

*The park may appear as it "used to be," but the fishing is no longer.*

*Welcome to...*  
**CONNETQUOT RIVER**  
**STATE PARK PRESERVE**

*Governor GEORGE E. PATAKI*  
*Commissioner BERNADETTE CASTRO*



**A Bit Of Long Island The Way It Used To Be**

BY ANGELO PELUSO

# Requiem for a Trout Stream

**T**he "Disney World of Trout Fishing" is what some called it, due to the ease with which numerous salmonids could be caught on flies. It was perceived by those patrons of the river as an improbable place - an artificial fishery where anyone could fool rainbows, brookies and browns at will. Yet, even those critics were drawn back often. Others, including me, viewed the river, the parklands and the watershed that nurtured it with much more reverence. That mindset was established the moment one entered the front gate and gazed upon the sign greeting all visitors. The message was simple and needed no explanation, "A piece of Long Island the way it used to be." Sadly, the sign is now but a remnant, an inanimate reminder of the glory that defined a truly remarkable and priceless place; a fishing place that at its core was once a living, natural museum. After a short illness and with the questionable intervention of humankind, the river as we knew it and loved has died. Infectious Pancreatic Necrosis (IPN) was

listed as the official cause of death but some might suggest the river was put to death by the hands of man.

When one looks at The Connetquot River State Park Preserve in the context of its entirety as a natural reserve, the river and its inhabitants were the park's life's blood in more than metaphorical terms. The trout were the catalyst that brought thousands upon thousands of paying visitors through the front gates of the park each season. Yes, trout were at times easy to catch, but that was not always a given. Old warriors die hard and that is indeed true of time-tested, large trout as well, even those that were hatchery-raised. They didn't relinquish their domain easily. The fish that resided in the waters of the "Conny" could be as challenging as those in the most technically demanding spring creeks, anywhere in our country. If an angler wanted, he or she could seek out large, battle-worn fish that took up residence under deadfalls and undercut sections of the bank; holding stations that at times presented even the most expert fly casters with difficult, if not

impossible presentations. That challenge was especially evident in the upper reaches of the river, those sections above the hatchery. Specific may fly, stone fly and caddis hatches, or nymph and larval stages of those aquatic insects, could frequently elevate trout selectivity to a point where they would snub one's finest fraudulent fly offering. That would test any angler's skill, mettle and patience. Yet at other times, the river's fish could be easy...very easy. Pray tell, what was wrong with that? Think about how many youngsters and novice anglers were introduced to the joys of fly fishing for trout by the welcoming flow of a friendly river, and an abundance of willing fish. Who among us has not enjoyed, at some time in our angling careers, that special place where we could catch lots of fish whenever there was a desire to do so? The Connetquot River was once such a place.

The Connetquot traverses its course more as a gentle stream than its river connotation would imply. It is a place steeped in much history and tradition. When considering the origins of fly fishing for trout in the United States, many will think of but a few time-honored and almost spiritual places. The first that come to mind are the hallowed waters of the Catskills: the Beaverkill, the Willowemoc or the East and West Branches of the Delaware River. The Poconos also receive consideration with their classic streams like the legendary Brodhead and the Paradise Run of that same creek. Some might even turn an eye toward the American West. But fly fishing's American roots are firmly grounded in the areas including and bordering New York City and Long Island. The core of that trout fishery existed on Long Island, and in the collective form of the Carmans, Nissequoge and the Connetquot Rivers. The Connetquot was the true jewel of that trout trilogy.

Close your eyes and imagine a mystical place of almost 3,500 pristine acres of woodlands, and a magnificent spring creek containing an acknowledged world-class trout fishery. Imagine a hatchery that for 14 decades operated as one of the most efficient, effective and innovative of its kind anywhere within the United States. Imagine this fly fishing paradise a mere 50 miles from the heart of New York City. Envision a place situated right in the middle of suburban Long Island that for almost a century and a half attracted presidents, kings, wealthy industrialists and financiers; the rich and famous all drawn here mostly for the magnificent trout fishing the river had to offer. Imagine too that a place like that was eventually opened for the angling public to enjoy. Then imagine that priceless treasure existing no more. We don't have to envision that scenario too hard, for it has happened. A significant part of paradise has indeed been unnecessarily lost - perhaps never to be regained.

In the early years, many came to the Connetquot in horse-drawn carriages and then via the rails and eventually by chauffeured limousine, all converging on a precious piece of Long Island real estate to share in the common interest of fly fishing. They came to escape the hectic pace of life in the big city, and they came for the trout that inhabited this very unique spring creek. Eventually, the private preserve became a public and democratic place where all could enjoy what was once the domain of a fortunate but visionary few. For a modest use fee, one could



*Where else could you even hope to tangle with brown trout like this, except for on the Connetquot?*

reserve a classic "beat" for a session of fly fishing, and thus enjoy a fly fishing escape, an almost private slice of trout heaven. Until recently, substantial populations of brook, brown and rainbow trout swam throughout the five miles of the Connetquot River contained within the park and preserve. Thousands of fly anglers from all across the United States and the world annually visited the river to sample its prized bounty. In the eyes of many, it was nothing less than a world class fly stream. But that prominence came to an abrupt and unfortunate end.

