

ON MAY 6, 2006, THE FRASER PAPER MILL ON THE BANK OF NEW HAMPSHIRE'S ANDROSCOGGIN RIVER BELCHED RANCID SMOKE INTO THE AIR FOR THE LAST TIME. Closed due to rising costs and diminishing returns, the mill was the economic lifeblood for the struggling town of Berlin, New Hampshire. The pulp industry had supported the city since the first mill opened in 1877.

The depressed town sits in the heart of the White Mountains near the border of Maine, and has depended on jobs created by the mill for decades. When the mill closed, the town was hit by an unemployment sledgehammer, and although the economy suffered, the Androscoggin River took a deep, clean breath after years of pollution. The river was reborn.

Androscoggin

The best big-river float fishing in New England

Reborn

Androscoggin Reborn

The Androscoggin is a broad river that starts in the New Hampshire town of Errol. It flows south from its birthplace for 178 miles to a confluence with the Kennebec River. Ultimately its waters empty into the Gulf of Maine after threading through a 3,530-square-mile watershed. It's a picturesque waterway for most of its course, winding amidst the gentle, rolling hills of Maine, carving out sandy cut banks and sculpted gravel bars.

However the Androscoggin River also passes through some of the most economically stressed areas in New England. Crumbling mill towns or former mill towns on their way back to economic health dot the shoreline and in four cases are home to major dams that interrupt the flow of the Androscoggin.

Rumford, Maine, for example, is a mill town which currently processes pulp, making it an odiferous hamlet with little esthetic appeal.

Likewise, the larger town of Auburn, Maine, which was supported by the river's power during its heyday, is an industrial graveyard of closed mills and dilapidated buildings. Here, the frothy river holds some gamefish but more closely resembles a superfund project than a destination river. And although the economy in Auburn has improved, and an expensive beautification project has helped improve its eye appeal, the Androscoggin is still plagued by 100 years of industry.

Five years ago the advocacy group Environment Maine (environmentmaine.org) declared the Androscoggin one of the 20 most toxic rivers in

America. The group cited that more than 25,000 pounds of toxic discharge was released into the river in 2007. The predominant source of this pollution was the paper and textile mills that line the river's banks.

The Androscoggin was one of the first inspirations for the Clean Water Act, a federal law that in 1977 strived to restore the river's suitability for recreation by 1983 and eliminate further pollution by 1985. This aside, the river today still holds "unacceptably high levels of mercury-contaminated wastewater" still being discharged from numerous mills.

While the downstream portion of the river is far from healed, the upper portion below the town on Berlin has settled into what is considered by many to be one of the finest trout rivers in New England.



► **The rebirth** of the Androscoggin has given rise to perhaps the best opportunity in the East for a trophy-size grand slam of brook, rainbow, and brown trout. The snow-capped Presidential Range provides a majestic backdrop.

