

The Land of

Milk & Honey

> ED MITCHELL

Illustrations: Al Hassall

WHEN I was a young man, a millennium or so ago, a friend and I took a trip to the upper reaches of the Connecticut River. More specifically, we stationed ourselves in the little town of Colebrook, New Hampshire, near the Canadian border. Surrounded by farms hugging a meandering river, it was then, and still is now, a fine New England community.

At that stage of my fly-fishing development, I already owned some excellent equipment. I had an 8-foot Winston fiberglass rod that threw a 5-weight line with smooth authority, a pearl grey Hardy Princess reel, and a five-tray Rex Richardson chest box brimming with every trout fly known in the galaxy.

The rest of my gear was, well, less high-falutin'. Even from across the river, you'd note that my vest sagged like a sack of potatoes. Home to torn pockets and jammed zippers, it was, at best, hobo chic. My wader suspenders had stretched out permanently, forcing me to tie knots in them in an effort to shorten them.

My waders? Patched to the point of looking like a quilt, they bore powerful witness to the benefits of carrying a repair kit.

And then there was my net. It was a cheap wooden creation that had been with me since the planet cooled. In fact, it predated everything else I owned at that moment. The bag had been ripped and repaired a time or two, and the wood frame had a disturbing crack in the bow.

In an effort to offset these imperfections, however, I had dressed the wood with several coats of high-gloss varnish. It shined like a jewel, at least in my biased eyes. Most importantly of all, the net had a ton of sentimental value. Just about every trout I had ever caught had spent a restful moment in this old thing. I loved it dearly.

During this journey to the upper Connecticut, one day we fished a lovely part of the river, high up between two of the Connecticut Lakes. In this spot, a low cribstone bridge crossed the river, and immediately upstream of it was a picture-perfect pool.

Adding to the beauty of the moment, this gem of a pool was chockablock full of rainbows, and I had



acquired enough angling acumen to hook 'em up pretty good.

These were not big fish mind you. Most of them were barely a foot long. But when you latched on to one, it would dash about, performing aerial antics across the surface of the pool. My rod and my cherished net got a wonderful workout.

After educating as many rainbows as I could above the bridge, I decided to wet a line on the downstream side. There, the river picked up considerable speed before breaking into a braid around a narrow grassy island.

Along the near shore of the island was a partially exposed gravel bar—a fishy-looking spot from which to try my luck. So I walked out on it, knelt, and chucked a few casts into the dark waters under the bridge's span.

My last cast was met with a serious strike; here was a bigger 'bow. At first, the large trout slugged it out under the bridge. Then it reversed and ran at me with

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alarming speed. But I knew all too well that if this bad boy got in those swift currents below me, it was bye-bye to certainly the largest trout of the day. Placing all the pressure I dared on the tippet, I put the brakes on that rainbow, and once I had the fish into slower water, I slid the red-banded warrior into my awaiting net.

After putting my rod on the gravel bar, I reached into the net with my forceps to unhook my prize, but the hook proved stubborn. So I unlatched my net from its lanyard and placed the net and the fish down on the wet stones.

With both hands free, I quickly removed the fly. Lifting the fish, I spun around to revive it in the stream. It responded immediately, running right back to its sanctuary beneath the bridge. I was one happy camper. In my mind, this place was the land of milk and honey.

Ready to return to the fun, I picked up my rod and went to get my net. It was nowhere to be found. For a moment, I was in disbelief. Where in the Sam Hill was that thing? Gradually it dawned on me what had happened. Minus the weight of the fish, the net must have floated off the bar, while my back was turned. There the strong currents swept it away.

I quickly studied the swift water below, looking for any sign of my net swimming downstream. Zero luck. At that point reality sunk in hard. My net was gone. I was heartbroken.

Feeling like a fool, I shook my head while staring at my feet. Inside I was a wreck. What a dumb-ass mistake.

Still there was absolutely no sense standing there awash in self-pity, there was several more hours to fish.

With a pit in my stomach, I began wading down the rapids, where the river melted into the forest. I figured at least the fishing would take my mind off the loss. And it worked to a degree. Here and there a rainbow yanked me out of my misery. Yet when I went to land it, I instinctively reached for my net. Back came the painful truth.

Eventually I came to a gorgeous little pool tucked in the balsam forest. Behind a big rock at the head, my fly found yet another frisky bow. Upon releasing it, however, something odd occurred. I thought I saw my net out of the corner of my eye.

Straightening up slowly, I surveyed my surroundings. But there was no net to be seen.

After calming down, I changed flies. With nippers in hand, I went to cut the fly off the tippet, when out of the blue, the weirdness struck again. My net popped up in my peripheral view. I whirled around like a sentry to a snapped twig. Nothing there, sorry no net. Now the situation had gotten spooky.

Convinced I was losing my marbles, I took a deep breath and sat on a rock at the head of the pool. "Enough already with the hallucinations!" I told myself. The net was history and I had to get over it. My imagination was just playing tricks on me. After collecting my thoughts, I flipped open my chest box and pawed through my flies for a favorite.

As I tied it on, I glanced downstream and saw the ghost of my net again. In slow motion it rose temptingly into view, and then evaporated without a trace.

I froze, spellbound, mesmerized.

Summoning all my courage, I rose from the rock and headed downstream in the direction of the apparition. Part way down the pool, the ghost reappeared in the current, tempting me. With outstretched hands,



furiously I lunged toward it, like a madman stumbling toward a mirage.

But before I could get close, it again vanished from view. But there was no stopping now, I forged onward, ready to face my demons.

At the tail of the pool, the river took a sharp bend. There, along the outside bank, the current coursed under a wall of overhanging alders, their limbs trailing in the flow. As I approached, one of the sweeping limbs caught my attention. Out of sync with the rest of the branches, it bobbed up and down feverishly, as if driven by unseen forces. Drawing near, I looked closer and discovered why.

Mother Machree, there was my net, plain as day. The net's bag was snagged on the branch, causing it to bounce wildly with the load. Meanwhile the net itself squirmed violently below, buried in the turbulent current. As I reached out with my hand, the branch suddenly sprung skyward, making my net shoot to the top. Wiggling like a plastic hula dancer on a dashboard, it shimmied above the waves, only to submerge again—an instant later. Mystery solved. So this is how my net had learned to play peek-a-boo.

Plunging my arm into the cold current, I yanked the net free. Carefully I waded back into shallow water, put my rod between my legs, and then reattached my net to the lanyard. A feeling of relief flooded over me. My net and my sanity had returned. Time to rejoice. Holding both hands high overhead, I gave a rebel yell. Now I could rejoin the land of milk and honey. 🐟

Ed Mitchell is a longtime contributor to FLY FISHERMAN. He is the author of *Fly Rodding the Coast* and *Fly Rodding the Estuaries* (Stackpole Books, 2002 & 2003, respectively). His website is edmitchelloutdoors.com.