



FROM  
DOWN ON  
THE FARM TO DOWNTOWN  
How Fly Anglers Are Changing Virginia's Rivers

Story and Photos  
by  
Beau Beasley

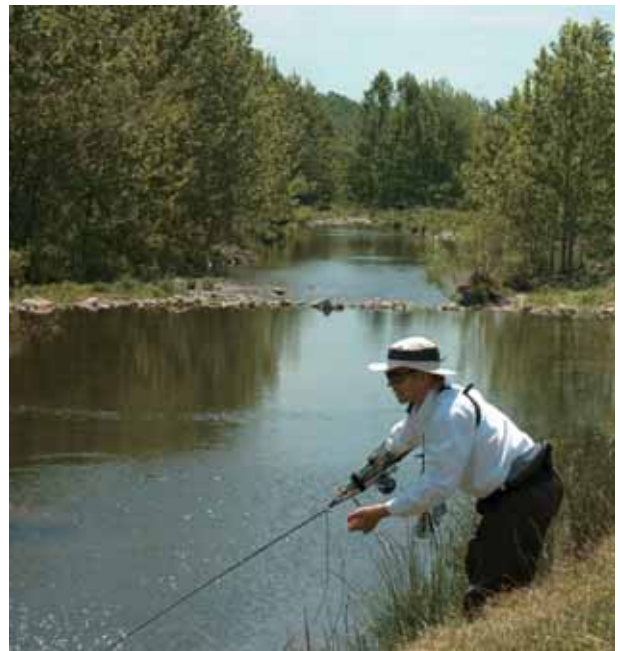


Escatawba Farms

**P**ull into Escatawba Farms, easily accessed from Interstate 64 in Allegany County, and you're greeted by an old friend: An enormous rainbow trout is mounted on the side of the farm's miniature silo. The jumping 'bow is a sign of good things to come for fly anglers who hope to get away from it all on some wonderful trout water.

In 1999, Derrick Barr decided to do something different with his family farm. "We changed from a traditional farm based purely on economics," he explains. "Farms are now an economy of scale operation requiring large numbers of cattle, about 300-plus, just to overcome the depreciation factor of farm equipment and the small profit margin. Since we had 500 acres, 350 of which are wooded, it was a no-brainer move for us to invite fly anglers to explore our trout waters."

**J.R. Salzman, a member of the Wisconsin Army National Guard, fished at Rose River Farm on behalf of Project Healing Waters**





Heavy equipment was used on the South River to help improve habitat for the river's fish.

Even if monster trout were not available—which they are—it's easy to see why folks drive hundreds of miles to reach Escatawba Farms: The landscape is pristine and soothing. Anglers from as far away as North Carolina have found their way to Escatawba Farms, willing to pay for what they know will be a relaxing and enjoyable day on the water. As public waters continue to fill up with patrons of every stripe, private fee-fishing destinations are becoming more prevalent across the Old Dominion.

Just past Syria in Madison County is Rose River Farm, another example of a traditional farm turned fee-fishing enterprise. Owner Douglas Dear, who is lucky enough to have the Rose River—one of the premiere trout streams of the Shenandoah National Park—flow right across his property, has seen interest in fishing on the farm soar since 2005 when he opened it up to the public. Dear fishes regularly himself, so it only made sense to him to fence off part of his property from his cows and invite anglers onto his property to enjoy the Rose.

The move has paid off in spades and landed his farm in the national news. Project Healing Waters, an organization dedicated to helping wounded veterans connect their physical therapy with fly fishing, picked Rose River Farm to hold its first major fundraiser. The event paired wounded vets with professional guides; teams then competed for prizes and other gear. Orvis and other top companies sponsored the event, and Dear allowed anglers and guides to fish on his farm at no cost, even stocking the river with trout that looked more like steelhead than the typical 12 inch Virginia stocker rainbows. In the end, Project Healing Waters raised over \$50,000. And Rose River Farm was in the regional and national spotlight, became the focus of magazine articles, and was even featured in an interview on National Public Radio.

#### **Not All Fun and Games**

Since time immemorial, farmers have faced every imaginable challenge, from disease to pests to destructive weather. Nontraditional farmers who have opened

their land to anglers also contend with the weather: Last season's drought placed a considerable strain on operations like Escatawba Farms and Rose River Farm. Both Derrick Barr and Douglas Dear had to turn customers away because of low water conditions. The trout suffered as well, since excessive heat places greater stress on the fish. Even fish that are quickly released by anglers can later die because of reduced oxygen supply in warm water.

