

Emily Bastian casts a line on the Zealand River in New Hampshire, one of many beleaguered rivers that have been poorly managed by the state. The Zealand has been channelized, dammed, and cut off from its floodplain. And New Hampshire stocks hatchery trout over top of the river's remaining wild brook trout.



RISING TIDES

EMILY BASTIAN

ON A CRISP SEPTEMBER MORNING, EMILY BASTIAN CAST HER MIDGE INTO RIFFLES ALONG THE ZEALAND RIVER IN NEW HAMPSHIRE. DOWNSTREAM WAS A JUNKYARD OF UP-ENDED STUMPS AND TREES. THE RIVER'S COURSE WOUND AWKWARDLY, LYING BRAIDED, UNCOMMON FOR EASTERN FLOWS. EVIDENCE OF EXCAVATION WAS OBVIOUS, AS DEMONSTRATED BY WEBBING-BOUND BLOCKS OF BOULDERS, ALL SECURED IN PLACE BY THE STATE OF NEW HAMPSHIRE IN AN ATTEMPT TO RE-ROUTE THE RIVER TO AVOID A WASHOUT ON A ROAD THAT ACCESSES MULTIPLE TRAILHEADS AND CAMPSITES.

"This is frustrating," she expounded. "All we want to do is preserve native trout and their habitat. This isn't the way."

Her attestation is a statement of her life mission: to protect wild native trout and their habitat. She's proved her mettle through years of advocacy, most recently as the vice chair of the Native

Fish Coalition (NFC). The Coalition strives to defend these fish and their ecosystems through everything from legal proposals to angler education. She was born to do this, and as a female in a historically male-dominated pastime, has made a dent in the armor of those who seek personal gain from simply catching fish.

CASTING THROUGH THE GLASS CEILING

BRIAN IRWIN
PHOTOGRAPHY & TEXT

She cares little about that. Her goal is to see that the resource persists for future generations, and for the general health of the natural world.

The 36-year-old grew up in New Gloucester, Maine, not far from the White Mountains, where I live. She started angling when she was eight and rapidly became a devoted fly fisher. She was trained by her father, Larry Bastian and her uncle, renowned wet fly tier Don Bastian. Her first fish caught on a fly was early in those years, on the Roach River near Moosehead Lake, Maine. For her, there was no turning back.

A high school valedictorian, she traveled widely, only to come home to roost in Maine. She graduated from the University of New Hampshire with a degree in wildlife ecology. UNH is one of

the few universities in the country that offer such a focused option for students. That's because our rivers and our creeks, full of trout—though admittedly far fewer than historic records would indicate—are in our backyard.

Bastian has walked a long, diverse path to her current role as vice chair of the NFC. She's worked as a National Park Service ranger, a hutkeeper for the Appalachian Mountain Club, as a Maine guide, as a field biologist, and as a game warden.

Today, she focuses mostly on wild native trout, and other species, as the NFC has chapters in many states including Maine, New Hampshire, Alabama, Connecticut, Georgia, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Vermont, and West Virginia.

Her environmental work is a purely volunteer position, one of



Emily Bastian has previously worked as a National Park Service ranger, a hutkeeper for the Appalachian Mountain Club, as a Registered Maine Guide, as a field biologist, and as a game warden. Currently she is the volunteer vice chair of the Native Fish Coalition.

is “raising awareness about wild native fish and the plight that they face.” She emphasized that they achieve their goal through “information, education, and outreach to teach people about wild native fish and how to protect them.”

However, the NFC doesn’t solely focus on catching gamefish. It’s not a fishing club, it’s a conservation organization.

“We’re not about angler satisfaction, rather we’re in support of natural abundances based on what nature laid there,” says Bastian. “The coalition supports natural abundances of population and structure.”

For instance, the NFC is against slot killing, as employed and encouraged in many Maine heritage-designated waters. The theory is that by killing slot fish we can provide larger fish to anglers, increasing satisfaction. This isn’t her mantra, nor is it that of the NFC.

They discourage bait, and abhor the inadvertent introduction of baitfish, as tragically happened to Big Reed Pond in Northern Maine. Big Reed is one of only 12 waters in the contiguous United States that hold blueback trout, which is actually a landlocked Arctic char left as a remnant from the post-Ice Age era. Big Reed used to be a thriving fishery for bluebacks, one of the few place in this world where you could catch them, until smelts were released by bait fishermen, throwing the ecosystem off balance.

Within a few years, it was difficult to catch a blueback. And when the state of Maine culled the lake, they harvested only 10 bluebacks. Those 10 fish were the starting point for a massive recovery effort.

The recovery of Big Reed Pond was spearheaded by Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, and supported by many volunteers. One key such volunteer was Igor Sikorsky, III, grandson of the inventor of the modern helicopter and owner of the Bradford Camps. Bradford Camps is a turn-of-the-20th-century, fly-in-access sporting camp in Northern Maine, not far from Big Reed. Sikorsky is a float plane pilot, and brought those remnant culled bluebacks to a private hatchery to reproduce while the pond recovered.

