

written by Daniel B. England

photography by Peter Baker

Gone fishin'

IN FAIRFIELD

for many, that red and blue seated train carriage that carries commuters to New York and back is something of a prison car, a transport between the confines of office and home. Even the *New York Times* cannot always rescue us from a sense of ennui as the unseen scenery blurs by.

There is a moment, though, just after the train pulls out of Fairfield station every morning, when a passenger who has not yet drifted back to sleep is able catch a glimpse of the Mill River. It is actually a moment worth considering further.



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A few months ago, one of those commuters, a product and marketing manager at Citigroup, looked at the Mill River with a different eye. Eric Johnson knew that if you follow the Mill River upstream all the way to the Fairfield/Easton border, you encounter a world of deep woodland and burbling stream where wicked-smart trout in quiet eddies watch for a particular kind of fly to land in their territory. And Eric knew that if you go downstream, you come to Long Island Sound where sometimes lazy but always fierce striped bass wait in the shelter of the Norwalk Islands for the bait that waters like the Mill River deliver in rich abundance.

One day, Eric got off the train. The next day he didn't get back on it. Instead, he took possession of the keys to a little business in Norwalk's Cove Marina called Westport Outfitters and determined to

FRESHWATER
STREAMERS



HELEN TROTMAN

BOB'S BANGER



**“ONE DAY, ERIC GOT
OFF THE TRAIN.
THE NEXT DAY HE
DIDN'T GET BACK ON IT.”**

make a go of it. Certainly, if you talk to Eric and see what he's managed to do with the fishing shop, you'll know that he is one savvy businessman. But if you talk to him for more than a few minutes you'll discover that this is a man passionate about fishing who is eager to spread its gospel to anyone who will listen. To use an apropos fishing metaphor, he draws you into his net and hooks you.

*Fairfielder Eric Johnson with some of
the rods on display at his fishing shop,
Westport Outfitters.*



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A close-up, low-angle shot of a person's hands holding a fly fishing rod and reel. The person is wearing a light-colored jacket. The background is a bright, golden sunset over a body of water, with the sun low on the horizon, creating a shimmering, hazy atmosphere. The fishing line is visible, extending from the reel towards the water.

Two of his catches are Robert and Robin Reinarz, who happen to live on Pine Creek, a little waterway that runs behind Fairfield Beach. Robert learned to fly fish from his grandfather and father. Robert loves to fish, whether from his dock or in the newly acquired boat he bought from Westport Outfitters. "Hooking that big bass on the end of the line—it is just awesome fun," he says. If anything, Robert's wife Robin is even more enthusiastic. "I'm a city girl," she declares. "And for me to admit that fishing is even remotely interesting to someone like me is something I thought I'd never say." What's the

attraction? "Well, I have

no desire to spend my Thursday evenings tying flies. But this is an activity that we can share together. Even my daughter Hayden, who's six [years old], loves to do it. It's exciting and peaceful all at the same time. When you hook a fish, there's nothing like it."

Still don't get it? Well, for those who think of fishing as sitting in a leaky wooden boat on a hot lake with a bobber that never moves, fishing does seem to make crocheting a viable alternative. But there are a couple of things to understand that can change your mind.

To begin with, Fairfield happens to be one of the best fishing places on Earth. Living here and not fishing is like living in Switzerland and not liking mountains or eating chocolate, or living in Scotland and not liking whiskey or sheep.

"[FISHING] IS AN ACTIVITY THAT WE CAN SHARE TOGETHER. EVEN MY DAUGHTER HAYDEN, WHO'S SIX [YEARS OLD], LOVES TO DO IT. IT'S EXCITING AND PEACEFUL ALL AT THE SAME TIME. WHEN YOU HOOK A FISH, THERE'S NOTHING LIKE IT."

—ROBIN REINARZ, FAIRFIELD RESIDENT



KRISTIN BURKE/THIRD RAIL STUDIOS

“FAIRFIELD HAPPENS TO BE ONE OF THE BEST FISHING PLACES ON EARTH.”

This is it. If you're in Fairfield, you are within about a five-minute drive of some of the best fishing anywhere. One of Eric's customers makes a weekly hour and a half drive from upstate New York just to fish here. Why is it so good?

