



## Fly Fishing at Maggie, Virginia

Located about 1 hour west of Salem

Story and photos by Dan Genest

Ed Marks was hunting. Bending his 6-foot, 4-inch body as low as gimpy knees and a bad back would allow, he stalked his prey.

“All I want is one shot at one of those big boys,” he said as he crept in a little closer.

The quarry continued sipping in small midges as Marks made his first cast with a nymph just upstream from where a huge rainbow trout had porpoised in a pool on John’s Creek.

Marks took to fly fishing late in life. An avid trout fisherman throughout most of his 72 years, he was a firm believer in red wigglers and Eagle Claw hooks until his son Joe got him interested in fly fishing. This trip to Fly-Fishing at Maggie was a birthday present from Joe and his other son Mike.

And now as his fly bumped

across the bottom he was grinning with anticipation. The take was subtle, just a twitch of the indicator as it bounced through the riffle. “Set the hook! You got it,” I yelled. In that instant, as Ed raised the tip of the 9-foot fly rod, the years sloughed off and the bad knees were forgotten. The rainbow cleared the water by a good foot on its first jump and its belly-flop landing set off a geyser. And then the big fish shot downstream, peeling line. Ed was right behind, laughing, as he fought to get the fish to the net.

And what a fish it was, a brightly colored rainbow maybe 23 inches long and easily pushing 6 pounds. A trout that size is a rarity on Virginia’s hatchery-supported streams. On the 3-mile section of John’s Creek where he was fishing, it was simply an average-sized fish.

Owner Bob Ratliff operates Fly-

Fishing at Maggie as a fly-fishing-only, fee stream. “I believe bigger is better,” says Ratliff. “I don’t stock small fish. If you are paying to fish, you should be able to get a trophy.” At Fly-Fishing at Maggie, a big rainbow trout is one that goes 8 pounds. Some of Ratliff’s rainbows have grown to more than 10 pounds on the diet of fish food he gives them and the bountiful natural bugs and minnows that live in the fertile waters of John’s Creek. Operations similar to Ratliff’s in Georgia often charge up to \$250 for a day of fly fishing. The cost for Fly-Fishing at Maggie is \$75 a day.

The stream is also stocked with browns and a few brook trout, which though smaller than the rainbows still average about 16 inches, and they are growing all the time. For those looking for a real challenge, wander upstream from the office and throw a large streamer under the trees for a brown trout. The browns are beautifully colored and put up a tremendous fight. John’s Creek stays cool enough to support trout even in the summer, although Ratliff closes it in July and August to keep from stressing the trout.

Ratliff started stocking the stream in 1983. For two decades he kept it closed as his own little piece of fly-fishing heaven. In the spring of 2004, he decided to open the stretch to fly fishermen as a catch-and-release operation.

“I have a pretty big investment in each of those fish, and I urge all my clients to handle the fish properly and get them back in the water quickly so the next fellow can enjoy the thrill of landing a monster,” Ratliff said.

Ratliff urges anglers to use his nets. Don’t come to Maggie with a 15-inch catch-and-release net. It won’t get the job done. Ratliff’s nets are big enough for a salmon and because of their size help reduce injuries to the fish. And leave those 3-weight rods and 7x tippetts at home. Ratliff recommends either a 6- or 7-weight rod and 2x tippet.



**Joe Marks moves upstream to keep up with a runaway rainbow.**

trout I have ever seen. If I don't get another one the rest of the day, I am going home happy."

Fly-Fishing at Maggie is located about an hour's drive west of Salem. Take Route 311 west through the small town of Newport. About 5 miles out of Newport take a left on State Route 658 and follow it through the hamlet of Craig Springs to the even smaller hamlet of Maggie.

To contact Bob Ratliff at Fly-Fishing at Maggie call 540-864-5381.

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Dan Genest is an award-winning outdoor writer from Midlothian, Virginia. His articles have appeared in *Fly Fish America*, *Virginia Wildlife*, *Southern Anglers' Journal* and the *Richmond Times Dispatch*. A former newspaper reporter and editor, he currently works in public relations in Richmond.

**When a trout hits at Fly-Fishing at Maggie, be prepared for a big fish. This 9-pound rainbow hit a streamer pulled through a riffle.**



Some fly anglers scoff at fee-fishing operations such as Ratliff's. It is artificial and unrealistic, they argue. Ratliff, an accomplished fly fisherman himself, has a ready answer for those who disdain fee-fishing streams: "Fishing here is not easy. I stock only twice a year, and the trout quickly adapt to their natural surroundings. They get spooky and selective."

"Some anglers come here and only catch one fish the entire day," he said. "Of course, for most folks, when that one fish weighs five or six pounds, one fish is enough to make them happy."

If you don't believe Ratliff, you need to know what Ed Marks said as he released his six-pound rainbow back into John's Creek: "That's the biggest darn

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