



# A CATSKILLS REVIVAL

Story by **GALEN MERCER**    Photos by **WALTER HODGES**

Mike Kimball and Galen Mercer fish the upper Delaware River during a break in a rain shower.



BY NOW, THE NOTION there are no second acts in America is ragged enough to consider working up its own second act. Miles to Madonna, steak to eggs, Cleveland to Camden Yards, nobody does reinvention better. More than merely dusting things off, rebirth seems part of this country's birthright, redefinition the defining trait. In terms of our own sport, one needs to look no further than the storied rivers of New York State's Catskill Mountains.

On the bright stage of American fly fishing, the most brilliant, longest-running production has been in the Catskills. For roughly 100 years, from 1860 to 1970, the sport was nursed, grew up and achieved celebrity there, fostering iconic styles of fishing, fly dressing, tackle manufacture, even attire. It was there the 19th Century English game was picked up and advanced, refashioned in the image of Yankee pragmatism and invention. The dry fly, the nymph and the streamer all found their modern forms on Catskill streams, while the high concept of imitation was refined to science.

At the heart of this Catskill angling mystique, top billing went to perhaps four streams: the Beaverkill, Willowemoc, Neversink and Schoharie.

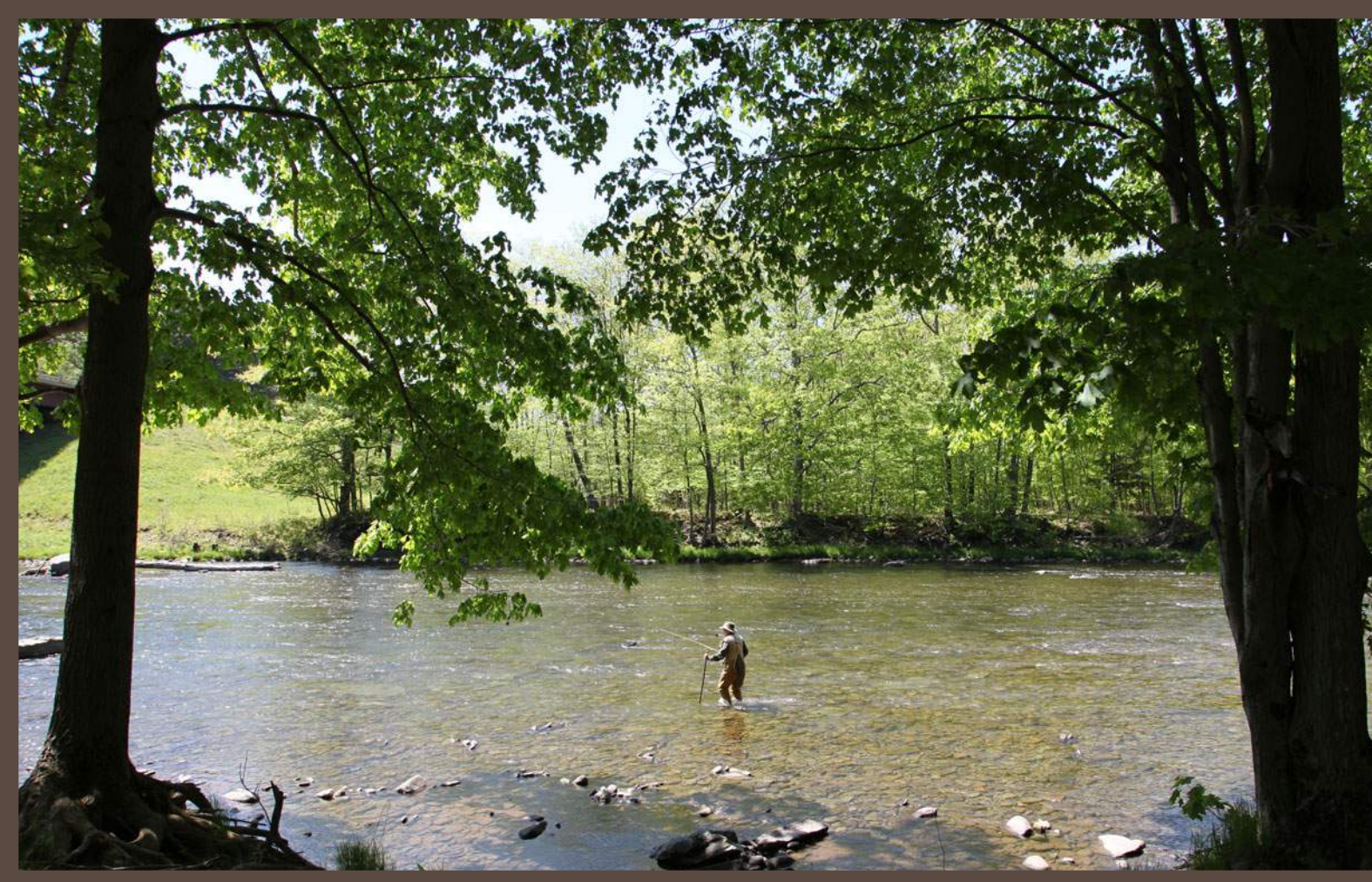
Home to legendary hotels and esteemed clubs, these renowned waters drew a repertory of the most talented and celebrated anglers in the field, each generation attracting and fostering oth-