Androscoggin Seasons

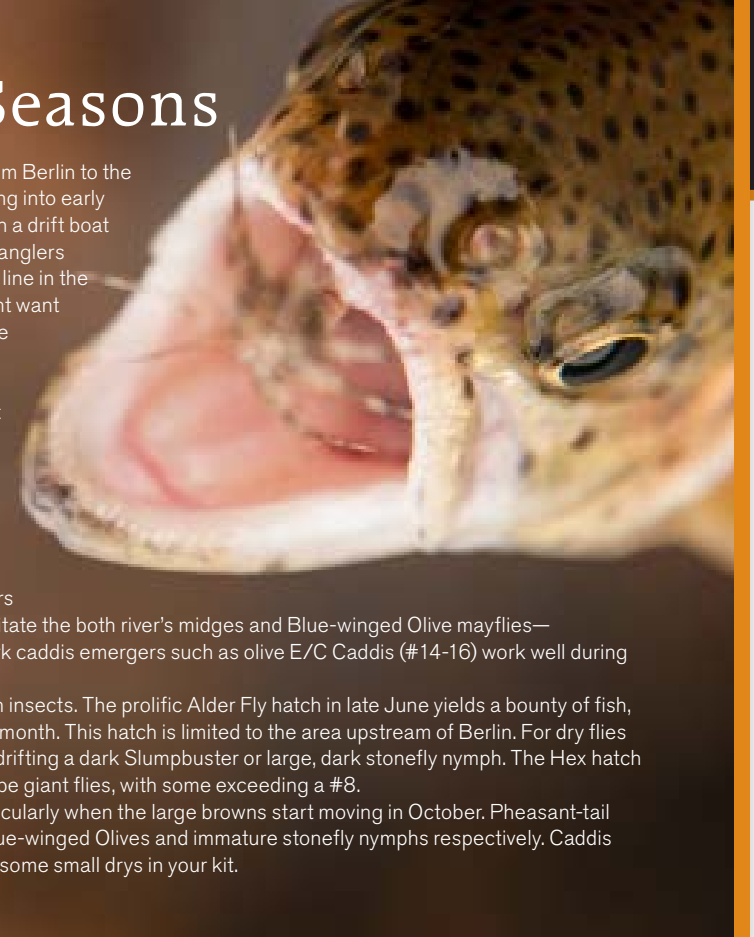
The Androscoggin River can be fished all year from Berlin to the Maine border; however it is most productive in the spring into early summer. Many stretches can be easily waded, although a drift boat gets you into stretches where your feet can't go. Most anglers use a 5- or 6-weight rod and a weight-forward floating line in the warmer months, a sinking line in the fall when you might want to fish streamers for the river's large browns. Here's the skinny on this water that isn't.

Winter. Warm days can produce stonefly hatches, but most of the action is subsurface. Olive Woolly Buggers (#8-10) are effective. Olive nymphs and Copper Johns as well as stonefly patterns turn these fish on, as do sculpin imitations. Grey Ghost streamers are also effective.

Spring. Until hatches erupt, try #10 or smaller Pheasant Tails or Hare's Ears. Olive and white Woolly Buggers are perennial favorites. Parachute Adams (#16-20) imitate the both river's midges and Blue-winged Olive mayflies—more exacting imitations are rarely required. Small, dark caddis emergers such as olive E/C Caddis (#14-16) work well during evening caddis hatches.

Summer. This is the season when the water pops with insects. The prolific Alder Fly hatch in late June yields a bounty of fish, with the larger ones becoming more active later in the month. This hatch is limited to the area upstream of Berlin. For dry flies use olive Stimulators (#6-8) and subsurface try dead-drifting a dark Slumbuster or large, dark stonefly nymph. The Hex hatch begins in late June and stretches into July. These can be giant flies, with some exceeding a #8.

Fall. Buggers and other streamers still work well, particularly when the large browns start moving in October. Pheasant-tail Nymphs and small Prince Nymphs imitate hatching Blue-winged Olives and immature stonefly nymphs respectively. Caddis hatches still occur on warmer days, so be sure to pack some small dries in your kit.



From Errol, the Androscoggin flows southwest through Berlin and then Gorham. Situated on the eastern aspect of New Hampshire's White Mountains, it's here where the grandeur of the Androscoggin gleams. The massive snowcapped peaks of Mount Madison and the idyllic Mount Washington provide a spectacular backdrop for this broad river.

Big for Eastern standards, the Androscoggin resembles a Western river, with braided sections tying together rocky islands choked with birch groves. With a freestone riverbed, the Androscoggin is dark and almost mysterious, as its reputation for being a thick, slow polluted flow precedes it. This section, where the mountains fall down to the river's shores, is one of the most stark examples of how a once-decimated river can rebound to become a true blue ribbon fishery.

Downstream from Berlin, the river has been designated as a fly-fishing-only, catch-and-release area. While the benefits of this status are pronounced, namely in the river's ability to hold three species of trophy-size trout, it's actually the residual pollution in the riverbed that led to this designation. Fish here are not considered safe from consumption based on

high mercury levels in the soil, and this irony has yielded a stretch of water that provides the best chance at not only an Eastern grand slam (rainbow, brown, and brook trout), but also the region's best shot at a fat, wild fish of size unmatched by any other water in the region.

