

A Day on the Deerfield River

Story and Photos by Ed Mitchell

On an Autumn evening last year, I got a text message from guide Chris Jackson offering me a half-day float on the Deerfield River. His offer, however, came with a warning. Drought conditions, coupled with unseasonably warm weather plaguing the entire Northeast at that time, had caused river conditions that were low and warm, resulting in difficult fishing. Still, without hesitation, I grabbed the opportunity to see for the first time this lauded river.

Born in the lush Green Mountains of Vermont, the Deerfield River quickly descends into northwest Massachusetts on its 75-mile-long quest to meet the

Connecticut River at Turners Falls. The portion I fished lies below Fife Brook Dam near the tiny town of Florida, Massachusetts, home to about 750 people. Yes, that's right, Florida, Massachusetts—think pinecones, not pineapples. From here the Deerfield snakes southward by the highest summits of the Hoosac Mountain Range, hugging the Mohawk Trail as it journeys through scenic countryside toward Shelburne, Massachusetts, and beyond.

Fife Brook Dam, a bottom release dam, delivers cold water supporting fine fishing year-round. Immediately downstream from it are two “catch and release” sections with a preponderance of wild brown trout, some reaching

Guide Chris Jackson prepares my line for our drift down the Deerfield River, Fall 2024.





Peggy Root, *Lord's Cove, Lyme*, (detail) oil on canvas, 40 in x 50 in



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twenty-five inches in length. Artificial lures and flies are permitted, but bait is prohibited. At this time lures and flies are not required to be barbless, but keep an eye on the regulations as this may change.

The first “catch and release” area begins at the dam, extending a mile and a half to the Hoosac Tunnel Railroad Bridge. There is good public access to this section from River Road. This reach has the coolest water in summer because of its proximity to the dam. The lower section begins at the confluence of Pelham Brook and continues downstream to the Mohawk Campground. Given its distance to the dam, these waters are prone to warming up in the summer. Public walk-in access is limited in this stretch.

As one expects, dam releases of water have a pronounced effect on fishing this part of the Deerfield. Early in the day, typically up until 10 a.m., the release may be only 125 cubic feet per second (CFS), offering low water opportunities for wading anglers. After midmorning, the dam release sharply increases, however, rising upwards to 1,000 CFS for about three hours. There

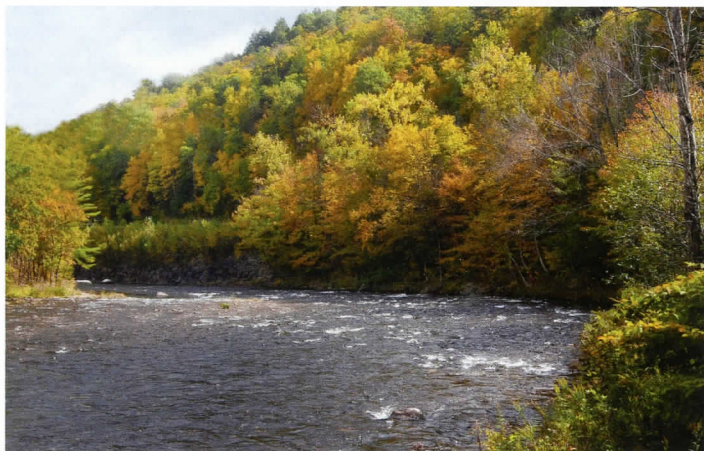
is a horn warning, audible for roughly a quarter mile downstream. Rather than depend on it, I urge you to check the dam’s online release schedule ahead of time. To that end I have included a link to Fife Brook Dam’s releases in the resource section at the end of this article.

This rise in water level obviously reduces wading access, but fear not, a new angling opportunity takes its place. The increased flow, locally called the “bubble,” facilitates fishing from drift boats and white-water rafts. This is extremely popular, with numerous guides to assist you, providing exciting float fishing adventures much like those experienced by anglers on western rivers such as the Yellowstone, Madison, and Big Hole.

Over breakfast in the tiny town of Charlemont, Massachusetts, Chris informed me he has guided on the Deerfield for eighteen years, a river he and many others consider the finest trout waters in this part of New England. When asked his opinion on the prime season, he broke it down this way: Winter is his favorite time to drift the river, especially February and March, often holding the best chance for hooking large numbers of fish



Top: Three variations of girdle bug flies.



Bottom: The Deerfield River flows seventy-five miles from southern Vermont to meet the Connecticut River at Turners Falls, MA.

surrounded us, each boasting the season, while the wide river coursed through hidden valleys. No question, the Deerfield is beautiful.

A quick look at the bank made it apparent that the river was indeed very low, as Chris had told me. Clearly, fishing would not be easy. In addition, the low water allowed me a chance to view the river's bony bottom. This is a very rocky river with large glacial boulders and complex currents. Wading these waters is best done with cleated felt soles and a staff.