ers. Entire fly boxes of famous patterns derive from their waters. Painters and photographers memorialized their pools, while writers had so much to say that Ernest Hemingway once wearily joked that he couldn't "take another fucking word on the Beaverkill." The torrent of ink spilled in their combined service would capsize Godzilla, with or without wading staff.

Yet, as good as fishing prospects to mid-Century purportedly were, it was really after this, when the acid factories, tanneries and major logging industries all went out, that the true potential of these rivers became manifest. Blessed with a generations-long run of cool, wet weather, the increasingly healthy streams burgeoned with both insects and fish.

In the '60s, the Beaverkill and Willowemoc were among the first streams in the country to offer "catch and release" sections, generating the slogan "Limit Your Kill, Don't Kill Your

(Top Right) Angler approaches a mid-day hatch on the Beaverkill River. (Bottom Right) Historical Beaverkill Falls on the upper Beaverkill River. This is one Theodore Gordon's favorite fishing holes on the river.





Limit.” These protected stretches became still better, providing the model that forever changed freshwater conservation. In contrast to prevailing notions, Walt Dette, then Dean of Catskill Fly Tiers (and habitué of those valleys for more than 50 years), often pronounced these latter decades the true “Golden Period” of Catskill fishing.

While these “imperial” streams did not entirely escape the rigors of time—the Schoharie, dammed and bled by excessive agricultural and recreational water use, would fall out of contention as a major resource; likewise the Neversink, which lost miles of storied water to another dam—public trout fishing on remaining Catskill rivers was good enough that, as the ’80s wound down, the biggest problem one encountered was likely to be overcrowding. No fly water in the country had more luster, was more distinguished, nor revered.

Any promising spring afternoon along the Beaverkill’s “Cairn’s Pool” might see 50 cars parked on the highway shoulder, while casting calls of anglers denoted the best runs. Encounters with a famous artist or statesman, a corporate titan or world-champion athlete became everyday events. Rigging for a hatch at “Barnhart’s Pool,” I recall once being asked tippet advice by an angler who’d just won the Oscar for Best Actor. It was perhaps the very apex for traditional Catskill waters. Then, literally, came the deluge.

(Right) Cairns pool on the Beaverkill is a long elegant run that holds an incredible number of trout.

