



Scott Nesbit casts for brook trout in a creek near campus.

Catch & Release

FOOLISH FISHES ARE HOOKED ON
THE ANCIENT ANGLING ART OF
Fly Fishing.



By Patricia Grotts Kelly '77

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TOM ROSTER

Not long after *A River Runs Through It* mesmerized moviegoers with its breathtaking footage of Montana and spurred a huge national interest in fly fishing, Professor Emeritus of Education Jim Holden taught Scott Nesbit how to cast. An instructor in exercise science and head tennis coach at St. Olaf, Nesbit was hooked — fly fishing became his passion. So when Cindy Book, chair of the college’s physical education department, suggested to Nesbit that he teach a class in fly fishing, he jumped at the chance.

St. Olaf students are required to take two physical education classes, and they must be in different areas. For the past six years, “Fly Fishing 128” has been one of their choices, and it always has a wait list. The lucky fifteen students who make it in spend fifty minutes a week learning to tie flies, another fifty learning to cast, and as many hours as possible fishing in nearby streams — outings usually led by Ole alumni who are former fly fishing students and who also assist Nesbit with hands-on help in the classroom. Local fly-fishing experts also give guest lectures on conservation, winter fly fishing, equipment, and entomology.

On rainy days, students cast in the Tostrud Center field house; on sunny days, they can be seen waving their fly rods and lines all over campus. “We use hula hoops for targets,” says Nesbit. “Or we aim for things like that chair, where that student is sitting.” He grins. “We use yarn flies when we practice. No hooks.”

 Every summer, countless Minnesotans head north in pursuit of the walleye, leaving behind a fly-fishing paradise in southeastern Minnesota. Nesbit is happy to see them go: “There are so many streams, so many fish, and so few people to catch them!”

Northfield is at the northern edge of a 24,000-square-mile “Driftless” region, which encompasses northeast Iowa, southeast Minnesota, southwest Wisconsin, and northwest Illinois. Because this region was not overrun by glaciers, it has none of the drift (dirt, gravel, and rock) that glaciers leave behind. Its dramatic cut-limestone gorges, sandstone valleys, and steep hillsides are laced with more than 600 icy cold, spring-fed streams, home to sunfish, smallmouth bass, largemouth bass, carp, and trout — rainbow, wild brown, and native brook.

“I’ve done plenty of boat fishing,” says Nesbit, “but fly fishing gets you out there in the cold water where the trout are, and it’s knockdown gorgeous!”

It’s also good exercise. “You walk a lot, sometimes upward of six or seven miles in a day,” Nesbit says. “You’re in the stream, continually balancing in the current, climbing up and down banks, trying to position yourself. And then there’s the movement of the arms. I’m always sore the next day and very tired. But it’s a good kind of tired.”

St. Olaf students can practice casting on the Cannon River right in downtown Northfield, but they travel to smaller, cleaner streams to fish for brown and rainbow trout: Trout Run in Chatfield, Hay Creek in Red Wing, the Whitewater River system, and the South Branch of the Root River. A little-known jewel is Rice Creek, a tiny, pristine stream that runs through a small dairy farm just south of Northfield and whose owner graciously allows St. Olaf students to fish for its native brook trout.

“The brook trout is the canary in the mine,” says Nesbit, “because it can only survive in the cleanest, coldest water. Once the water gets at all warm or dirty, it dies. And these fish are absolutely beautiful.”

Fly fishing students practice casting in the Tostrud Center field house and tie their own flies in the classroom before heading off to nearby rivers and streams.





Fly-fishing students at St. Olaf — an equal number of men and women — come from all disciplines and backgrounds, but most love the outdoors, are conservation-minded, and love a good challenge. Nesbit says the stream is an ideal place to problem-solve, think creatively, and experiment. Tree branches, rocks, rapids — all sorts of things get in the way of putting your fly where you want to put it in the water. You can use basic casting, roll casting, curved casting,



side-arm casting, casting into the wind ... as many casts as there are places where the fish are hanging out, facing upstream, waiting for edible tidbits to arrive.

“In fly fishing, you read the water like you read a book,” says Nesbit. “You look for logs or branches in the water. Most fish like to dart out and get their food and then go back into protection. You look for bends in the stream, or pools, or slower ‘runs’ after little rapids with ‘riffly’ water. Trout like riffly water because it’s highly oxygenated, and the bubbles and texture on the water hide them from predatory birds. But it helps us catch them because they can’t see us as well. When they see you, they’re gone! Trout are spooky, and that’s what makes trout fishing extremely challenging.”

Nesbit says two myths keep people from taking up the sport. The first is that it’s expensive. “It can be, but it doesn’t have to be,” he says. “You can still buy an \$80 rod and go fly fishing in sandals and shorts. No problem. But the water is cold, so you might want waders.”

The other myth is that it’s too difficult. “To be able to put a fly in a teacup from twenty yards away — very difficult. That takes a lot of practice and luck. But to get your fly in a general area where fish might be — not difficult at all! That’s what we do in our class.”

Nesbit says that tying flies isn’t difficult either — except for the very small ones, which he usually buys. “And a fly doesn’t have to look great,” he says. Fish are attracted to how the fly moves through the water just as much as what it looks like.

At the start of each fly-tying class, Nesbit writes the “recipe” for a fly on the blackboard, and the students hunker down over their vises and bobbins. “It’s like a craft class,” he says with a grin. Each student is responsible for buying and stocking his or her own fly-tying kit with the stuff that flies are made of: yarn, chenille, copper wire, deer and elk hair, turkey and pheasant feathers, synthetic furs, and shimmering bits of chiffon. Nesbit says there are recipes that date back 200 years, for woolly buggers, sand worms, foam beetles, hare’s ear nymphs, scuds, prince nymphs, elk hair caddis flies, and countless more.

Nesbit’s newest fly is made solely from pheasant feathers and copper wire. “I’ve been catching fish with it like crazy!”



On a cloudy, humid day in late July, Nesbit gently lands his pheasant tail nymph on Rice Creek. Trout are partial to mayflies, caddis flies, midges, and unlucky terrestrials — nonaquatic insects that land on the water by accident, such as grasshoppers and beetles. The pheasant tail nymph mimics a mayfly that has just begun its life cycle on the stream.

“Part of reading the stream is to see what the fish are eating,” says Nesbit. “You look at the bugs on the water, the bugs in the spider webs on the side of the stream, you turn over rocks.”

Almost immediately, he hooks a small brook trout. He lifts it up to admire its brown speckled sleekness, its smooth belly the color of pale orange sherbet. He gently releases it beneath the water. A few minutes later, he catches another and releases it.

Catching fish, Nesbit says, is only a small part of the pleasure of fly fishing for St. Olaf students: “When you ask them, ‘How was the fishing?’ it’s not about how much he or she caught. It’s about how much they loved being out there.” 🦄

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