

Subject: Brook Trout - the "Canary" of Mountain Streams  
September 4, 2023

I attended a wonderful tribute to the late Katheryn Willoughby at the *Shakespeare and Me* Bookstore last Friday afternoon. Mrs. Willoughby was the owner and operator of the bookstore for many years and an honored and loved resident of our community.

The bookstore had a table of books by local and area authors. As I perused the table collection, I noticed a number of works focused on this beautiful, historic area and the plateau's unique environment. So, while at the tribute, I honored her memory by buying a book, *Searching for Home Waters: A Brook Trout Pilgrimage*, by Michael Steinberg.

I quickly discovered my newly purchased book wasn't just about pretty pictures and trout. It really was an exploration of the state of our land, waters, and environment from North Georgia all the way up to Maine and even Labrador. The author had searched for and caught the elusive native brook trout in remote and hidden streams along the Appalachians. Steinberg stressed that the wild, native Brook Trout was an indicator of the health and vitality of a local watershed. The native, naturally occurring Brook Trout, which live in, our creeks and streams, can be compared to the Canary in the coal mine, as they provide a warning of impending danger – the canary warning the miners of dangerous carbon monoxide and the brookies warning us of the effects of climate change and excessive water flow and the resulting reduction of the fish population. Steinberg did find those rather small and elusive fish in a number of remote and isolated streams across the mountain chain.

What immediately impressed me was that just a few years ago, I had discovered we still had "Brooke's" in some small creeks right here in Highlands! I even went to the streams to see for myself and yes, the Brook Trout were there. Most folks would never notice them because they are small, about 6 or 7 inches, and they are very skittish. One has to actually almost stalk them, because any sudden movement and they will dart off. But, on one day, I was able to sneak up to a small, shaded pool in a remote town creek to discover a small school of Brooks. As soon as I attempted to cast a fly at them, they vanished in an instant.

This week I went back to pursuing and confirming the existence of Brook Trout within the town limits. I once again was able to see them, but I'm not going to tell you where they reside. They desperately need anonymity and privacy in order to survive. There will also need to be continued restrained and careful development in town if the Brookies continue to live here.

Our development and building ordinances help preserve what we value most about Highlands. Over the last several years there have been instances where folks building near town streams attempted to ignore the vegetative buffer requirements. Our town staff enforces this ordinance whenever they discover a violation. That ordinance is critical to keeping our home water clean and vibrant with aquatic life like small, native fish. Initiatives like paving town roads to minimize sediment runoff is also a part of an effort to preserve our watershed. There is more to be done.

For that matter, all of the communities on the Appalachian Mountain range from Georgia to Maine should be cognizant of this cautionary tale captured in Steinberg's book. When communities preserve these natural resources and wild creatures we are in fact preserving ourselves. We all love these wonderful hills, valleys, and peaks. The challenge is to protect them.