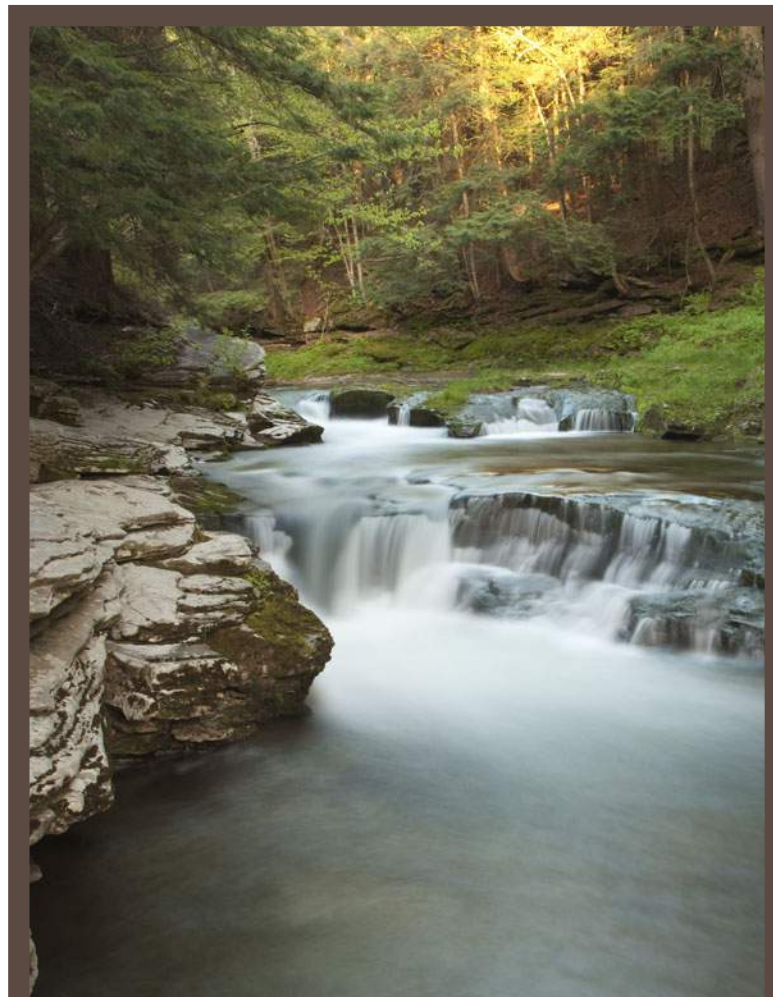






The upper Beaverkill River represents a perfect view of what constitutes a classic Catskill stream.





Flowing through steep, relatively narrow valleys, Catskill streams are “flashy” waters, long prone to unpredictable, damaging floods. The literature cascades with their agonies. Still, the devastation wrought by a coming sequence of tumultuous, mega-floods was both unexpected and unknown in modern times.

Calculated by displaced stone walls, in barely over a decade, the Catskills experienced the proverbial 100-, 200-, and ultimately 500-year floods. People died and homes and bridges were swept away like chaff. Observing two of these events, I aim to be in another time zone when the Millennial flood rolls through.

Possessing steep gradients, the marquee freestone rivers (particularly their lowermost reaches, where sand and loam banks offer far less resistance than upstream ledge rock) proved especially vulnerable. Invaluable trees, along with major sections of riverbank were lost. Already subject to a natural, decades-long process of widening and shallowing, the floods accelerated this erosion, increasing siltation dramatically. Tributaries also suffered and, despite valiant and repeated efforts on the part of local communities and concerned conservation groups, remain badly scarred.

Interspersed with these catastrophes were droughts so severe that local fishery biologists privately admitted they feared trout mortality, on certain rivers, exceeded 50 percent. Some thought it a conservative estimate. I recall taking stream temperatures in the midst of swift, deep Beaverkill pools that yielded readings in the 80s—for weeks on end. These were repeated events, and the combined havoc proved disastrous to both trout and fishing quality.

Stating that the principal Catskill streams went into a tailspin wouldn’t be an exaggeration. Simply put, short-term fishing prospects pretty much collapsed. Anglers stayed away in droves and once popular pools fell eerily quiet. By the late ’90s, things were deemed so dire that local communities petitioned for, and were granted, the right to supplement the limited state stocking programs on public (including no-kill) water.

While the eclipse of these Catskill streams occurred suddenly, their decline in angling prominence had started years earlier. A case might be made that the process really began with events in that famously transformative era, the ’60s. It was during this time that “Fly Fisherman” magazine, the first mainstream periodical wholly devoted to the

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(Clockwise from top left) Barnhardt’s pool on the Beaverkill has produced huge trout for generations of Catskill fly anglers. Classic detail views of the upper Beaverkill as it flows as more of a rocky freestone type stream.





Junction pool where the Willowemoc and Beaverkill river meet is one of the most famous pools in all of angling literature. This is the epicenter of the beginning of fly fishing in the United States. This is also where Thaddeus Norris and his friends the Houseless Anglers gathered in the 1800's to cook trout at "The Noonday Roast."





sport (and, ironically, both a chronicler and active promoter of Catskill fishing), came into being.

With its conception, a fresh age of angler knowledge and possibility dawned. To this ferment, a growing number of excellent new books, whose emphasis increasingly became science and specialization, lent momentum. Classicism was soon trumped by the clinical, as elegance ceded to the empirical, charm to fact.

