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Preface

Some landscapes are defined by volcanoes, leaking and occasionally spewing molten rock out of the earth. Others are defined by the slow-motion collision of continents, twisting and lifting layers of rock into the sky. Most of the Midwest is defined by glaciers that flattened the hills and scraped the bedrock, leaving behind a fertile prairie dotted by lakes. The Driftless Area is defined by streams. Geologists are still arguing the reasons, but this region, nestled between four states in the heart of the Midwest was untouched by glaciers, and its streams have incised steep valleys through the uplifted limestone of an ancient sea as they flow towards the Mississippi River. Trout streams.

My introduction to the Driftless Area came as a small child, when my parents would load my two brothers and me into a station wagon and head southwest on Highway 151 from our home in Madison. A few miles west of Verona, hills began to dot the landscape. We drove on through Mt. Horeb, past Blue Mound, Dodgeville and Mineral Point. As we approached Big M at Platteville, emblazoned on a hillside back when the University of Wisconsin-Platteville was called the Wisconsin Mining Trade School, the hills became more rugged, and we dropped down to the Mississippi. My Uncle Bill and his sons Joe and Dick would be waiting for us in a couple of johnboats, where we would transfer our baggage and head over to their cottage on the Iowa side of the river. Uncle Bill, with the indentured servitude of my cousins, had hand-built the cottage on land purchased from a farmer. He installed a generator for electricity and piped in water from a nearby spring, where he harvested watercress.

He never had the water tested, figuring if it was clean enough for the watercress it was clean enough to drink. The cottage stood on high ground, looking over a lagoon that served as a boat landing. A small creek tumbled down a hillside on the other side of the lagoon, past bushes loaded with ripe wild raspberries in July. The cabin was decorated with fox pelts, deer antlers and duck decoys. We spent the precious 4-day weekend shooting .22s at empty beer cans, fishing the sloughs, putting pennies on the railroad tracks to be flattened by passing trains, and exploring the tool shed, where Uncle Bill always managed to find a spare wrench or chisel to give to me and my younger brother Steve. It was a magical place for an aspiring outdoorsman.

My introduction to trout fishing came later, at age 12 if I recall correctly. Steve came home from visiting a friend, whose father had shown him some trout he had caught that morning in Richland County, and announced that we should go trout fishing. We learned of a stream called Davis Creek, not far from Camp LuWiSoMo, in the sand country north of Madison, where we spent many summer weekends. We drove to the creek one evening with our dad, tied size "0" Mepps bucktail spinners onto our spinning rods and cast them into the closet-sized pools. A 12-inch Brown promptly raced out from an undercut bank and attacked Steve's spinner. That trout, pulled out from that tiny creek, still stands out in my mind as a trophy.

Steve quickly lost interest in trout, but I was captivated. I read everything I could find on trout fishing, began tying flies, and rode my bike 7 miles one way out to Cross Plains, where I tried to tempt the educated trout of Black Earth Creek, with no success. I also convinced my dad to drive me up to the Brule River, in Northwest Wisconsin, where we had better luck. In those days, the Driftless Area wasn't as well known for trout fishing as it is today, and the best

trout fishing in Wisconsin was considered to be up North, especially on the Brule. So, apart from my fruitless efforts on Black Earth Creek, I never fished in the Driftless. At around age 15 I got busy with High School, discovered girls, and pretty much stopped fishing. I went to college, spent a year in Germany and three in Japan, got married, and earned an MBA at a business school on the East Coast. I moved to Minneapolis in my late 20s to take a job as the Asia sales manager for an industrial equipment company.

I knew that the Kinnickinnic River, a 45-minute drive from Minneapolis just over the Wisconsin border in the northwest corner of the Driftless Area was a famous trout stream, and I talked occasionally about going there, but didn't do anything about it until my wife Sahya bought me a fly rod and reel from Orvis for my 30th birthday. Big mistake on her part—she became a fishing widow almost overnight. I invented creative excuses to get out on the Kinni, the Willow and the Rush on weekends and the occasional weeknight, and I forced her to go camping with me and our baby daughter in Forestville State Park, where I fished the Root. A year later my Driftless fishing career was interrupted when I accepted a job to set up an office in Tokyo, and I ended up spending 21 of the next 24 years in Asia. I enjoyed my international business career tremendously, but in 2016, I fulfilled a longstanding threat to retire at age 55 and mis-spend what remained of my years fishing, skiing and goofing off. We moved back to Minneapolis, a short drive from my favorite place to fish in the whole world.

Why am I so obsessed with the Driftless Area? A psychoanalyst might refer to my childhood adventures at Uncle Bill's cottage and conclude that I had never grown up. I can't argue with that diagnosis. But I would add to it.