My first exposure to the Connetquot River occurred in May, 1975 shortly after the park extended public access privileges to fly fishermen. That initial trip to the river was an enchanting one, and I have been drawn back ever since, not only for the fabulous trout fishing but also for the total experience of such a magical place. Through the course of its flow, the river slowly transforms itself yet always maintains its majesty as a classic trout stream. I too was transformed by the river's flow and the ghosts of those who fished there before me. Traditions hang heavy in the park and it is easy to understand why. The Connetquot has a small trout stream charm and elegance all its own. Its cold-water, spring creek attributes are ideal for sustaining healthy populations of trout. The history of the place dates back to 1683 when William Nicoll purchased a large tract of land from Winnaquaheagh, a member of the Secatoug Native Americans. Bordering this tract of land was a river called the "Conttquot". In 1702, after amassing land holdings in the area that encompassed more than 51,000 acres, Mr. Nicoll returned a portion of the headwaters of the Connetquot River to the Native Americans for use as a campground. It was also during the early 1700s that Mr. Nicoll constructed a Gristmill, which still stands along the banks of the Connetquot River. The mill was once a popular and productive fishing area, like many other beats on the river, but that is no more.

The true beginnings of the Connetquot watershed as a sportsman's paradise started some time around 1820



*Tradition ran deep in the park, and its waters were fished by anglers from all over the country and the world.*

when Eliphalet Snedecor leased a portion of land along the river to establish Snedecor's Tavern that would function as a coach stop for travelers journeying from New York City to Montauk. It didn't take long for the bountiful natural resources of the area to establish it as one of the nation's most popular fishing and hunting locations. A group of wealthy sportsmen who were regular visitors to the Inn couldn't get adequate lodging and subsequently bought the tavern and its facilities in 1860 along with 879 adjoining acres. This was the beginning of the Southside Sportsman's Club of Long Island. The club attracted its membership from among the most influential business leaders and politicians of the day and over time expanded the range of their holdings to encompass 3,473 acres. In 1963, the State of New York purchased the property, leasing the land back to the Club for a period of 10 years. The park became a complete public property in 1973 and opened its gates to fly fishermen in 1975. For years the park maintained the same, if not better quality of angling than it did when the river and its surrounding environs were the private and exclusive retreat of this nation's most influential leaders. But all that has sadly come to a premature end. Who could have let such a thing happen?

The Connetquot River is located in Oakdale, New York and runs an almost eight and a half mile course out to the Great South Bay; the park proper containing about five miles of river. The vast majority of trout stocked in the river were hatchery-raised within the park and ranged in size from about a 1/2 pound up to 2 pounds. Occasionally, smaller and larger fish would also be released. In all, approximately 33,000 trout were set free into the river each year. Sea-run "salters" that migrate from the park out in to the Bay and even the ocean beyond have been imprinted to return to the preserve, adding greatly to the appeal of the river. I have been witness to the return of magnificent steelhead. It is a sight to behold, especially on Long Island. It mattered not that the fish may have been hatchery-raised. Big is big and those were truly heart-stopper moments, that quite possibly may be no more. Hopefully, the sea-run trout will continue to grace us with their presence, but they too come back to an empty home.

Whenever I would walk the park or fish the cool spring waters of the river I'd often contemplate what the original

club members must have felt being in such an extraordinary place. But I would never have to think too long or too hard. The beauty and traditions of the park and the river had been meticulously preserved and enhanced by the efforts and vision of park manager, Gil Bergen. Through his stewardship, the Connetquot River is now classified as one of New York's Wild, Scenic and Recreational Rivers. All who visit this magnificent piece of real estate owe a huge debt of gratitude to Gil for his diligence, perseverance and personal commitment to preserve this precious natural resource and allow us to bridge the decades – to experience the Connetquot much like our ancestors saw it. While much of that shell remains, the grandeur of the trout fishing is now but a treasured memory to those who were fortunate enough to experience it and grow to cherish the river and its fish. The hatchery now remains a dormant concrete hulk, as if it is in a state of perpetual hibernation from which it will never again rouse. Eighty thousand trout were set free in the lower river by the freshwater fisheries division of the New York State Department of Conservation, with the hope they would be caught and killed never again to perpetuate the strain of trout that was a hallmark of the Connetquot River. While those who were there during that release period enjoyed unnaturally fast and furious fishing, it was a sad and humiliating way for a grand and stately trout stream to die. It was a mockery of 140 years of tradition and superb fisheries management. Was IPN really to blame? Was it the cause of the river's demise or simply a convenient excuse to impose a new management agenda for change. Regardless, a great hatchery is no more and the river it fed has starved, a victim of the method used to address a disease that has likely existed for decades.

I am no expert on infectious fish diseases and I surely don't know the answer to the how the problem to eradicate IPN in the Connetquot River should have been resolved. I do know from reading about the disease as it exists in other states and other countries that there were alternatives that could have been considered and tried before an entire population of trout was summarily sentenced to extermination. I also know that some very well-meaning and informed individuals and organizations raised some of the alternatives to those charged with evaluating and solving the problem. It is not my purpose to offer a "what we should have done" proposition but rather to suggest that not enough was done by those accountable for making the decision before 140 years of Long Island's trout fishing history was eradicated, perhaps permanently.

Can the river ever be what is once was? I doubt it. Will the hatchery ever be allowed to operate as it did in the past? I doubt it. Will new anglers who visit the Connetquot River be fortunate enough to collect the caliber of fond fishing memories as I and others have over the years? I doubt it. Will the legacy of a great place that is on the National Historic Registry be fully passed on to future generations? I doubt it. Does anyone in a position of authority to try and restore the trout fishery to that level of greatness even care about doing so? I doubt that, too. I sincerely hope I am wrong. But maybe - just maybe - if enough of us care and react, we can get someone to listen. Until then, may the Connetquot River and its long departed trout rest in peace! 🍷