

Righting a Restocking Wrong

When J. Ross Eakin, the Smokies first Superintendent arrived in the park, he arrived in a place completely different from the park we see today. Although some of the largest amounts of old-growth forest in the Eastern US were present, in many places the idea that this dense forest gave of unimpeded wilderness was ruined by lands stripped bare and desecrated by the logging industry. In addition, rainbow trout, a non-native trout from the Pacific Northwest, had been stocked into nearly every park watershed by the time he was sworn in as superintendent.

Although time was what much of the areas in the park really needed to recover from mass logging, Eakin and his small staff also intended to help the natural world regain lost ground in the park by extinguishing wildfires, prosecuting poachers and continuing to purchase tracts of land from logging companies and individual land holders.

One of Eakin's largest and most extensive programs began on April 1st, 1931, when staff released 7,500 rainbow trout into the Forney Creek in NC below Clingmans Dome. Although Eakin started this program with the good intention of gaining interest and support for the park idea from fisherman and outdoors-persons, as well as stabilizing an ecosystem ravaged by the logging industry, the plan was not without its problems.

Unfortunately none of the original 7,500 trout released into the stream that day and not many of the thousands upon millions of brook and rainbow trout that were released in the park up until the mid 70s were native. Rainbow trout, the most commonly released fish in the park are actually native to the Pacific Northwest, and caused more problems for the already struggling native brook trout population. Brook trout were also stocked, although because the local brook trout could not be raised in hatcheries, northern hatchery strains were brought in and stocked into GRSM streams. Today, scientists have determined that there is a unique southern Appalachian brook trout native only to streams south of the New River watershed in Virginia, including the Smokies.

Rainbow trout are more aggressive feeders, produce more offspring and grow more rapidly than native brook trout. It was not until the 70s that park staff really started to understand this destructive dynamic and it was not until the late 70s to mid 80s that the park began trying to reverse the damage. Their first step was to close brook trout harvest in 1976 in order to reduce further range loss of this native resource.

Since 1976, the process to restore the parks streams to a state free of non-native rainbow trout has been ongoing, with the National Park Service taking over all of the work in 1986. Since 1986, 17.2 miles of 11 brook trout streams within the park have been restored. Streams in the park are still monitored by park staff and volunteers to determine population of brook trout and other important species to the ecosystems of the Smokies.

Today the park boasts nearly 60 species of freshwater fish ranging including non-parasitic lampreys, minnows, suckers, sculpins, darters, bass, and trout. For a complete list of the fishes of the park, goto our fish species checklist link at <http://www.nps.gov/grsm/naturescience/fish-checklist.htm>

Table 1. — The number of brook (>700,000) and rainbow (>1.3 million) trout stocked throughout Great Smoky Mountains National Park from 1934 to 1975. Note most of the fish stocked prior to 1945 were fingerlings while most stocked after 1945 were catchable size fish (>8 inches). All brook trout stocked were from northern hatchery stocks not native to this area of their range.