Anglers, refining and redefining their craft, sought fresh challenges. New waters received increased attention and a steady, westward shift in focus began. The gentler character and more consis-

tent hatches of many of those rivers, especially the soon-to-be famous spring creeks, and placid meadow sections of the Madison and Henry's Fork, proved ideal laboratories. Both flies and technique took an undeniable jump forward and, as a consequence, Innovation packed her bags. The West became where it was at.

Concurrently, and largely incidentally, New York City's momentous construction of two vast reservoirs on branches of the Delaware River changed a complex of marginal trout streams into tailwaters of spectacular potential. This transformation was radical, and occurred so quickly (as one measures



(Facing page) Art Lee casts to a Cairn's Pool brown on the Beaverkill. (Above) An angler changes flies while standing in Mountain Pool on the Beaverkill. Mountain Pool was made famous by Spare Grey Hackle in his book *Fishless Days Angling Nights*.



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(Clockwise from top left) Matt and Sam Batschelet along with Odin Rantham float the Mainstem of the Delaware looking for huge brown trout. The West Branch of the Delaware near Hales Eddy at sunrise. A fly fisherman checks his flies for the perfect match of hatching mayflies.



Today, the Delaware and her twin branches, the East and the West, are what people talk about when they refer to great Catskill fishing.

river time), that it was decades before the angling fraternity would perceive, then fully catch up to, the boon. Trout rapidly colonized these lush new frontiers, yet fishing texts of this period, and for some time after, lagged behind, largely ignoring the altered resources. Despite this, a few anglers began exploring.

Further change occurred with the completion of the new “Quickway” road system, which connected New York’s Western Tier to the Thruway, and ran right through the heart of the major Catskill river valleys. High-speed access (the old version) came to the region, encouraging curious sports to bypass traditional angling centers and venture farther afield.

For all this, the reputations of the charmed rivers would not likely have diminished much, had it not been for the fateful catalyst of weather. Attributable to climate change or not, one must look back to the wanton felling of hemlock woods in the late 19th and earliest 20th centuries, and the decimated brook trout populations that resulted, to recall such a nadir of sporting fortunes.

While their headwaters remain stable, with recovery downstream proceeding slowly and hatches beginning to rebound, damage to these noble rivers

remains such that, justly or not, many perceive these compound afflictions as having put an end to a classic era of American sport.

Yet not to superb angling.

Today, the Delaware and her twin branches, the East and the West, are what people talk about when they refer to great Catskill fishing. The transfer of angling loyalties, begun as a trickle in the ’70s, had by the ’90s assumed the same torrential proportion as the dramatic events initiating it. Viewed as something of a betrayal by the old guard, ultimately even they would be won over by the beauty and extraordinary angling potential to be found in the “other” Catskills.

Navigating broad, fertile, lowland valleys, these rivers meander more than they race, drift more than they plummet. Festooned with islands, braids and side channels, they offer both scale and intimacy, bringing equally to mind spring creeks and the most expansive of western waters. Protected by dams from extremes of fluctuation, their rich currents harbor vast insect populations, giving rise, literally, to extended and predictable hatches. Especially in this regard, they are unlike any other systems in the East.

(Right) Galen Mercer and Mike Kimball wade into a favorite run on the East Branch of the Delaware river.











Matt Batschelet ties on midge pattern in early morning light on the West Branch of The Delaware River.

Anyone who's fished these rivers knows firsthand the variety and exceptional abundance of insect life. There's no modifier too purple to convey the sheer mass of bugs these waters see off in a good day's hatch.

Water flow is the key. The cold, nutrient-laden reservoir tailings are their— and the sport that flows from them— life's blood. Both hatches and fish benefit enormously from these stable temperatures. While control and "appropriate" use of this desirable commodity has become a politically Byzantine, bitterly contested issue, its paradisiacal effect on angling prospects is unquestionable.

Late in sweltering July, when traditional Catskill pools beg to be closed, their trout gasping in the few remaining spring holes, you might well experience the best sport of an entire season, belt deep in some frigid West Branch flat. The chilly water also slows the metabolism of hatching bugs, leaving them helplessly adrift for extended periods: a huge opportunity for both rising trout and those pursuing them. There's also a moderating aspect to such releases in early spring. Then, being less subject to cold weather extremes, tailwaters warm more rapidly than freestone streams, with their hatches showing slightly earlier, and lasting longer.

