

# Trout Town

## Carlisle, Pennsylvania

In the Footsteps of Legends

By Henry Ramsay



PHOTO BY CRYSTAL HUNT. COURTESY CUMBERLAND VALLEY VISITORS BUREAU

**M**any states have communities that can aptly be termed “Trout Town.” They are destination towns for anglers, places with easy access to outstanding fisheries, usually including famous, if not downright legendary, streams. They are communities that cater to fly fishers, where a wader-clad, rod-toting visitor won’t raise an eyebrow.

New York’s Catskill Mountains, for example, claim the small town of Roscoe, which proudly declares itself Trout Town USA. And rightly so because of the nearby Beaver Kill, Willowemoc Creek, and the East Branch Delaware, as well as a number of smaller, lesser-known headwater streams.

But hardly to be outshone, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, in the heart of the Cumberland Valley, is a genuine Trout Town in its own right. The Cumberland Valley in central Pennsylvania is rich in limestone marl deposits, which contribute to the fertility and alkalinity of the area’s streams; an abundance of aquifers in the valley give birth to famous limestone streams and spring creeks, such as the legendary Letort Spring Run, Big Spring, Falling Spring Branch, and Yellow Breeches, as well as less-heralded waters, such as Green Spring, Silver Springs Run, and Shaeffer Run.

The Cumberland Valley offers a variety of other fun things to see and do while you’re visiting Carlisle. After a long day on the stream, relax with a cold one at one of the area’s breweries and brewpubs. From regional favorites like the Appalachian Brewing Company, with a branch in nearby Mechanicsburg, to hangouts like Molly Pitcher Brewing Company in downtown Carlisle, you’re sure to find your next favorite microbrew. The valley also abounds in great dining options, including hometown eateries





Vince Marinaro’s mesmerizing accounts of the fishery captivated me; he captured the allure and mystery of this smooth seam of water that wells up from limestone aquifers in the heart of the Cumberland Valley. To a boy who grew up fishing the fast pocket waters and riffles of streams in the Appalachian and Pocono Mountains, the world described by Marinaro in *A Modern Dry-Fly Code* and *In the Ring of the Rise* seemed exotic

and foreign, even though Carlisle was only an hour’s drive to the west. Charlie Fox’s *This Wonderful World of Trout* added to the intrigue, and I soon became obsessed with the idea of sampling the Letort. In June 1978, my friend Steve and I turned off Spring Garden Street, where a simple mailbox at the end of Foxcrest Drive marked the gateway into the enchanting world of the legendary Letort.

My 11th-grade school year had ended the day before, and all of the tackle and camping gear we owned at that stage of life was piled into the back of Steve’s 1963 Chevy step-side pickup. While another year of education had brought us closer to ending our high school experience, the stream we stood next to was ready to

cozy taverns, pubs, waterfront options, and more.

The area offers myriad diversions from fly fishing, and welcomes all outdoor enthusiasts. You can spend a morning, afternoon, or entire day hiking, biking, bird-watching, or kayaking along intriguing land and water trails, including the midway point of the Ap-