Another challenge to the fee-fishing operation is the poacher. Though the locals may slip in and cart off a few fish now and again, the real threat to the stocked fishery comes from the professionals: eagles, herons, kingfishers, and even minks.

Just as traditional farmers regularly till their soil and improve the land, so these nontraditional farmers also work to develop their farm. They may not sell trout to restaurants, but they still carefully monitor and improve the health of their streams. Sometimes this might mean moving streamside rocks into the water to create small dams so that larger pools can form behind the dams in which fish may survive the warmer months. Sometimes, however, a larger investment is necessary: Barr, for example, has spent nearly \$25,000 in renovations to his property to improve the fishing.

#### **Downtown Fishing**

Just as some farmers have seen uses for their streams change, so too have urban settings like the City of Waynesboro. Once the South River, which runs through downtown, was seen simply as a cheap way to supply water to heavy industry. Today, however, the river is the focal point of a resurgence of tourism to the town. City manager Doug Walker doesn't mince words when it comes to the importance of the South River for Waynesboro's rebirth: "Waynesboro is positioning itself, thoughtfully and deliberately, to be a destination for recreational tourism."

To that end, Waynesboro is home

to the Virginia Fly Fishing Festival, which draws thousands of anglers to the city each spring. “Hosting the Virginia Fly Fishing Festival,” says Walker, “is one example of the city’s strategy to capture a share of the recreational tourism market. Waynesboro is not just a place to pull off the interstate and grab a quick bite to eat—it has become an angler’s destination.”

Since 1999 anglers have celebrated the quiet sport on the banks of the South River in Waynesboro every April. Business owners in the fly fishing industry fly from Arizona, Colorado, and even Alaska to participate in the festival and meet the well-heeled festival goers. And has it paid off? Well, the city’s newest bed and breakfast proposes to call itself “The Speckled Trout.” Enough said.

Officials in cities like Waynesboro understand that in our high pressure, technology-driven world, people yearn to be outside and to reconnect with nature. At the Virginia Fly Fishing Festival, ordinary people learn how to cast a fly rod, row a driftboat, and safely enter and exit a kayak. They hear professional guides talk about tips, tactics, and trips of a lifetime. They can also wander down the South River and wet a line for themselves.

And when attendees tire of fishing, they can relax by the river and listen to live music with a glass of wine from one of Virginia’s great wineries. Best of all for Waynesboro, these eco-conscious attendees leave tourist dollars behind them at area hotels, shops, and eateries. Yes, the factories may be long gone, but the South River is still working for Waynesboro—better (and cleaner) than ever.

This year when spring fever hits, you’ll be prepared: Get out from behind your desk, grab your kids and your gear, and hit an area stream. Perhaps you’re looking for the edge that fee for fishing can give you. Or bone up on your angling skills and enjoy the camaraderie of the Virginia Fly Fishing Festival in Waynesboro. You’ll be doing your part to support Virginia busi-

nesses and getting a soul-satisfying experience in return.

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Make plans to attend the 8<sup>th</sup> Annual Virginia Fly Fishing Festival on April 19 and 20 on the banks of the South River in Waynesboro, Virginia. Sponsors include the City of Waynesboro, Orvis, Dominion, SunTrust Bank, St.Croix, Augusta County, *The Virginia Sportsman*, Mid-Valley Press, *Virginia Living*, Brookside Flies, *Garden and Gun*, The Speckled Trout, Hog Island Boat Works, Gander Mountain, WaterSkeeter, and Alaska Trophy Adventures Lodge. Attendees will enjoy numerous classes and lectures as well as visiting the booths of nearly 100 vendors. A huge gear raffle is also available with the grand prize of a week’s free fishing in Alaska, including round-trip airfare. Some

advanced casting classes are available for a fee, and attendees may also purchase VIP Dinner tickets. For more information, visit the festival website: <http://www.vaflyfishingfestival.org>. To enjoy farm fishing, check out Escatawba Farms ([www.escatawba.com](http://www.escatawba.com); 540-962-6487) or Rose River Farm ([www.rosriverfarm.com](http://www.rosriverfarm.com); 703-209 2832).

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Beau Beasley is the author of *Fly Fishing Virginia: A Guide to Top Waters*, released in May 2007. He will be a guest speaker at this year’s Virginia Fly Fishing Festival. ([www.beau.easley.com](http://www.beau.easley.com)).