This last point is an interesting one. Anyone who's fished these rivers knows firsthand the variety and exceptional abundance of insect life. There's no modifier too purple to convey the sheer

mass of bugs these waters see off in a good day's hatch. Too, the emergences are long, almost freakishly so. Sulpher hatches, that on other Catskill streams peak in a week or, at most, two, will on the tailwaters evolve into months-long bacchanals, one sulpher species supplanting another as these waters' capacious diversity supplements the larder.

Harry Darbee, the great fly tier and Catskill oracle, was once quoted as saying the releases "scrambled" the hatches, and perhaps in a way they do. I think it more the case that they extend the emergences, the consistency of ideal temperatures drawing them out, both on the front, and especially, the back end of their cycles. I've seen green drakes, whose hatch traditionally blacked out angler calendars from Memorial Day through early June, still appearing in a September trickle on the West Branch. Hendricksons last a good two weeks longer on the branches than on other Catskill streams. Isonychia show in greater numbers and over lengthier periods, while olives, a mayfly providing unpredictable, if occasionally memorable foul-weather sport elsewhere, comprise a trout's daily fare on the Delaware system.

That precise combination of water

(Previous spread) Sunrise on the West Branch of the Delaware near Hancock. The river holds huge brown trout in this section.



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Now, a new show is in town, a full-blown Catskill revival at hand. The reviews are in and they're glowing. The curtain is up again, the lights back on, brighter and more dazzling than ever.

character and consistency, which first attracted angler attention to the West, now compels a reconsideration of the East.

A singular regret from my Catskill zip-code period remains how slow I was to embrace this bonanza. Brian Wilson, among the first and best to guide the new waters, called ceaselessly (in what I now view as an act of immense charity) to extol their virtues. There was exceptional fishing to go around then, so apart from periodic forays, I never really bothered. Today, pondering the wonders missed, I list into melancholy and grind my molars, apparently a common affliction, as many Catskill anglers of my experience have related similar woes.

Not everyone was as reluctant to shift allegiances and, if news of the astonishing resources trickled out slowly, still there was a vanguard. Beginning in the early '70s, Art Lee regularly wrote of the fishing, while Ed Van Put became such a fixture on Main Stem runs he might easily have been taken for a statue. Al Cucci and the proprietors of the West Branch Angler also got in early, as did a few lucky others.

I well recall a twilight encounter on a huge East Branch flat from that same period. A distinguished older gent; a

cane-rod-fishing, New York Anglers Club patched, silver-haired, khaki-garbed heir to the finest traditions, stated he'd given up on the Beaverkill and her like years ago, and now only fished the Delaware. A boy then, I was shocked. Twenty years later, I caught his drift.

While quite different in nature; tailwaters as opposed to freestone, expansive rather than narrowly confined, even tempered versus mercurial, the West Branch, East Branch and Main Stem Delaware do not lack for history, and can hardly be seen as understudies. They are the natural successors to, and have easily assumed the mantle of, those storied lead players in the legacy of Catskill sporting traditions.


The same cycle of esteemed anglers is once more being repeated. Clubs and lodgings are flourishing. Innovative tackle and fly patterns issue forth annually from their waters, while sports from around the globe are again drawn to try such challenging, engaging rivers. One obvious reflection of the increased interest is that guides' ranks continue to grow, and the drift boat, once an oddity here, is now so common as to have become a bane.

Unlike many other rivers, east and west, the sport appears to have kept pace. Mike Kimball, among the West Branch's resident wizards, told me that in 30 years

on the river, he'd recently experienced two of his best seasons. One of these afternoons included back-to-back browns of 25 and 26 inches, taken while sight fishing in thin water with minute patterns.