For one thing, you have your choice of saltwater fishing or fresh water fishing and you can change your mind every day. If you prefer salt water, the fishing in Long Island Sound from Fairfield down to Norwalk is chock full of bass, bluefish and weak fish. That's because all the streams and rivers that course into Long Island Sound are delivering tons of exactly the kind of food these fish love. But here's the bonus for the fish.

Striped bass, who will fight on the end of the line like you've mistakenly hooked onto some kind of angry underwater Rottweiler, are as lazy as your cousin Earl. And that's where the islands in the Sound come into play. Those islands act as shelters from the tides, so a narcoleptic bass can expend very little energy while waiting for the tide to bring it breakfast. Of course, if you're out in the Sound in a boat, your fly, if tied right and properly cast, will appear to be just the feast that big bass (some of them weigh over 30 pounds) are waiting for.

Ed Byron, who has been fishing since he was three, is one of those who loves going out on the Sound with his boat. Before he fishes, he'll go into Eric's shop to "share what's going on that day—you know, what's biting and where." Ed has some advice of his own. "I'm kind of a minimalist in going after bass. I use a Clouser minnow,



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which is a weighted fly that imitates a sand eel. Or sometimes I'll use a Deceiver, which is larger, and imitates a baby bunker which bass love." Who knew?

Ed's recommendations for prime fishing spots? "Right around Sheffield Island [off Norwalk] and Cockenoe Island [off Westport] are good spots. And the South Pine Creek area is sometimes really jumping with fish. I saw some seagulls the other day swirling around a spot over the Sound and I knew that there must be a lot of bait fish there. That means there would be lots of bass as well. I can hardly wait to get out again."

If, unlike Ed, you don't have a boat or don't want one, then Fairfield is still the place to be for saltwater fishing. One way to do it is with a kayak. Kayak fishing is growing in popularity because it's great exercise, the kayak doesn't disturb the water much, and it floats along at just the right speed. There are even special kayaks



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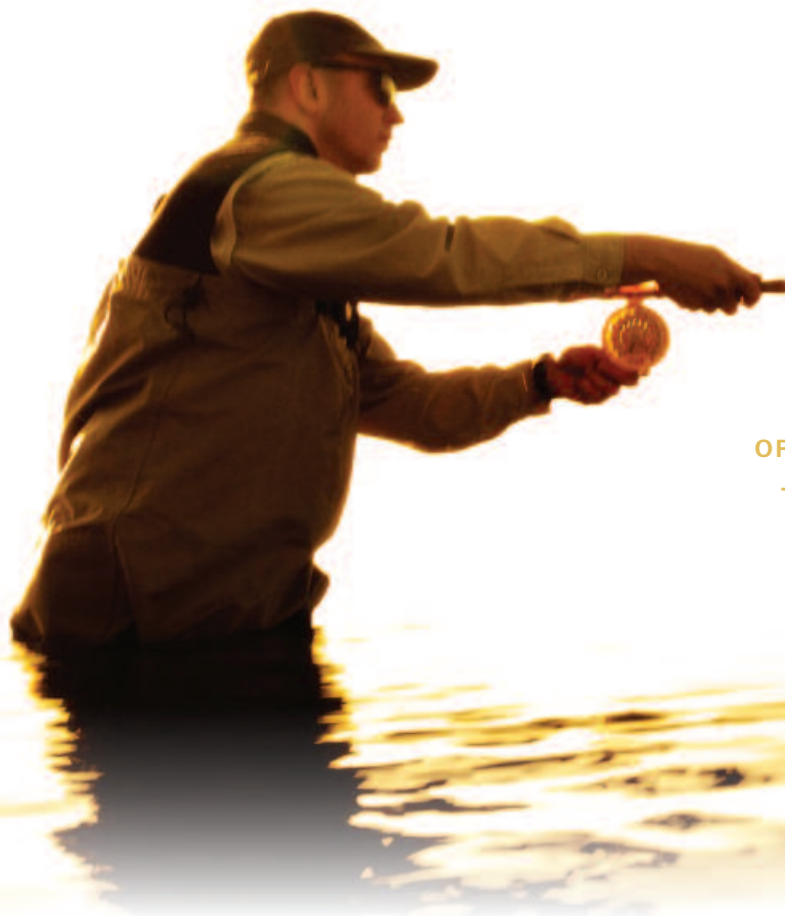
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built for fishing. They're slightly more stable than regular kayaks because, as Eric Johnson puts it, "if you hook a 30 pound striper in a kayak it's like you just added a 4-horsepower motor."

