

Fall *Fly* Fishing at DeSoto

By Ken Thomas,
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BRITNEY HUGHES



Desoto
State Park
Superintendent
Ken Thomas
surrounded
by the scenic
beauty of the
Little River.

SHAWN MCRAY

While sitting on the tailgate of my truck at the Azalea Cascade Boardwalk trailhead, I get some strange looks as I don my breathable waders and boots. It's not until I put my fly rod together that the peculiar looks turn from confusion to understanding.

On my short hike to the West Fork of Little River, I pause on the bridge at Indian Falls to take in the beautiful fall view. DeSoto State Park and Little River Canyon National Preserve have long been premier fall color destinations in Alabama. In years past, the fall color has peaked around the end of October and beginning of November. Consequently, reservations for a stay at DeSoto State Park should be made well in advance as it is the busiest season of the year.

Skill and Stealth

As I meander down the Yellow Trail, I start to think I would have been better off with an eight-foot or seven-and-a-half-foot fly rod to deal with the tight surroundings of the West Fork of Little River. I'll have to focus on my back casts if I'm to keep my fishing flies out of the limbs and bushes along the banks. Any fly fisherman spending time in the park or canyon should practice roll casting in advance of their visit.

Approaching the small river, I purposely slow my movements for two reasons. First, I am spellbound by the magnificent combinations of rocks, river and color. Second, I do not want to spook my prey in the shallow, crystal clear water. Because of the cramped banks, shallow water and pristine water clarity, I recommend wearing earth tones and/or camouflage in all seasons. Be conscience of any shadows that you may cast over pools and potential hiding spots. The fish are easily spooked and anglers need all the advantage we can get.

Another consideration is sound; splashing through the water will scare the fish and make them more skittish than they already are. Try to avoid wading when possible or utilize the small rapid areas to mask your sound when in the water; otherwise, stay on the bank.

In the portion of the West Fork of Little River that flows through DeSoto State Park and the Little River Wildlife Management Area, you can expect casts of less than 20 feet. Long casts can be made in the Little River WMA and Little River Canyon where the river widens after joining with the East Fork. This is why roll casting is such an important skill to have.

Bluegill and Redeye Bass

I have heard rumors of trout in Little River, but personally have never seen one, nor met any anglers who have caught one. My prey this afternoon are bluegill and redeye bass. To help catch fish I have chosen a fly fishing standard, the Adams. The Adams and all its variations has proven over and over to be a favorite dry fly of many species of fish. It is a combination of many of the insects commonly found floating on the water surface, waiting to be devoured.

Black Gnats, Elk Hair Caddis, Royal Wulff, Hoppers, and Poppers are also good flies to try in northeast Alabama. I have had good luck with Copper John and Czech Nymphs for under the surface action.



Staying out of sight might provide the angler with a needed advantage when dealing with skittish fish in clear narrow waters.

SHAWN MCRAY

SUGGESTED FLIES



▶ ADAMS



▶ BLACK GNAT



▶ ROYAL WULFF



▶ DAVE'S HOPPER



▶ POPPER

FLY PHOTOS BY BRITNEY HUGHES

Because of my surroundings and typical short casts, I stick with an average leader and tippet size. I typically use a seven-and-a-half-foot 5X leader with a two- to three-foot 3X tippet.

My first cast needs to count because if I make a poor delivery then I will probably spook the fish and ruin any second chance. Here it goes... and it's a terrible cast as the Adams fly plops into the water. I wait anyway, but there are no takers. So, I cast into a small pool that doesn't look like it could have any fish in it. After a pause, there is a small explosion on the water and the all the magic of fly fishing comes to pass as I gently reel in a small, but beautiful, redeye bass.



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The redeye bass, sometimes called the Coosa bass, lives in the many cold-water rivers and streams of Lookout Mountain. Like other fish, it seeks shelter in undercut banks, aquatic vegetation

and submerged rocks and stumps. Young redeye bass occur in shallow runs and riffles over sand and gravel substrates. Its diet includes aquatic and terrestrial insects, crayfish, and small fishes.



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Long Eared Sunfish

There are plenty of other fish that readily provide a lot of great fun for fly fishing. The other species of fish I'm after include any of the members of the sunfish and black bass families. Bluegills are very fun to catch and are real fighters. You can be easily

fooled into thinking you have a monster on the line only to land a palmed sized red-eared sunfish. Little River also provides opportunities to catch the largemouth bass while fly fishing.

The narrow width and bush-choked banks of the West Fork of Little River make it challenging to get a good cast. So again, be sure to practice roll casting before visiting the park or preserve. Look for small eddies where the slower currents meet the faster current. Fish hang out there while feeding awaiting food to wash by them. Small pools occur sporadically down the length of Little River. While trying to keep my flies out of the bushes I cast as close to the banks as possible. A friend once told me to float a dry fly under a low hanging branch and there'll always be a bream waiting for it. He's right most of the time.

Fly fishing is sometimes misunderstood by other anglers. Just like any outdoor activity, it takes patience to learn but is more than worth the effort. **AA**

{How to Roll Cast}

The roll cast is truly a "must-have" technique for limited casting area.

- 1** Begin with the rod tip parallel to the water's surface.
- 2** Lift your arm slowly and smoothly in a back-and-up direction until your hand is next to your face allowing the line to slide across the water toward you.
- 3** It is critical that the line not be aerialized – it must slide smoothly across the water's surface until it hangs by your side.
- 4** Tip your wrist back stopping the rod in the eleven o'clock position and the line hangs by your side.
- 5** Once the line has stopped sliding toward you, make an accelerated forward stroke to roll the line out in front of yourself.
- 6** Stopping the stroke to propel the line into the air.

ILLUSTRATION BY BILLY POPE