

Stories of Brown Trout Introductions into GRSM

Cataloochee Creek

Anglers fishing Cataloochee Creek and its tributaries can catch native brook trout and non-native rainbow and brown trout. The introduction of rainbow trout into this stream is well documented and began in the early 1900's. Members of the Palmer family brought rainbow trout fingerlings from the Balsam Hatchery and released them into a sections of the stream that they owned. The Hall family also stocked fingerling rainbow trout into a small lake on their property. Both families had pay to fish operations on their property and they supported this operation in this manner. After the park was established stocking of non-native rainbow trout continued for several years.

The history of brown trout introductions into Cataloochee Creek is not as clear. In fact there are no official records of brown trout being stocked in Cataloochee Creek in the Park. However, three different stories exist of how this non-native trout got into this stream. They are as follows:

1. According to some local residents, brown trout stocked in the Pigeon River miles upstream of Canton, N.C. migrated downstream into Walters Reservoir and then moved up into Cataloochee Creek. The problems with this story are: a) During the time this supposedly took place, Champion Paper Company was discharging their waste into the Pigeon River. Based on information from the NC Wildlife Resource Commission only the most pollution tolerant fish species could live in the river downstream of the Champion plant or in the reservoir; b) if a few brown trout did miraculously survive this journey, they would then encounter the falls at the Blackgum Hole and have to jump this waterfall. This waterfall is between 25 and 30 feet vertical so it is highly unlikely that brown trout could this obstruction. The reason being is that under ideal conditions salmonids can only jump vertically five (5) times their body length.
2. The second story is that during 1950's and 1960's a NC Wildlife Resource Commission hatchery truck was in route to Big Creek with a tank of brown trout to be released in state managed waters downstream of the Park boundary. Given that this section of I-40 was not completed until 1968, the only route the truck could have taken was Highway 284 from lower Jonathan Creek through Cataloochee to Big Creek. The interesting part of this story is that the truck broke down on the bridge crossing Cataloochee Creek. The Cataloochee sub-district ranger, Mark Hannah, happened to be returning for a patrol and found the truck on the bridge. As the story goes, the NC Wildlife Resource Commission truck driver told the ranger that if he was not allowed to dump the water and fish in the truck, that it could not be moved due to the weight and that the fish would die in the tank. So as the story goes Mr. Hannah agreed to let them release the water and the fish into Cataloochee Creek.

3. The third story is that in the sub-district ranger from 1970 - 1973 left Cataloochee Valley every Tuesday afternoon to go to the Elks Club in Waynesville, NC. The story is that one night while he was out of the Valley, fishermen from Western NC who loved brown trout brought a two 55 gallon barrels with brown trout fingerlings in them and dumped them off the lower Cataloochee Bridge.
4. Frank Lowe a native of Haywood County and other lifelong residents do not believe either the hatchery truck story or the brown trout being dumped out of barrels story. According to these gentlemen, brown trout were being caught below the falls “way back”, perhaps in the early 1950’s. But he gave no specific time frame. However all of these men indicated that brown trout were first caught in the section of Cataloochee Creek between Walters Reservoir and the Blackgum Falls. These men think that brown trout moved out of Fines Creek, crossed the reservoir and into Cataloochee Creek. When ask how brown trout got above the falls, Frank indicated that one of the men he talked to said a stream ran through the falls. They think that the brown moved up through this “stream” and into the downstream reaches of the stream inside the Park. Their recollection is that brown trout were being caught for years in this stream section before they were caught in the vicinity of the bridge. Given their lifelong residency and the fact that I have known these men for most of my life I have reason to believe most of what they have told.

The reality is that the truth of how brown trout actually got into this stream may never be known.

Abrams Creek

Brown trout were illegally released into Abrams Creek between 1973 and 1975. Based on information relayed by Alan Kelly, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Assistance Office, Gatlinburg, TN and Lloyd Valentine, Townsend, TN, they released brown trout into Abrams Creek during this time period. According to these gentlemen, they took a USFWS pickup truck, to the Erwin National Fish Hatchery, where they apparently borrowed a fish transport tank. They then acquired 500 brown trout and returned to Cades Cove with these trout. They traveled to the west end of the Cove and released the brown trout at the last stream crossing prior to turning onto the road to the Abrams Falls parking lot. When ask why would do this, their reply was because we love brown trout and we think this will eventually be the best brown trout stream in the Park. They then said that if they were reported, they would deny the deed and that it could not be proven in court of law.

Alan Kelly and Lloyd Valentine were both avid brown trout fishermen. They had access to the USFWS truck and Erwin National Fish Hatchery and I have no reason to believe that they did

not illegally introduce brown trout into Abrams Creek. The presence of brown trout in this stream up through the early 2000's provides additional evidence to support their story.

Little River

TWRA has stocked brown trout into Little River downstream of the Park boundary for many years. Without doubt some of these fish moved upstream into Little River, survived and reproduced. But their upstream movement is believed to have been stopped by the large cascade at the Sinks. However, information obtained by local anglers over several years indicates that fishermen who favor brown trout and also wanted them upstream of the Sinks. Given that the Park had seriously curtailed stocking in the 1950's and 1960's, some anglers would catch brown trout after they had been stocked and put them in 30 gallon trash cans. They would then transport these fish up Little River and release them between Metcalf Bottoms and Elkmont. Others indicated that some of these anglers took fish to the fish Camp Prong – Little River split and released them as they could drive to that turn around at that point during those years.

John Boaze, a former US Fish and Wildlife Service employee who worked in the Gatlinburg Field office in the late 1960's, supplied the following information. According to him in 1968 he ordered "a truck load" of fingerling brown trout for stocking in Little River in Townsend, TN. According to the story, the truck entered the Park at the Gatlinburg entrance and exited at Townsend. When the truck arrived in Townsend the truck was empty. Apparently the brown trout had been released at several locations along Little River.

Having been associated with John for several years, I have no reason to doubt this story.