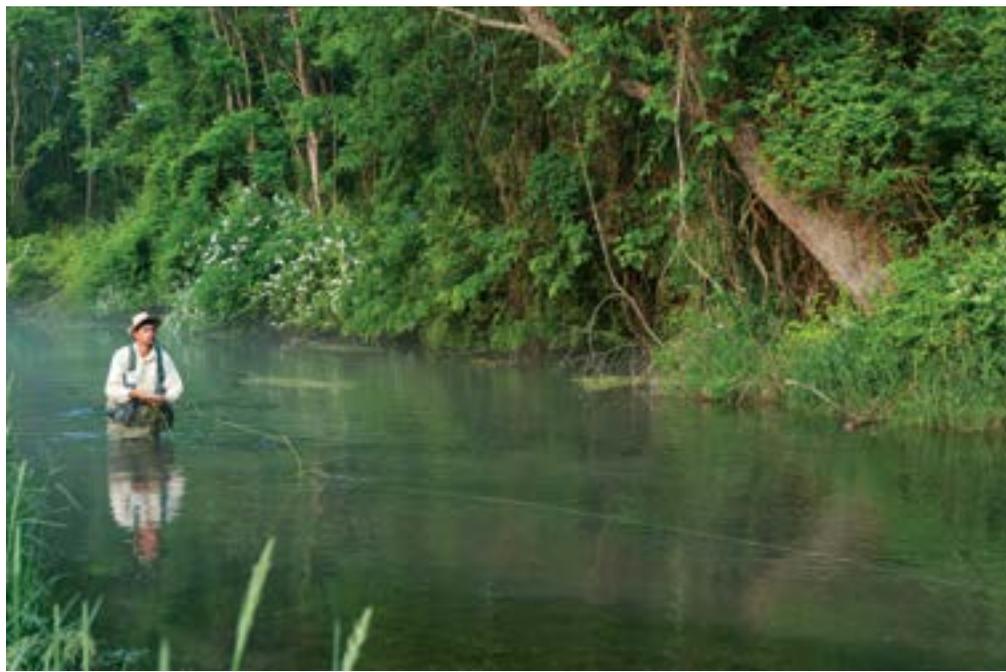
palachian Trail, where easy day hikes allow beautiful views of the valley’s farmland and towns. Explore the valley’s scenic waterways by kayak on such routes as the Yellow Breeches Creek Water Trail or the Conodoguinet Creek Water Trail.

The valley is also known for auto events and American history. Plan your trip around one of Carlisle Events’ famous car shows, held from April through October at the Carlisle Fairgrounds. If you’re a history buff, stop by the U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center in Carlisle—it’s the premier facility for U.S. Army research and includes the interactive Soldier Experience Gallery and the mile-long Army Heritage Trail, lined with full-scale military exhibits.

With so much to do, you’ll want to spend the night. Visit [www.visitcumberlandvalley.com](http://www.visitcumberlandvalley.com) to browse lodging options, including modern hotels and charming bed-and-breakfasts, and book a room.

**The Legendary Letort**

Long before I ever walked along the banks of the Letort, cast a fly into its cold currents, and felt the surge of one of its speckled inhabitants at the end of my line, I had read everything I could find about the famous stream.



teach us what we had yet to learn about fly fishing. Teenage boys often don’t know that they don’t know about many things in life, but they are typically bold about learning. We knocked on the screen door at the end of Foxcrest and inquired as to the whereabouts of Mr. Fox. It turned out that he was out of town and we would have to explore and learn about the stream on our own. Years later, when I finally had the chance to meet Fox, I discovered him to be one of the kindest, most unpretentious fly-fishing writers I would ever meet: a true gentleman.



PHOTO BY JAY NICHOLS

large brown trout that, like a crocodile, slid from under a logjam upstream from Fox's house to crush a white marabou streamer during an afternoon rain shower. The remainder of that first trip was spent learning just how spooky a wild Letort trout could be and how even walking on the spongy ground along its banks could send out vibrations that sent fish speeding away. If I was fortunate enough to make a good cast without

We spent four days camped at the end of Foxcrest Drive and discovered that the things we'd read were, in fact, true. Standing by the stream for the first time was a bit disconcerting. The Letort was entirely different from the waters I was accustomed to fishing. The water was smooth and seemingly placid, like the surface of a mirror, and clear as gin—hypnotic as it flowed through lush weedbeds. The currents slid by quietly and smoothly without the light music played by the riffles, runs, and pockets of a freestone stream.

It was captivating.

I caught one fish during that trip, on a Sulphur nymph drifted between beds of watercress and elodea, and also had a brief encounter with one very

spooking a rising trout, I learned how a trout in a creek like this could drift along for several feet studying a fly on the surface before rejecting it and returning to its feeding position.

