

# Learning to FLY

> BRIAN IRWIN

Photo | Jim Klug

Experiencing the outdoors with your children



▶ To enjoy a day on the water, it's important that your children have boots and waders that fit them. Take your child somewhere the fishing is likely to be easy, whether that's in the Alaska wilderness (shown here) or a stocked suburban pond.

Photo | Brian Irwin



▶ The first step toward getting your children involved in fly fishing is just getting them outdoors. Here, the author's children enjoy a wilderness hike toward Big Minister Pond.

## WHAT

**WHEN I WAS** a kid I almost gave up on fly fishing. My father took me to all the right places, and I learned to cast on bass-filled ponds with great success. But the purist's prize, trout, evaded me for years. Warmwater fish lit a fire in me, but it wasn't long before I was studying each salmonid page in *McClane's Standard Fishing Encyclopedia*, hoping to one day connect with one of these beautiful fish. Decades later, as saw the same progression in my own son, and knew we'd catch trout together.

I grew up fishing pocketwater in Maryland where the trout were as wary as the Secret Service agents who guarded Camp David, which was adjacent our home stream. I lost fly after fly, going years before I finally got a trout to eat one. But I stuck with it, and filed those experiences into my quiver of parental tricks so that I could one day tailor my own children's experiences into something tantalizing, perhaps converting them into life-long fly fishers.

### Adventure Weekend

We live in New Hampshire. Much of our local water, including critical nursery brooks, have been negatively affected by many generations of human impacts from recreation to timber harvesting. Genetically native trout are all but absent in the majority of our rivers, and wild trout (those that reproduce in the wild, but are progeny of fish raised in hatcheries) are hard to come by.

Tragically, one 2005 study performed by the Eastern Brook Trout Joint Venture revealed that only 5 percent of the Eastern brook trout in North America are actually native. To catch one of these fish on fly, as a child, could very well be the inspiring experience that deeply connects a young person with nature.

If you live in the Rockies, interestingly, there are oodles of tributary streams, headwaters, and beaver ponds where you can't keep non-native Eastern brook trout off the hook. If you have access to these memory makers, you're halfway there with your children, or anyone new to fly fishing for that matter.

In New Hampshire, we don't have honey holes like this, so I struck out with my family into Maine's Great North woods in search of wild brookies. Success is important when you are teaching youngsters to fish, so we decided to turn it into even more of an adventure—and fly to get there.



Photo | Brian Irwin

Andy Irwin (above) used a tenkara rod to catch wild brook trout at Big Minister Pond in Maine's Debsconeag Lakes Wilderness Area.

### Tall Tales

Jim Strang has probably seen more of Maine's Great North Woods than almost anyone—from the air, anyway. The 67-year-old has been a pilot for 35 years, and has been flying his own 1976 Cessna 206/G floatplane and running his company Katahdin Air for the last 20 years. Strang was our pilot on our family foray into the idyllic Second Debscondeag Lake some 20 miles northwest of the rugged western border of Baxter State Park.

Our plan was to depart Friday morning for the lake. A swift, 20-minute flight would drop us off at the only designated campsite on the lake, owned by The Nature Conservancy. He'd leave me, my son Reid (8), and step-daughter Morgan (10), to set up camp while he flew back to shuttle my son Andy (11) and wife Lori back to our camp.

He'd make a third trip to bring us a kayak, and from there we'd explore for three days, bushwacking one day into a remote pond in search of brookies. Three days later, he'd return in the late afternoon and swoop us back to our car.

The shoreside campsite nestled at the mouth of an unnamed stream that leaves Big Minister Pond, 0.6 miles upstream from our own sandy pocket beach. The stream cascades down 20-foot waterfalls and over slick benches of rock before entering the lake.

As it tumbles, the water throws off fine mist, which has propagated a verdant carpet of moss over the entire shaded hillside, generating a magical gumdrop-like series of mounds atop each huge boulder. There was a cave to explore, a pair of loons visiting our site, and even a lavish bloom of mating butterflies at our site. The waterfall tapered into a vodka-clear stream

loaded with frogs; as it entered the lake, a mere 100 feet from my tent, the fish sipped at anything that hit the surface. It seemed the perfect place for the kids to find success, and perhaps a brookie, on fly.

### The Carrying Place

The Debsconeag Lakes region is a wild patch of land, so named by Native Americans who used to portage (Debsconeag translates to "The Carrying Place") birch bark canoes through the chain of lakes that is effectively an extensive canoe trail. The entire region was once owned by a paper company until 2002 when The Nature Conservancy purchased the 240,000 plot, encompassing scores of streams, lakes and ponds, placing that land into conservation for perpetuity. In addition, the 195,000 acres of land surrounding the wilderness were placed into an easement, to be managed by the State of Maine, effectively sealing almost a half-million acres of rugged terrain into a protected envelope for the enjoyment of generations to come.

Jim Strang believes that the region is without peer in the Eastern United States. The landowners have a policy of permitting recreation and float plane access, and they expect responsible, sustainable recreation in exchange.

The fishing in Second Deb was productive for chubs and pumpkinseed—predatory, invasive species that over decades has brought the brook trout population in that lake to its knees. My research suggested that there were still brookies upstream in Big Minister Pond. A published survey by the state in 1976 reported that "A series of steep falls on the outlet have prevented migration of fish into Big Minister from the Debsconeag Lakes below." And so

we shouldered our packs for the short hike to Big Minister, where we hoped to find a surviving population of native brook trout.