Today, the stretch of water that

courses through the valley outside of Gorham, New Hampshire, is almost completely recovered. Water quality is impeccable, and although tannin stains the water a dark khaki hue, the clarity is decisively proud. Turbidity and stench are gone, replaced by trickling sheets of cold, crisp water that flows over gravel bars and into

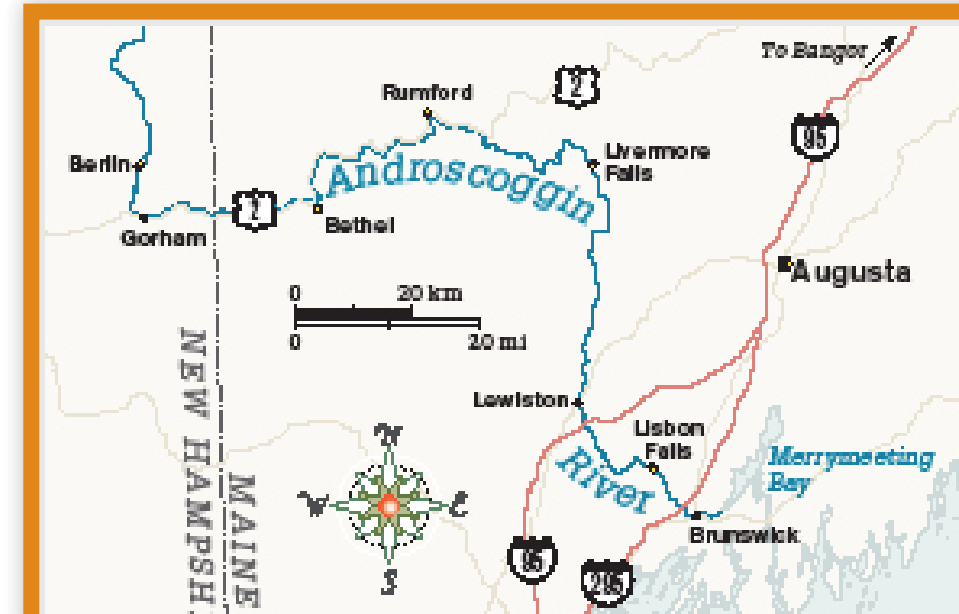


Illustration | David Deis

Androscoggin Reborn

What was once an environmental crisis is now a stretch of water healed to the end that it can support large, reliable numbers of wild fish. The river transformed from an eyesore to eye candy.

deep, foamy pools that under a setting sun twinkle with a hint of emerald.

Fat stoneflies grapple to the underside of its boulders, and clouds of caddis hang in the air while fat trout slurp from the surface.

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Deep Waters

The Androscoggin is a wide river, yet a gentle one. With rips rarely exceeding class II whitewater, it is popular destination for drifting, which is the most effective way to reach the seemingly endless series of swirling eddies and abundant seams. A cold river that hosts not only trout but land-locked Atlantic salmon as well, it is fed by scores of clear tributaries which empty the product of last year's snow from high in the hills.

The Peabody River for example, trickles from the northeast flank of the mighty Mount Washington, the birthplace of the Giant Slalom ski event and contemporary Eastern alpinism. The snow and ice that make up the most severe mountain in the East give way to the fluid that feeds the Androscoggin, bringing cold, aerated water into the larger river. Trout congregate at these confluences, as if sipping cold iced tea loaded with ice cubes.

Rick Estes, one of the most tenured guides on the Androscoggin, operates Owl's Roost Outfitters (owlsroostoutfitters.com), a guiding service out of Ossipee, New Hampshire. The 63-year-old former game warden has been guiding these waters since 1998, and knows them as well as anyone. He heralds the Androscoggin and its consistent flows as "the best river in the region for drifting."