Meanwhile, the state poisoned the pond with rotenone—an insecticide, piscicide, and pesticide— that was dropped into the pond from Blackhawk helicopters, in an attempt to eradicate smelts and any other invasive species. It took a few years for the water to settle. But when it did, the offspring of those 10 bluebacks reproduced with relative success.

Bastian weighed in on this strategy.

“Ultimately we had to rotenone Big Reed, as we were going to lose the bluebacks,” said Bastian. “But it’s not as much of a success story as the mainstream media would suggest. There are still a number of nonnative minnows in the pond. They simply hid in the tributaries. But at least there are no smelts, which were the big threat.”

I’ve flown with Sikorsky, and stayed at Bradford. It’s a time warp in the truest sense, and he remains impassioned about the recovery effort. However, in 2020, against the protestations of NFC, Libby Camps, and Trout Unlimited, the state relaxed the regulations and now bait and harvesting are again permitted at Big Reed. You can even use PowerBait. It seems it may be a story of one step forward, two steps back.

Bastian is not just focused on bluebacks or Eastern brook trout, the species that sparked the founding of the NFC. She explained that “Atlantic salmon are also a focal species, especially for the coalition in Maine.”

This is underscored by the ongoing battle between conservation groups, the state of Maine, and the owner and operator of four impoundments along the Kennebec River that effectively decimated the Atlantic salmon migration. Once the most prolific spawning system in the country for these anadromous fish, it’s now barren of salmon. The NFC continues—along with other groups—to battle for dam removal. To date, there’s been no true progress. [Read “Are Salmon Being Abandoned in Maine?” by Brian Irwin in the Oct-Nov-Dec issue of FLY FISHERMAN or online at flyfisherman.com. THE EDITOR.]

Nominated for FLY FISHERMAN magazine’s 2021 Conservationist of the Year award, Bastian is impassioned with the protection of wild, native fish. She’s helped synthesize relationships with two Native American tribes and many other groups, pulling together a mass effort to spread the mission of conservation she holds so dear. And it’s not as if the NFC is a juggernaut, well-funded organization. They’re doing lots with little, and as she put it “. . . we’re funded by member donors. We’re the definition of grass roots.”

For now, Bastian continues to keep her mission running by filling the fuel tank with her salary at L.L. Bean. Many days she’ll fish with her best angling buddy, a black Lab named Maybelle, who is reportedly well behaved on the water. She’ll flip Stimmies into pools in New England while enjoying a cigar, something she only



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Emily Bastian and her friend Bob Mallard have plans not only to protect and enhance gamefish like Atlantic salmon, brook trout, and blueback trout—they also want to restore natural balances of minnows, suckers, chubs, and the entire natural ecosystem.

does when she fishes. And she'll always make sure the .357 Magnum sidearm she carries has the safety on. Unless there's a need to release it.

But aside from Maybelle, her best fishing partner is the chair of the NFC, Bob Mallard. But they don't just fish together. They once spent a weekend demolishing by hand six harmful rock dams on tributary streams in the White Mountains National Forest in New Hampshire as part of NFC's Rock Dam Buster Volunteer Campaign.

Mallard recognizes that to dig this deep into someone's passion and heart, and expect a viable model from volunteers, is a threatening position. He elaborated on their history, and relationship, as despite a gender and age gap, they are, in my observation, kindred spirits.

"I first met Emily at a presentation I was giving. She was heading up a volunteer brook trout survey project for Maine Audubon, Maine TU, and Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife and

wanted to talk to me about it. This led to an ad hoc analysis of the data collected to date, which showed that the state was not holding up their end of the deal, and protecting what the volunteers found. Unfortunately, folks were more concerned with collecting data than doing anything with what they collected. Disenchanted by what she was seeing, she left the project and moved on. Emily is about as smart as they get. She is also hardworking and dedicated to making a difference. She is critical to the success of NFC."

Today the fish that run deep in the Kennebec, Big Reed, the tiny creeks of Pennsylvania, and in so many drips that used to be thronged with fish, brookies and others, remain vulnerable. Bastian's efforts, and Mallard's, and so many others, swim, like the fight-for-survival salmon do in the Kennebec, as they all struggle to get upstream. And against barriers. But those barriers are coming down, albeit slowly. But hopefully, by the time Bastian is in a position to levy more muscle, things

will finally change.

Mallard shined light on the situation, a large uphill battle. He sees a future in Bastian, who he hopes will eventually become his successor.

"I'd like to see Emily take over as executive director for NFC when the time is right. She has the credentials, knowledge, and work ethic to really get things done given the opportunity."

For now, for Bastian, it's about continuing to persevere and never giving up. And in between sessions of fighting for the wild native fish, there's always time for a good cigar and the thrill of popping off a few rounds. She's true grit, but not abrasive. Kind in her words and tone, she is great company—the kind of person you'd like to enjoy a nice dinner with.

Just as long as wild native trout is not on the menu. ~

Brian Irwin is FLY FISHERMAN'S New England field editor. He is a medical doctor and lives in North Conway, New Hampshire.