

Bois Brule and Other Reasons



Sitting on the bench outside the cabin I took a deep breath of the cool, moist morning air and finished off the tepid coffee in my mug as a tiny bit of daylight leaked into the clear October sky. I pulled on my waders, cinched my boots, closed up the cabin and jumped into the truck. My neighbor across the way had already headed out under the cover of darkness and I wasn't far behind.

I had two planned stops along the Bois Brule River of northwest Wisconsin. After that, I was going to scout and stop as it suited me. For the record, this would be my third attempt fishing for the infamous Brule River steelhead. My first trip a few years ago was mostly blind and exploratory. I was hoping number three would be the charm. It wasn't.

Anyone who hunts or fishes for a long period of time, for years, understands the idea of paying your dues. Some folks are blessed with beginners luck or innate ability while others mitigate the odds with mentors and guides. I, however, couldn't win a two-ticket raffle, so I willfully slog through a well-executed set of errors and missteps while still finding plenty of reasons to be excited about the moment. Armed with a spinning rod and 8-weight fly rod, both rigged the night before, I also carried along a box of assorted flies tied by a friend who lives in Oregon. Almost too exquisite to use, Lisa knew of my desire to catch a steelhead on a fly rod and promised this gift. Now the Brule is not the Deschutes, but it's good water nonetheless even if limited, and even though another friend lobbied for using spinners, Lisa's flies are now among the assorted reasons I make this trip.

Still dark enough for headlights, vehicles were already darting down roads where few people live filling forested dead end parking lots, reminding me of early morning races on public waterfowl areas. The race to stake claim over prime territory and the reason I no longer hunt such places. Mild chaos supplanting what should be a relaxed moment. Yet, here I am, although with slightly less urgency than the average Brule River angler. Anglers like Barry, for example.

At o'dark-thirty Barry arrives. Headlamp illuminating the path leading to the water where he will cast. A Minnesota resident like most of whom I saw along the river, Barry's been doing this awhile. Leaning into his wading stick he tenuously wobbles along, running the race the best he can with an intensity rivaled only by people with younger legs. And when the time arrives, when this earthly ribbon of stained water may now be legally fished, the man wearing a Brule River Sportsman's Club cap casts into a deep hole where others have stood prior. The hole has a name, as they all do, and more than a few stories, and when you stand at this spot hoping for signs of chrome, it

does one good to remember the old days and those who have come before, and to wonder if their spirit still floats on the breeze.

When I checked back seven hours later hoping to take a late afternoon turn at this honey hole, Barry popped out of the brush heading to his car. We made introductions, engaged in a little small talk, and I gathered enough intel to know I was not going to beat Barry to this location tomorrow morning. About the time he's putting on his waders, I'll still be worshipping Mr. Coffee. But not a problem as there's plenty of other crowded unexplored holes yet to try.

I was now eight days into an outing that started in Wisconsin's Driftless Area where I danced with trout in small streams. A few days later I willingly endured creaky knees and everything briars and alders could dish out for two days just to hear the flush of grouse, or pa'trudge if you prefer. And now I rest my head somewhere near the Brule River State Forest, eating my evening meals at the Twin Gables Café while trying to untangle some of the mystery and history of an infamous river.

These trips north always have many purposes. Many reasons. To be sure, I wouldn't make these October trips without the companionship of my fishing rods and maybe a shotgun. But it's mostly a time for melding expectations, imagination, experiences, and curiosity into memories I can call on later during the cold deadness of late January when contemplating what more I need to do and what the new year will allow.

And so, before I fish, I stop at the old hatchery and try to envision the long gone pinery, the CCC camp, and the look of the land 100 years earlier. I relish the Friday night fish fry eating deep fried whitefish sourced from Bodin Fisheries out of Bayfield, in business for five generations. I wade into "the big lake they call Gitche Gumeé" wondering about Lightfoot, the Edmund Fitzgerald, and Hiawatha while bending to pluck a piece of beach glass to take home to my wife. I watch wild turkeys along the roadside and wonder about their origins and possible Missouri ancestors. I visit with a friend who lives the dream, pursuing divers, steelhead, and turkeys as the mood allows, and successfully accomplishes two out of three while still finding time for a nap. And of course, I have Lisa's handmade flies, one of which is now lodged in an unapproachable rock on the bottom of a famous river near a big white pine.

On my second day fishing the Brule I encountered Barry one more time along the trail. We talked again, only this time with a comfortable familiarity. With a quick glance he noticed how my fly rod was rigged and asked about my plans. He shared important useful upstream tidbits, asked if I had a wading stick and told me where to cross the river near the two rocks where fish can often be found holding. He told me his intentions and invited me to tag along. I politely declined. He proclaimed me to be true and honorable and wished me well, leaned into his walking stick to step over a fallen tree and headed downstream as we parted ways.

Maybe I should've walked with Barry. I may have learned something. But I have always preferred the solitude of fishing solo, something hard enough to do on the Brule at this time of year. Years ago I was warned this is how it



would be, so I slow things down and adjust expectations accordingly. Earlier I avoided an encounter with four anglers crowding a stretch of the river. They were loud and detached from their surroundings; it doesn't take much to turn a place of sanctity into a sinners den. Not much further upstream I passed a young couple standing side by side in the middle of the river. I enjoyed watching them for a while and surmised them to be new to trout fishing. He caught a small brown trout on his spinning rod as she watched, giddy because of it. Another 50 yards and I slipped behind a solo fisherman as I looked for a different hole far enough away and it was then when I started feeling crowded and a little anxious and knew my rendezvous with the Brule was coming to an end.

And next year, when the river calls to me again, the only excuse I'll need, I'll carry Lisa's flies, watch for Barry, and enjoy all the other reasons, known and yet to be, why I travel two days to stand in the north flowing waters of the Bois Brule hoping to catch an elusive fish. And trying to live up to the title of true and honorable.