The Driftless Area is surprising. Imagine driving through a sea of corn and soybeans when the road takes a sudden dip and descends into a forest of oak and maple, the coulee walls studded with limestone outcroppings. A few S turns later, a stream appears beside the road dropping through a series of pools and riffles. You stop at the bridge, peer into the water, and see shadowy forms of trout facing into the current. You get back in your car, cross the bridge, drive up the hill and a few minutes later you are once again surrounded by a sea of crops, spreading across the prairie.

In this upside-down world, the terrain is created not by addition, but by subtraction, streams patiently eating away at the bedrock as they carve their way deeper and deeper into the earth over millions of years. Lakes are practically absent from this region in the midst of the Land of Lakes, but streams are everywhere. And what lovely streams they are. Fed by springs emerging from the fractured Karst geology, they rarely deviate more than 15 degrees from the ambient ground temperature of just below 50. The lime-rich water has a slight aquamarine tint, and sustains large populations of macroinvertebrates: scuds, mayflies and caddis. Wild trout abound.

This is not a world of majestic peaks and jaw-dropping canyons. The elevation difference between the tallest point in the Driftless, Blue Mound, (1719 feet), and the lowest, the Mississippi River at Dubuque (617 feet) barely exceeds 1100 feet, the vertical drop you might find on a beginner's run at a Colorado ski resort. In fact, it may require a trained eye to fully appreciate the contrast with the surrounding country. My wife Sahya grew up in Kobe Japan, where 3000-foot peaks tower above the harbor. The first time I drove her into the Driftless we passed the Winona Exit on I-90 and descended towards the Mississippi. "Aren't these hills a relief after all those cornfields?" I asked. "What hills?" she replied. To which I can only answer: No view is more precious than an oasis to a Bedouin, a deserted island to a sailor, or

a 300-foot bluff to a flatlander.

The Driftless Area is a magnet for nonconformists. Gun nuts, goat ranchers, potters, bikers, morel hunters, nudists, eccentrics and recluses of all kinds. Preppers, hoarders and junk collectors. Amish communities and Zen meditation centers. I have no personal familiarity with this, but no doubt some of the residents in the more remote coulees are hiding from the Law.

Like other habitats in our modern world, the Driftless Area is threatened by human activity. Climate change is causing more extreme rainfall events, driving flooding and erosion. Nitrogen fertilizer and manure increase nutrient loads in the already fertile streams, causing algae blooms. Almost all corn seeds planted by farmers are treated with Neonicotinoid insecticides, a teaspoon of which can kill over a billion bees. Nearly all of the neonics dissolve into the soil and make their way into streams. Frac sand mining, vacation home construction and road building inflict a thousand other tiny cuts. But there is cause for hope. More sustainable farming practices are reducing erosion and increasing spring flow. Marginal farmland is being converted into conservation easements or sold to outdoor lovers who manage it for wildlife. Conservation organizations are stitching together corridors of land to allow watersheds to recover and animals to migrate. Eagles have returned to the skies, and the occasional bear track can be found on stream banks. Native brook trout, the trout species most sensitive to pollution and temperature increases, are recovering in some streams.

My spirits always rise as the road dips, and I descend into a coulee. The scent of wild mint fills the air as I crush it under my boots on the stream bank. On the far bank, a fish dimples the water as it intercepts caddis flies swimming to the surface. This is my happy place, and this collection of essays is my tribute to it.

Forestville Creek

When trying to explain Minnesota to my Japanese friends, I start out by telling them that it is the 12th biggest state. It is 60% the size of Japan, but the population, at 5.6 million, is the same as a dozen or so wards in central Tokyo. The typical response is amazement that any place on earth could be so empty, but the few Japanese I've met who have actually traveled here between December and March have the opposite reaction: how could so many people willingly live in such a God-forsaken place? The answer has something to do with skyways, heated garages, and an airport with direct flights to Cancun, all of which are found in the Twin Cities Metro Area. That's where you'll find the people, too. Take away the 12-county metro area, and you'd still be left with a big state, #16 to be exact, but the population would barely reach 2 million. Instead of 64 people per square mile, we'd be at 24, like Nebraska or Kansas. Urbanites often refer to this area of the state as "Outstate Minnesota" or "Greater Minnesota". A resident of Alexandria (definitely outstate) retaliated by telling the Minneapolis Star-Tribune that it should start calling the metro area "Lesser Minnesota".¹

All of which is a long-winded way of saying that we still have space for a few trout streams, even in Lesser Minnesota. Most of the good water is outside the Twin Cities metro area, and some of the best is in Fillmore County, on the Iowa border. The population density of Fillmore County happens to be the Greater Minnesota average of 24 per square mile. That's far more people than the 1.6 you'll find in Cook County on the other end of the state, but it is few enough that some of the trout streams never pass under a road. That sounds to me like a good working definition of a place that is more wild than civilized.

One of those streams is Forestville Creek.

