

A New Breed



Water Willow in the Rock Springs Run Reserve

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It always amazes me how our children can grow up to be such strangers. People always remark how our kids resemble us, but as they become mature adults, each child grows into worlds we never have known. It makes it all the more fun then to have them take you out on the river to discover what is not you, the genetic instructions you never gave and the friends of theirs you've never met.

I don't know where my daughter Kate caught fishing, but I remember vividly the day she came with Pete, her husband-to-be, and proposed we go fishing on the Wekiva. It's just the kind of place you want to bring all your lovers to. We put in at the main spring and headed for the lower half of Rock Springs Run.

Pete looked familiar enough, slender, long dark hair with a beard, quiet and unassuming. This would be me at thirty, except that the light in his eyes had a lot to do with a river I had never seen very well. His fishing experience and pleasure was spread out over many of the lakes and rivers of central Florida, from Tampa to Mosquito Inlet. He looked down through the spring-clear waters of Wekiva, identifying each species as though he were paging through a family album. He had held all of these in his hand.

Pete was the first person I took out on the river who saw beyond the below, whose focus was fully in the water. He took the bow, Kate was in the middle, and I was sterning, but not very much since we had two poles constantly popping.

From my whole life, I can only remember two experiences of fishing. When we moved to Daytona Beach in 1952, my dad used to take us for a picnic to the Tomoka State Park, riding up Riverside Drive under that marvelous canopy of oaks. He liked to fish off the bridge and I remember baiting hooks then with him—at twelve or thirteen, I suppose—but I never caught a thing.

Later, when my mom and dad bought their first and only house in Tomoka Oaks, out where I-95 now crosses the river, they had a canal in the back yard that connected right into the upper Tomoka River. One morning I took dad's rod and reel out back and hauled in two catfish out of the muddy canal. They were so spiky and tricky to handle that it turned me against the whole prospect of fishing. I was Pete's age then and had not yet developed a taste for fish of any kind. But we can all change.

For most of her adolescent dating years, Kate used to entertain us with her vehement protestations that she had sworn off marriage and kids. So it was fun for me this day to study the relationship of my young passengers who really enjoyed this life together over the water. I have no clue, as they would say, who taught her how to fish and how she landed this stranger in the front seat who was whipping out some fins just about every other cast.

The pace of fishing is five to ten times slower than my usual mode of coasting with the current, idling from side to side, and stopping only occasionally to observe a little blue heron stalking across some lily pads. I like to study the sky, listen to the woods, comb the reeds and snags for gators and otters. Sitting in this or that fishing niche, however, with nothing to do but keep us steady, I began to take a better measure of the underwater fin-fare.

I know about the difference between the bream and the bass of Florida's waters, but never realized what varieties of color you can see, how often tinged with pink or red the bream can appear when held up to the sky. Easy now to comprehend Elizabeth Bishop's contemplations of the rainbow in her almost romantic poem about the old fish she caught who carried the insignia of many jousts with the hook.

The bass in the Wekiva are less numerous and smaller, in my limited visual experience, than the giants you see regularly in the Rainbow River, for example, or the champions they show on the sports page that some lucky fellow holds up out of the St. Johns River for a prize. Pete pulls up one bass, just bigger than his hand, long and thin with rounded large mouth that must be formidable to all the little feeder fish Wekiva boasts.

It turns out Pete is a country boy from the mountains of North Carolina who operates complicated machines in a cardboard factory, churning out #32 and #56 boxes, made to order for all kinds of commercial enterprises. He has very good hands.

Kate is really having a lot of fun and she too can do all the little magic that goes with tying bait, flipping the rod in narrow spaces, winding the silvery flashes into the boat, catching the wiggle out of thin air, and most importantly, extracting the little sharp metal edge out of the cartilage and skin of a thin lip. For the man in the stern, each catch is more interesting as a discovery of the stranger at the reel than the one on the hook.

One weird fish, however, turns up, reminding us why parent and child end up in different worlds in the same river. Pete has caught a bream with the mouth of a bass. He holds it up for both of us to see, and I am truly astounded. “How can this be?” I ask, incredulous in my dangerously little knowledge, and acting as though I had seen a minotaur.

Pete is unsurprised. Though it happens not often, the fisher occasionally finds such anomalies of form. Now my inventory of the waters is keen on finding other examples of this hybrid, adaptation, or mutant. Our conversation explores these possibilities and I later report the finding to a colleague in biology who says he might be interested in doing a study of Wekiva’s hybrids.

We turn up Rock Springs Run and paddle for quite a while against the brisk current, dislodging a large gator on the right, before settling down under the canopy of an oak tree to have some lunch and fish some more. When Kate turns to ask, “Want to take my pole for a while?” I go through my apologies and tell the story of the two catfish that were such a hassle to unhook and throw back. But finally, after some more prodding, I say okay, mostly because I feel sure that Pete will catch any gill within our casting range and that my usual luck with rod and reel will endanger nothing.

Then oops, before that thought can become a connection, there’s a bite on the line and I am reeling it toward the right side of the canoe. About halfway in, it seems to be stuck on something, so I give the pole a jerk and the darn thing flies up into the tree overhead, a little pink and silver flash, ten feet above us, fluttering like a female cardinal after a bath. What in the world have I done. It’s stuck up there.

Now the guilt I feel at hooking a fish is magnified twelve-fold by the fact that I can’t get it down. The pole is useless, the fish is gasping for water, and I would rather be hooked myself or strung up in the tree. This is what it comes to when you set forth on the prospect of finding out, through your dear children, what you are not.

Pete eventually cut the line and got the half-rainbow down safely. I’ve had plenty of time to put it all in perspective. These days I like to imagine the story the bream must have been telling his schoolmates about how he was caught up into the seventh heaven and looked down on this little spot of Rock Springs and realized that all his passions and fears were for nothing compared to the eternal bliss of the next transformation: “It was like my fins were wings and I could fly.” I don’t remember now, but I think he might have been one of those bream with a large bass’s mouth.¹

¹According to Florida fishing guides, the fish was likely a warmouth.