Letort Spring Run is so challenging that the difficulties in fishing it ushered in new fly-fishing philosophies, strategies, and tactics. For Marinaro, Fox, and others, the Letort was a classroom, a place that necessitated challenging the traditions and conventions of fly fishing. It spawned a wellspring of new approaches to fly design to match aquatic insects with sparse patterns that sat flush in the surface film; it required anglers to devise new tactics for confronting hyper-selective brown trout. The Thorax Dun, developed by Marinaro and presented in *A Modern Dry-Fly Code*, was a radical departure from the influential Catskill School of fly design and would eventually change the way many mayfly imitations were tied.

Moreover, early Letort anglers needed to think beyond aquatic insects. The stream produces hatches of Sulphurs and *Tricorythodes*, but it is also loaded with scuds—favorite forage for Letort trout. These fish also feed heavily on terrestrial insects. The spring creeks of the Cumberland Valley were ground zero in the development of flies for imitating terrestrial insects. Marinaro and his circle of

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friends developed many of the first imitations of beetles, ants, grasshoppers, and leafhoppers (which Marinaro called “jassids”). Other angling writers, such as Ed Koch, Ed Shenk, and Ernest Schwiebert, wrote extensively about the Letort and the other streams surrounding Carlisle, and the lessons learned by fishing them. The influence of these streams eventually reached far beyond the Cumberland Valley, and many fly patterns used on selective trout throughout the country are based on lessons learned here.

Yes, the Letort is a special place. But it’s not easy. It will teach you what you haven’t learned about fly fishing yet, and if you are fortunate enough to fool one of its wild browns, you’ll remember the experience for a long time.

The Letort begins near Bonny Brook and flows for just over 9 miles to Conodoguinet Creek. The upper Letort, paralleling Spring Garden Street, was the classroom for Fox and Marinaro and is home to the famous Barnyard and Turnaround Pools, as well as Otto’s, Marinaro’s, and Fox’s Meadows. Below (east-erly of) Carlisle, lots of good water is easy to reach via roads that cross the stream after departing US Highway 11. While the Letort may not be as productive as it was decades ago, it remains a unique, excellent fishery, a place every fly angler needs to experience. A tragic fish kill in 1981 eradicated most of the legendary wild browns that inhabited the upper section of the stream, but surviving fish in the headwaters have multiplied and the stream continues to rebound. A Special Regulations Area begins 300 yards above the Bonnybrook Road bridge and continues for 1.75 miles downstream to the railroad bridge at the south end of Letort Park in Carlisle, with fishing limited to catch-and-release fly fishing. From this point downstream to the mouth, the Letort is managed as Class A water.



PHOTO BY JAY NICHOLS

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## The Beautiful Breeches

Five miles southeast of Carlisle flows the famous Yellow Breeches Creek, dramatically different from the Letort. While the “Breeches” is a limestone stream, it is not a spring creek and lacks the lush aquatic weeds and smooth, low-gradient flows we tend to visualize when we think of a Pennsylvania limestone. Instead, the Yellow Breeches looks like many freestone streams, replete with riffles, runs, and pools, but it benefits from the same limestone formations that filter water to its sister streams in the Cumberland Valley. Hence it is fertile, supporting abundant insect life and trout.

In fact, while the famous limestone spring creeks do not support high densities and diversity of mayflies, caddisflies, and stoneflies, the lovely Yellow Breeches offers a variety of superb hatches, including Blue Quills, Hendricksons, *Baetis* Olives, Sulphurs, Cahills, March Browns, and even a summer hatch of *Hexagenia*. The stream is also rich in caddisflies, so spring and summer bring a variety of hatch events, often with several types of insects active at the same time. The stream’s signature hatch is that of the White Fly (*Ephoron leukon*), which occurs after sundown during August.

Yellow Breeches offers solid populations of wild browns in its upper section, while most of the trout lower down, near Boiling Springs, are stocked. From its source on the north side of South Mountain, the stream flows more than 40 miles to the Susquehanna River.