If you prefer to stand, you'll need waders. There's something called the Penfield Reef, which is a just-under-the-water natural barrier that goes out quite a way into the Sound from Fairfield Beach. With waders, you can walk on it. Then, when the tide is on the move, the fish know that this reef will act as a kind of snow fence for bait fish and they will wait by it for the bounty to appear. Once again, if you're there with your bait-look-alike fly, you will probably find yourself contending with a fish that is really irked off at finding a hook in its meal. You'll soon have a terrific fight on your hands. A dopey grin should appear on your face a few minutes later.

Of course, what the fish doesn't know is that in the tradition of fly fishing, anglers almost always release the fish before heading to the local fish store to buy one to eat. (The lakes, streams and Sound are much cleaner than they used to be, but the fishermen we talked to hardly ever put a catch in their pan).

Now if you really want a challenge, get out your fresh water rod and reel. For a couple of hundred dollars, you can get yourself pretty well outfitted and ready to go fishing.

Once you have your reel in hand, follow the Mill River upstream. Along the way, you'll notice signs designating a Mill River Trout Management Area in certain places.



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“OF COURSE, WHAT THE FISH DOESN'T KNOW IS THAT IN THE TRADITION OF FLY FISHING, ANGLERS ALMOST ALWAYS RELEASE THE FISH BEFORE HEADING TO THE LOCAL FISH STORE TO BUY ONE TO EAT.”



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HAMMERHEAD
DECEIVER

HELEN TROTMAN

This means that the river there has been stocked and that you have to use a barbless hook. (This gives the fish a sporting chance, sort of like using a bow and arrow instead of a sniper's rifle for hunting deer.) And, of course, you have to have a license, which you can get for \$20 at the Town Clerk's office.

Then comes the real fun. Trout know, somehow, what flies are flying near their home at different times of the year. So it behooves the careful fisher to determine what the trout are looking for by means of a sieve (to see what's in the water). Or by calling a local fly supplier. Anyway, you then tie the appropriate fly onto your line, but not just any line. The leader—the series of lines that eventually holds the fly—must be stepped down so that the fly is attached to a virtually invisible, thin piece of line. Trout know that their food does not come with a long tail attached.

Now then, since trout have very little else to do except watch bugs doing what bugs do, they are veritable experts in the behavior of the things. So if your fly comes crashing into a trout's territory (they don't wander very far) in a very un-bugly sort of way, the trout will turn its nose up at the offer, and you'll be standing there troutless.

But if—and this is the series of "ifs" that makes fly fishermen practically giddy—if you have the right fly tied on your line and if you correctly "load" your line by taking it back (no wrist!) and if you then smoothly deliver the rod forward in such a way that the line sails forth at exactly the right trajectory and length and if the line at the last possible moment flicks over so that the fly lands on the eddy in a very fly-like fashion, and if the trout believes it is a fly



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of the kind it prefers that day and *if* it hasn't been spooked by some fool with a dog upstream...well, you might just have caught yourself a fish.

But even if you haven't, because you're fishing in Fairfield, you will have walked to some of the most tranquil and beautiful spots within a hundred miles. Perry's Mill Ponds off Sturges Road, for example, are two ponds right in the middle of town where a chap named Perry once had a mill. It is so exquisite a site that you'll be tempted to keep it a secret.

But that would be a shame. Because why else does one pay a premium both in terms of dollars and effort to live in a place such as Fairfield and then not exult in these destinations not five minutes away that can restore your soul, your connection to nature and, if you're lucky, your sense of adventure in capturing a wily old trout who fell for your perfect cast?

Not everyone seeking relief from ring tones, laptops and demanding bosses will climb off the train and open a fishing shop. But a whole lot of families have a unique opportunity here to discover an ancient sport that, according to those who engage in it, is about as satisfying an activity as human beings get to do. And not only that, but we get to do it, without the purchase of a plane ticket, in a place that seems put on this Earth for those who want to fish. 🎣