During our float, Chris had me working a team of nymphs around the current seams. As the river depth and speed changed, he constantly made adjustments to my leader. His preferred searching rig consisted of a nine-foot tapered leader. Below a strike indicator rode a blue winged olive nymph as a dropper, matching a frequent seasonal hatch, while on the leader point was a girdle bug, acting both as an anchor fly and an attractor. Capable of imitating a stonefly, a hellgrammite, or a large terrestrial, the venerable girdle bug fly has proven its worth time and time again over the years. And it is also versatile, easily made to match a variety of situations. Shown here, I tied three variations, all in size 10#. To the right is one constructed simply with a chenille body and rubber legs—fine in shallow water; the middle fly adds a brass bead for times when you need to get down a bit; and on the left is one suited for heavier water, with a tungsten bead and a jig hook, to reduce snagging the bottom.


as well as a monster brown trout; for wading anglers, he suggested May and June as they held the best hatches.

Dry fly activity is rare up by the dam, so he recommended starting roughly a mile downstream. He went on to tell me that in terms of flies, emerger patterns typically outfish conventional dries. He prefers to make his emergers from snowshoe rabbit fur. He added that emergers are particularly effective on big fish who are more likely to rise to a crippled insect. He noted that caddis hatches are numerous, along with good hatches of the usual New England mayflies including Hendricksons, March browns, Sulphurs, and blue-winged olives. There are also hatches of large stoneflies and Isonychias, which he liked to match with the good-old dun variant dry fly.

A short drive upriver, Chris slid his whitewater raft down a hillside, and our adventure began. First taking a moment to adjust our gear, Chris then manned the oars as we headed downstream, transported by the currents through a stunning, wild landscape. Ablaze with autumn color, steep forested mountains millions of years old

Guide Chris Jackson retrieving our raft after our drift down the Deerfield River, Fall 2024.



As the day wore on, it became all too apparent that Chris's prophecy was true. The fishing was poor. Still, I felt grateful to Chris for this opportunity, and told him so as he winched the raft back up an embankment. At the same time, it was a stark reminder that even on heralded rivers such as the Deerfield, climate change can have a serious effect. And far from being an isolated event, October 2024 is now being called the driest month ever recorded across much of our country. Moving into November we got little relief. The drought continued, with nearly 90 percent of the contiguous states experiencing a rain deficit, the Northeast perhaps the worst hit. Let's all do what we can to support climate action initiatives both locally and globally. And hope this winter provides adequate rain and snow. 

Ed Mitchell is the author of four books about fly-fishing and has written for many magazines. He has over forty years of experience in both fresh and saltwater fly-fishing. A special thanks to Adam Kautza, PhD, Coldwater Fisheries Project Leader of the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife.

Resources

Chris Jackson Guide Service

chrisjacksonflyfishing.com

Follow Chris on Instagram @jacksonchrisd

Deerfield Fly Shop

8A Elm St., South Deerfield, MA 01373

deerfieldflyshop.com, 413-397-3665

Fife Brook Dam Release

For information about water releases visit

www.safewaters.com/facility/fife-brook

Accommodations: Red Rose Motel

1701 MA-2, Shelburne Falls, MA 01370

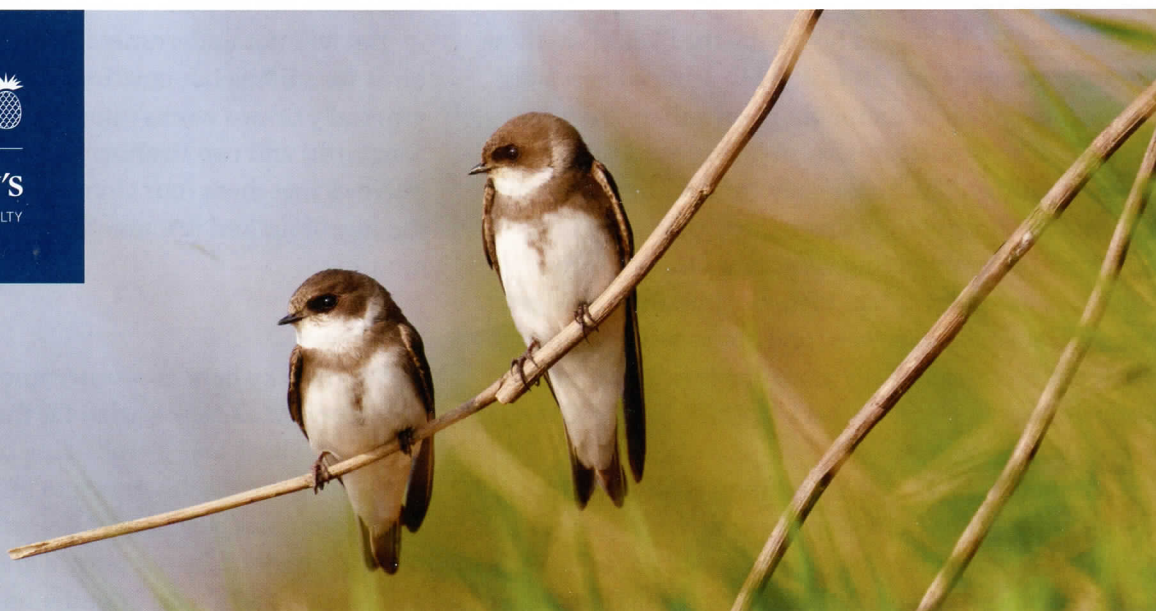
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Interesting Fact

Bank Swallows do not join in the large gatherings (murmurations) of their cousins, the tree and barn swallows, eschewing the crowds for smaller social gatherings.