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Anglers willing to explore can enjoy solitude along with wild fish in the upper reach above Boiling Springs. The most popular section of the stream begins at the outflow of Children's Lake (known as The Run) and continues downstream through the Allenberry Resort Inn and Playhouse property. This section is one of the most heavily stocked sections of stream in Pennsylvania and offers easy access and easy wading. A Special Regulations Area (catch-and-release; artificial lures and flies) begins at the outflow of Children's Lake in Boiling Springs and continues downstream for approximately 1 mile.

Tom Baltz moved to the Carlisle area in 1968 and began guiding on the local streams in the mid-1970s. He knows the Cumberland Valley area streams better than most, and is the originator of my favorite midge pattern, which he developed on Yellow Breeches. Baltz needed a tiny *Baetis* mayfly pattern that his clients could see on the water. He tinkered at the vise and came up with the aptly named I Can See It Midge (ICSI), a parachute pattern with a bright, easy-to-track wing post. You won't find me without this pattern when I fish the Carlisle-area waters.

## Big Spring Surprises

A few miles west of Carlisle, near the small town of Newville, flows Big Spring Creek, the fifth-largest limestone spring creek in Pennsylvania. Big Spring flows just 5 miles from its source to Conodoguinet Creek.

Think about what constitutes a "classic" limestone spring creek. Do you conjure images of a low-gradient, cold-water-stream flowing through lush meadows with thick beds of water cress and elodea. Big Spring fulfills that vision, but throws in a wrinkle: a substantial population of wild brook trout that defy the brook trout stereotype of being pretty but unsophisticated and easy to catch. Big Spring's resident brookies are certainly beautiful, but they are also hyper-selective. They rise and feed as astutely as wild spring creek browns, allowing anglers no room for clumsy approaches, sloppy casts, or dragging flies. These fish are so sophisticated and elusive.

Big Spring has been through both tragedy and recovery. Years ago, the stream was one of the best spring creeks in the country and boasted a tremendous population of wild, free-rising brook trout that were often measured in pounds, as well as a few monster browns, such as Don Martin's 15.5-pound beast taken in 1945. In 1953, however, Green Spring Trout Farms constructed a fish hatchery



PHOTO BY HENRY RAMSAY

below the source of Big Spring, and in short order the brookie population downstream from the hatchery collapsed. Fortunately, the Green Spring hatchery was closed in 1968, and the stream began to rebound.

But then, in 1973, the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission built a hatchery at the headwaters, and almost immediately the brook trout population in the stream went into precipitous decline and only a short section known as The Ditch held a decent population of stream-bred trout. The hatchery was finally closed in 2001, and with improved water quality, trout numbers have recovered (including large wild rainbows).

Hatches on Big Spring include *Baetis* Olives, Sulphurs, and lots of midges. Cress Bugs and shrimp patterns are



very effective here, and Mike Heck's Simple Shrimp is my go-to pattern most of the time. Sculpin patterns can be very effective on big trout. Terrestrial imitations are excellent during summer. Special Regulations water (catch-and-release fly fishing) on Big Spring stretches for 1.5 miles, from just below the stream's source downstream to the bridge at Nealy Road; the stream is easy to access from Big Spring Road.

## Off the Radar

To the west of Newville flows Green Spring Creek, one of the quiet, less popular streams in the area. This stream has been damaged by agriculture and development, negatively affecting its trout and aquatic insect populations. The stream still produces hatches of Sulphurs and *Baetis* Olives, but most of the food sources for its resident trout are crustaceans and terrestrials. Despite the loss of productivity over the years, Green Spring Creek remains a fun fishery that is overshadowed by the area's famous waters, so anglers can find solitude and seclusion. A catch-and-release, fly-fishing-only section, accessible from Bullshead Road, runs 1.2 miles from the mouth at Conodoguinet Creek up to just below the intersection with State Route 641 (Greenspring Road) and Bullshead Road.