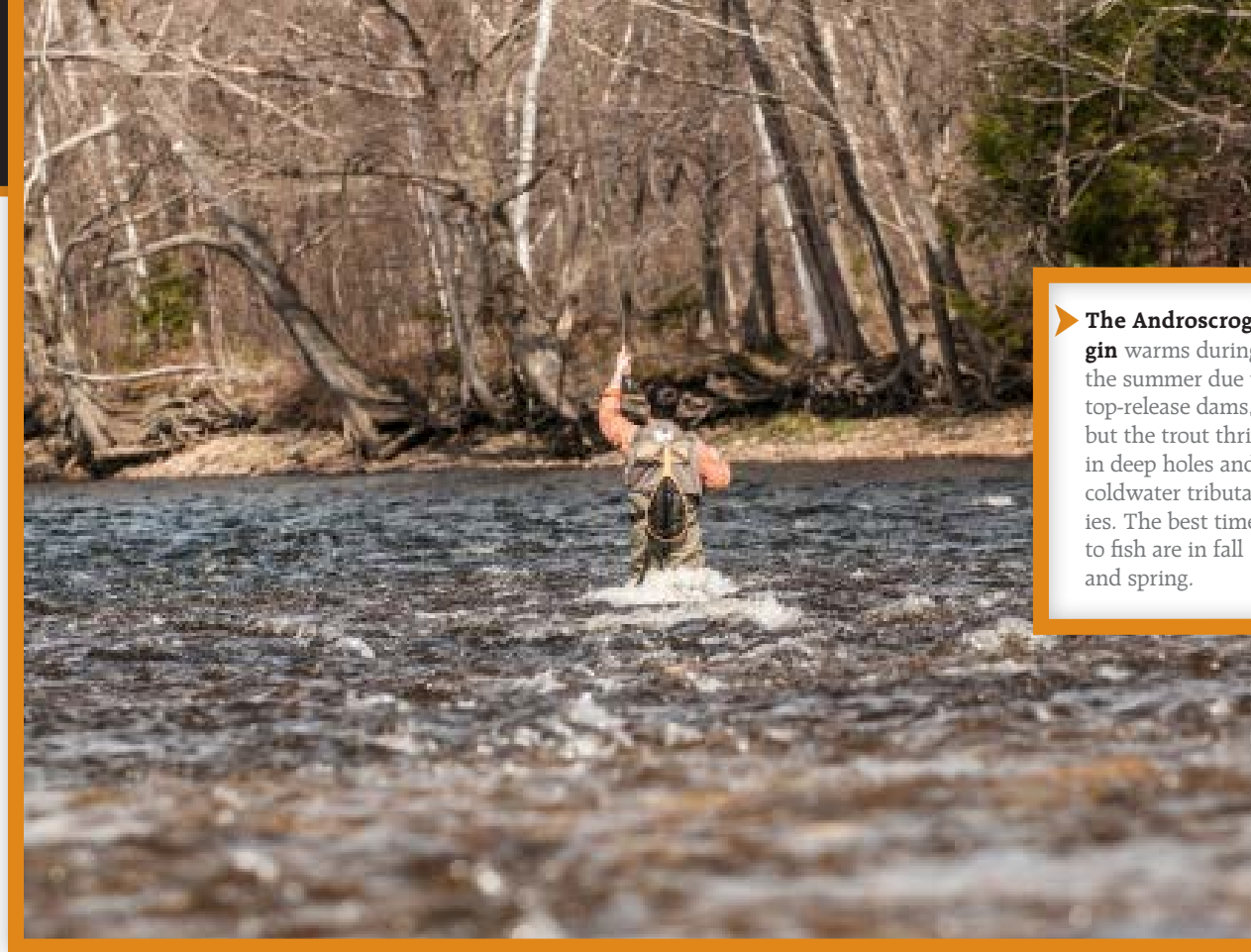
"Although the river does heat up in the summer due to top-release dams along its course, there's cold water in there. There are some holes that are 52 feet deep," Estes explained.

Estes touts the stretch downstream from Errol as the most productive water. "Most of the topwater action is in the third week of June when the Alder hatch occurs," although the river is a strong fishery year-round, with olive nymph patterns and stoneflies being particularly productive, especially in the off-season.