### On to Big Minister

The short hike was lush and followed a half mile undulating game trail past innumerable rivulets, braids and cascades before gaining the broad pond. Andy and I boarded one of the aluminum canoes stashed at the outlet, Lori and the other kids slipped into the other. Fish were rolling all around us while Andy and I cast from our canoe, and Lori and the others circled the lake watching the trout lap insects from the surface of the lake.

Andy focused on fishing while I navigated to the pond inlet, logically the best spot to find a congregation of feeding trout. It did not disappoint. Where the creek rambled into the belly of Big Minister, pods of brook trout readily sucked down small Stimulator patterns.

No one knows for sure how brook trout arrived in Big Minister and the Debsconeag Lakes. Without genetic evaluations, there's no way to confirm if these fish are native. It's possible they were introduced by man and found the pond to be an exceptionally forgiving place to propagate. However, they have never been stocked by anyone who's taken responsibility, and to me and my son, they are as wild as the giant timbers, black bears, and ambling wildlife that calls that region home.

For three days we fished and ate, swam, and played in the cascading falls that drain Big Minister, reveling in the sunset that collapsed into the horizon to the cadence of a pair of loons and the gentle crackle of a dying campfire. At the end of the weekend, we sat atop our duffel bags and waited for Strang to return us to the reality of our daily lives. When the humming of his plane entered the valley and he touched down at our lake, we felt a certain sadness.

As we soared above the forest carpet, jet-black ponds and shining lakes faded behind us. Beneath the surface those lakes teemed with wild trout, hungry, willing to eat and roaming in search of their next meal. Our best reassurance was that those fish are protected, strong, and will be there next summer, waiting. And we'll be there too. 🍷

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## Tips for Success

**Have patience.** Fly fishing is time intensive and can easily be frustrating for children who are naturally impatient children. It's no time for you to be easily frustrated. Constantly reassure young fly fishers that the time they're investing will pay off eventually.

**Distractions.** You don't have to fish from sun-up to sun-down. It's a great idea to bring some non-fishing activities in the event they want to take a break. Many non-fishing activities can help your kids become better fly fishers, or more knowledgeable naturalists. Catch crayfish and put them in a bucket, catch mayflies or butterflies with a net. Make a temporary collection of insects, leeches, and crustaceans, and identify them. Learn to identify birds, trees, or just stop fishing altogether and learn to skip stones.

**Dress for success.** Outfit your kids like you'd outfit yourself if you were just starting. I'm not suggesting investing thousands of dollars in outerwear they may quickly outgrow, but you want them to know you are dedicated to a comfortable and sincere outing. Waders and boots that actually fit are critical—it can be miserable flopping around in old hand-me-downs.

**Make casting easy.** A rod and line that is commensurate with their physical abilities goes a long way toward happiness on the water. They'll get a kick out of owning their own tackle, instead of just borrowing your stuff. The Redington Crosswater Youth Combo (\$150) includes a rod, reel, and pre-spoiled backing, line, and leader. Another great way to go is to forfeit the reel altogether and get them started with a tenkara rod. Most beginners find success only at close ranges, and tenkara rods take some of the complications like line control and tangles out of the equation. A kid's starter kit at [tenkarabum.com](http://tenkarabum.com) is \$140-\$180.

**Choose the right water.** All that stuff about ying-yang, "it's just nice being out on the water," "it's the challenge of difficult fish" is adult philosophy. Fly fishing is obviously most fun (for anyone) if you catch fish. Start small on water that has a likelihood of producing. Farm ponds serve this purpose well. Choose one with some unobstructed casting space so the chances of them hanging their fly up in the trees is less. If you're aiming for trout, many states, counties, and municipalities have designated, water where only minors can fish. Often, these spots are well stocked with surprisingly large trout. Once you've got a few stocked trout under your belt you might get the itch to catch some native trout, in which case you'll have to do a good bit of research to put you in a place where the fish are wild, and catching them is relatively easy. You may even find yourself in a float plane.

**Professional instruction.** Even if you're a seasoned angler, you may not be a seasoned instructor. Take advantage of the expertise of your local guides; they know how to break bad casting habits before they start and can be inspiring figures. There may be schools in your area at a local fly shop, and for older kids, there are five-day fish camps ([theflyshop.com](http://theflyshop.com)) where adolescents and teenagers can explore their own independence and have fun catching trout with other fledgling fly fishers.

**Plan ahead.** It's important to involve kids in your planning, because anticipation is part of the fun, and preparation always bears fruit. Chances are if you wake your teenager up early on a Saturday morning to announce a fishing trip, they'll be less thrilled than if you've talked about it in advance, and let them help make as many of the decisions as possible. Ultimately you'll need to steer the committee, but let them think they helped come up with the plan as much as possible.

**Bring a buddy.** Kids love spending time with their friends. Having their peers as witnesses to their success will equate to bragging rights and fond memories. And if you can get both of them away from that game console and into the outdoors, you're doing a great service to humankind.

**Don't be a snob.** Fly fishing is the greatest sport on earth but we all have to take small steps to get there. Most great fly fishers got started with a worm and a bobber and worked their way up from there. Especially with little kids it's important to just get them outdoors and catching fish. Let them decide when it's time to graduate to a fly rod. If they've seen you do it, they'll know that's the pinnacle.



Photo | Brian Irwin