## Carlisle, PA NOTEBOOK

**When:** Year-round.

**Where:** Carlisle is 20 mi. west of Harrisburg.

**Headquarters:** Carlisle offers all services and amenities. *Information:* Cumberland Valley Visitors Bureau, (888) 513-5130, [www.visitcumberlandvalley.com](http://www.visitcumberlandvalley.com).

**Appropriate gear:** *Letort/Big Spring/other spring creeks:* 8.5- to 9-ft., 3- to 4-wt. rods; floating lines; 12- to 16-ft. leaders; 5X–7X tippets. *Yellow Breeches:* 7- to 9-ft., 4- to 5-wt. rods; floating lines; 9-ft. leaders; 4X–6X tippets.

**Useful fly patterns:** Nymphs, emergers, duns, and spinner patterns to match *Baetis* Olives and Sulphurs, including Thorax Duns; ICSI and No Name Midge, and midge larva and pupa patterns; Letort Hopper, Letort Cricket, beetles, Parachute Ant (black, cinnamon, and red head); Heck's Simple Shrimp; sculpin patterns.

**Necessary accessories:** Polarized sunglasses, neutral-colored clothing.

**Fly shops/guides:** *Boiling Springs:* TCO Fly Shop, (717) 609-0169. Angling Adventures (Tom Baltz), (717) 486-7438; Mike Heck's Trout Guides, (717) 816-7557, <http://fallingsprings.com>; Ken Okorn Fly Fishing Guide Service (717) 697-2451; Thomas Livingston, (717) 938-1931.

**Books/maps:** *Matching Major Eastern Hatches: New Patterns for Selective Trout* by Henry Ramsay; *Spring Creek Strategies* by Mike Heck; *A Modern Dry-Fly Code* and *In the Ring of the Rise* by Vincent Marinaro; *This Wonderful World of Trout* by Charles Fox; *Flyfisher's Guide to Pennsylvania* by Dave Wolfe; *Pocketguide to Pennsylvania Hatches* by Charles Meck and Paul Weamer. Stream Map USA, Northeast, (215) 491-4223, [www.streammapusa.com](http://www.streammapusa.com); *Pennsylvania Atlas & Gazetteer* by DeLorme.



PHOTO BY ERIC FORBERGER. COURTESY CUMBERLAND VALLEY VISITORS BUREAU



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To the south, in Franklin County near Chambersburg, flows the beautiful Falling Spring Branch. Only about 4 miles long, the creek holds wild browns and rainbows in the upper water (above Interstate 81). The upper stretch includes a 2.5-mile catch-and-release, fly-fishing-only section that begins a few hundred yards above the Briar Lane bridge and continues downstream to the Geisel property, which is marked by a wire. Below I-81, a stocked 1-mile delayed-harvest section begins downstream of Walker Road and ends at the Fifth Avenue bridge. The stream produces a typical mix of hatches for the area, including *Baetis* Olives, Tricos, midges, and *Chimarra* (Black) Caddisflies. Cress bugs and shrimp are a big part of the trout's diet, and terrestrials are important during summer.

## On the Water and Off

Success on the Carlisle-area spring creeks depends on a stealthy approach; you must gain an advantageous casting position without spooking fish. My first visit to the Letort over 35 years ago hammered that point home, as I watched anglers wearing muted natural tones, even camouflage, staying well back from the stream banks and moving slowly, looking for visibly feeding fish. When an angler found a target, he would stalk into position ever so carefully and quietly, and then cast accurately and purposefully, taking great pains not to spook the fish. The same lessons and tactics hold true today. These waters can certainly be frustrating, but the difficulty also means success is very rewarding.

And when you're ready to celebrate success or tuck tail and commiserate over tough sledding on these hallowed waters, Carlisle beckons, truly one of America's great Trout Towns. ➤

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*Henry Ramsay, [www.ramsayflies.com](http://www.ramsayflies.com), is a Pennsylvania-based guide, writer, photographer, and creative fly tier. He is the author of Matching Major Eastern Hatches: New Patterns for Selective Trout.*

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