The water from the town of Berlin to the state line was designated as a special-use area by New Hampshire in the mid-1990s, with regulations including no closure dates and mandates requiring single flies and barbless hooks. Although it remains an idyllic section of water, Estes believed this changed the river.

"That portion actually fished better prior to the new regulations. [The regulations] brought attention to that stretch of water, which increased pressure."

Regardless, this unstocked water remains healthy with a combination of naturally reproducing populations of brook trout, rainbows, and browns, the latter of which tend to be the largest in the water. Additionally, many of the tributaries are stocked, which leads to the presence of some smaller, younger stocked fish. And although it may not be what it was 15



► The Androscoggin warms during the summer due to top-release dams, but the trout thrive in deep holes and coldwater tributaries. The best times to fish are in fall and spring.



► The Androscoggin downstream from Berlin, New Hampshire, is a fly-fishing-only, catch-and-release area. Because of the size of the river and limited access points, floating the river is the best way to reach its wadable riffles and runs.

years ago in terms of productivity, the river is now cleaner, which when considered with its spectacular backdrop makes it the most picturesque section of the Androscoggin.

I first fished the Androscoggin in 1999. I was in medical school at the time, training at Central Maine Medical Center in Lewiston, Maine, which shares the other bank of the Androscoggin with Auburn. Known as the twin cities, Lewiston-Auburn, or L.A., is a rough set of towns. I was in line at the coffee shop my first night when I saw a man shoot himself in the face while engaging in horseplay in the parking lot. My neighbor got mugged. I was advised to not stroll the streets alone at night.

This was my first experience in New England, and I was dismayed with the lack of peace, the absence of covered bridges or grazing moose. I fished in the pools below the town's industrial corridor. Cigarette butts and decaying cans were scattered on the shoreline. Broken beer bottles stuck into the soles of my waders as I cast into what the local fly shop reported was "quality water." I came up with one sucker, no trout, and a need for a tetanus shot.

The most recent time I fished it, we focused on the upper stretch of the

river which had been allowed to heal after 100 years of environmental insult. We waded the section that flows through the tiny town of Shelburne, New Hampshire, just downstream from Berlin. In the background stood Mount Madison and its summit snowfields, framed in the foreground by a 1929 hydroelectric project. On the side of the dam just under a low hanging wire was a sign: "Danger, 2,300 volts."

Below the dam a stretch of flat, spinning tailwater emerged, easing down to the junction of the Peabody River. Once a trickling stream, the Peabody now drips down a stripe of jumbled boulders lined with ten foot berms of rubble and stone. In 2011, Hurricane Irene swept through this part of New England, gouging out new fall lines, depositing huge boulders on the banks of the Androscoggin and in a sense giving the layout of the tributaries a facelift. Last years' holes and eddies were transformed and opened up, however where the river was once straight without features new erosions have created new holes, riffles, and pockets.

As the crackle of electricity hummed overhead, the burning sun fell behind the White Mountains which struggled to hold their snow.

After a few hours of casting, the river awoke. Its smell was sweet; a pleasant organic aroma oozed from the roiling riffles. Rings were appearing on the surface of the slickwater just upstream from the Peabody's mouth. Tiny, cream-colored midges began to swarm in the damp air above the water, heavy with fog from a recent rain shower.

My eyes strained to tie on a #20 Adams, suspecting that this utilitarian pattern would compensate for my inability to match this hatch. I waded over clean boulders and rocky shoals to a point where the river's flow reversed along the bank.

Under the draping branches of an oak tree, the shiny nose of a rising trout sparkled in the light of the setting sun. I fed line and cast to the fading rings that were my target. One strip and the fly evaporated with the swirl of a tail. My line went tight, sending electricity down my rod and into my arm as the clean face of the Androscoggin reflected the melting summit cones of the Presidential Range. 🐟

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Brian Irwin is a family physician, freelance writer, and photographer (brianirwinmedia.com). He lives in Madison, New Hampshire.