasant tail, though you can modify the thorax color to match various hatches, and the bright collar is thought to induce strikes. The local fly shops stock plenty of these local patterns, so be sure to stop by on your way to the river.

Native Tar Healers know what treasures reside in their own backyard. If you haven't fished the quaint and productive rivers of Western North Carolina, you don't know what you're missing. Scads of trout are ready to entertain anglers in the Oconaluftee, Tuckasegee, and Nantahala; just watch out for those rattlesnakes. 

Beau Beasley ([www.beaubeasley.com](http://www.beaubeasley.com)) is a frequent contributor to *American Angler* and the author of *Fly Fishing the Mid-Atlantic*. He's also the director of the Virginia Fly Fishing & Wine Festival and lives with his wife and children in Warrenton, Virginia.