This is my first-ever stream writeup, and I must confess to being uncomfortable about it. Revealing a stream's secrets feels a bit like kissing and telling, and not many trout streams have been ruined by too little publicity. On the other hand, it is pretentious to think that enough people are going to read this essay that it would have any effect on fishing pressure, especially on a stream as remote and difficult to fish as Forestville, so I'll take a few steps down the slippery slope. I have only fished it a handful of times, but I have managed to fish its entire length, which I haven't done for many other trout streams. I figure that gives me at least one qualification to write about it.

According to DNR documents, the creek was first surveyed by Thaddeus Surber in 1920. He described a stream emerging from a cavern at the base of a 150-ft high cliff, flowing through a deep, narrow, wooded valley and ending at the junction with the South Branch of the Root River. A local landowner told him that it had been an excellent brook trout stream

¹ <https://www.startribune.com/where-did-the-terms-outstate-and-greater-minnesota-originate/570658441/?refresh=true>

in the 1880s. Somewhere along the line, brown trout were introduced into the stream and have become the dominant species. The browns may not be native to the creek, but they have been wild for generations: the last stocking of Forestville Creek was in 1976.

Most of the creek flows through public land, and the DNR, in its wisdom, has purchased perpetual easements on the rest. Perhaps due to its isolation, the creek's watershed was never farmed intensively, and there are no steep, muddy banks of topsoil buildup that are so often observed on other Driftless streams. Some habitat improvement work was done from the 1950s through the 1980s, but it has long since blended into the natural scenery. It is one of the loveliest valleys in a lovely region, and it would be worth visiting even without a fly rod in hand.

I have never fished in the cave itself, but the store at Maple Springs campground displays a photo of an angler casting a fly into it. I neglected to ask if he caught anything. The creek flows shallow and wide for a few hundred yards until a large spring dumps into it. For the next half mile, it flows narrow and deep through a picture-perfect pasture, cows grazing peacefully, with one fishy-looking undercut bank following another. It looks like perfect hopper water. I tested this theory on a breezy August afternoon, fishing from the start of the pasture to the cave. I didn't get a strike. I retrieved a shred of dignity on the walk back by tightlining nymphs through a couple of promising holes and landing two six-inchers. I have no clue why the hopper wasn't working; additional field research is indicated.

Just as the creek enters the forest, but before it gets too brushy for back-casting, there are two plunge pools that you won't want to miss. My stream notes indicate catching 13-inch fish in each of these holes, and I wouldn't be surprised if larger fish are lurking in them.

For the next couple of hundred yards, the creek is nearly impossible to fish, or at least it was in mid-August, when I tried it. The creek is filled with thick weed beds, leaving dry flies as the only alternative, but the banks are choked with brush, making it nearly impossible to cast them. I suspect this may be a good stretch in the springtime, after winter has cleared out the vegetation.

A little farther downstream, the weed beds subside as the creek picks up some speed and heads through a series of riffle-pool sequences for about a quarter of a mile until it reaches the campground. The brush is still thick, but back-casting is possible in some places, roll-casting in others, and you can always make a bow-and-arrow cast, which works more often than you might think. Unless you fancy fishing in somebody's backyard, skip the next couple of hundred yards where campers park their RVs. Downstream from the campground is a half-mile stretch of water with undercut banks, riffle-pool sequences, and few enough trees that casting is actually possible. This, along with the pasture, is the most pleasant part of the creek to fish, and I found it more productive than the pasture.

Maple Springs campground has been around since the 1970s when the owners of a small family farm put a pay box on the gate and invited families to camp in their cow pasture. Things are more organized these days, with clean, hot showers, a well-stocked store and, believe it or not, fast Wi-Fi. You are unlikely to get a site along the creek—all but one are reserved for season campers—but it is just a few minutes' walk to the creek from any site. Non-campers who want to park their car to fish the upper reaches of the creek can purchase a day pass for a few bucks.

The productive water ends roughly where the creek flows back into the forest a few

hundred yards above the state park boundary. For roughly a mile, until it passes a set of concrete slabs allowing hikers to hopscotch across, the creek is shallow and slow, with few good lies. Fallen trees provide a marginal amount of cover, but are difficult to fish, and frustrating to navigate. I spent the better part of a day covering this stretch and emerged with mosquito bites, nettle stings, and a bad mood after having caught only one small fish and lost a nice one in a deadfall. I could have avoided this fiasco if I had looked carefully at the map. Productive water is usually characterized by lots of twists and turns, indicating deeper holes and undercut banks. This stretch of Forestville Creek flows nearly straight across the map.

The fishing improves in the final half mile. The obstacle course continues, but the creek deepens and resumes its serpentine pattern all the way to where it empties into an impossibly aquamarine pool in the South Branch of the Root. The last time I fished this stretch I pulled a 14-inch brown out from under a fallen log. For once, everything went right: I set the hook on a hunch, guided it away from obstacles that could snap the 5x tippet, and managed to keep my rod from hanging up in the canopy of tree branches. It felt like a trophy when I finally got it in the net.