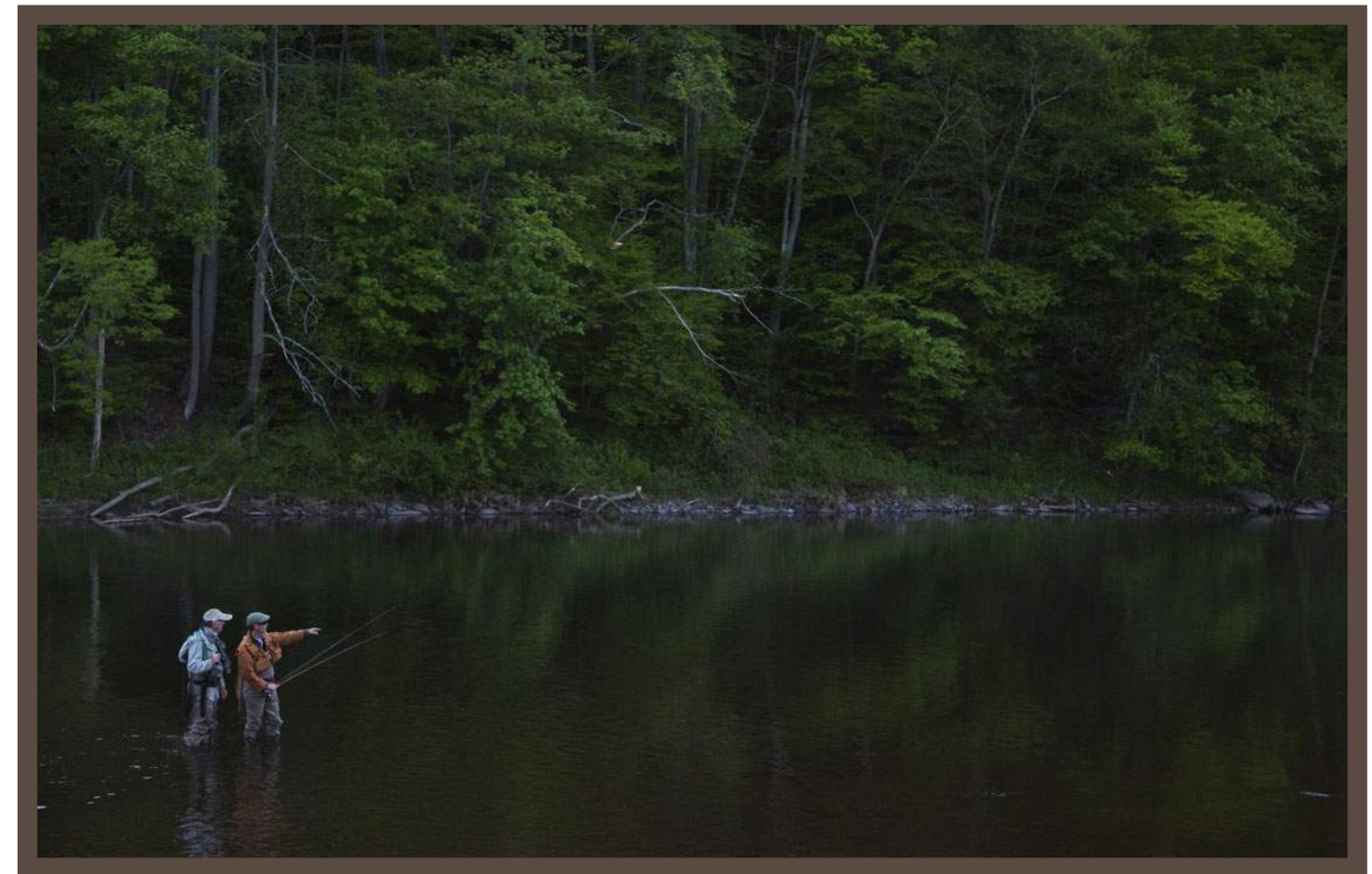
If it sounds too good to be true, so did tales of previous "Golden Periods." Yet, in large part, they proved out. I was privileged enough to experience one of these and, mark it, the sport was every bit as good as they say.

Now, a new show is in town, a full-blown Catskill revival at hand. The reviews are in and they're glowing. The

curtain is up again, the lights back on, brighter and more dazzling than ever. You'll want to catch it. Book early. 

Galen Mercer is a painter with ruinous tendencies towards fly-fishing travel. He and his wife, Jaimie, live halfway between Lupa Restaurant in Manhattan and the Roscoe Diner, perched on a Hudson Valley orchard among a welter of brushes, fly rods and loose scraps of dubbing. This is his first visit to the Ten & Two confessional.

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Galen Mercer and Ken Aretsky discuss evening fishing strategies on the West Branch of the Delaware.