

# The Drake

FOR THOSE WHO FISH



## Harpeth River Emergence

Twenty years of success for a Tennessee conservancy  
BY JOHN MATTOX

ABOUT 27 MILES south of Nashville, the historic town of Franklin is growing rapidly, like many affluent bedroom 'burbs. Founded in 1799 by Abram Maury, the town is named for Ben, and has seen its share of prosperity and heartache. In the early 1800s, it was one of the richest counties in America, but this prosperity often came on the backs of slaves, and on Nov. 30, 1864, the Civil War ravaged the town. The main battle pitted Confederate soldiers moving up from the south, against the Union forces, which were entrenched on the north side of the Harpeth River.

Today, the town successfully markets its historic battlefields, fine restaurants, art deco theater, and occasional sightings of country music stars. But Franklin doesn't market the river it was founded upon—the Harpeth. Never heard of it? Not surprising. Its bass fishery is overshadowed by brook trout in the Smokies. Even residents of Franklin hardly know where it is, except when they cross the bridges that span it.

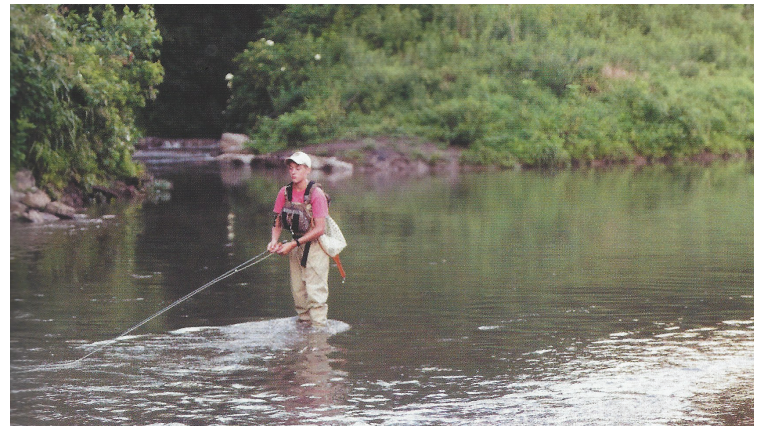
This all changed on May 1, 2010, when a 500-year flood raised river levels 30 feet above normal, sending water over bridges and across fields, pinning drowned cows against bridge pillars. More than 13 inches fell in two days, which is still a record for the area. During clean-up efforts, I'd hear, "I had no idea the river was so close." A month later, I opened a canoe outfitting business with the tagline, "Discover the rivers in your own backyard."

The mountain creeks in the Smokies and the tailwaters across the state are known for an abundance of trout. The Harpeth has some too, thanks to the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, which regularly stocks it with rainbows each winter. But the Harpeth is primarily a warmwater river, a haven for largemouth and smallmouth, and varieties of bluegill, crappie, gar, and carp.

Given its lazy flow, it's ideal for family-friendly flyfishing. On summer weekends, while waiting for canoe shuttles,

I cast poppers or crawfish patterns for smallies, and the bite is so good that it has weaned me from chasing trout east of Nashville. If the bass bite is off, I'll catch a few fat, longear sunfish and marvel at the wormy patterns of teal and tangerine along their sides.

Like many natural resources, the Harpeth is at war with the people around it. In 2015, American Rivers listed it number nine on its annual "most endangered rivers in the country" list. As an outfitter, the distinction between polluted and endangered is important, especially when adventuresome dads and cautious moms want to float the river with their children. Potential patrons will sometimes ask, "Isn't the river polluted?"



"Impaired and endangered," I respond, then try to explain the difference: how low-flows combined with nitrates and phosphates from over-fertilized lawns and the sewage plant causes algae that depletes oxygen, endangering plants and animals, not humans.

"So, it's safe to play in?," they ask.  
"Yes, and to fish and float."

The Harpeth Conservancy is the main citizen-run conservation group for the river. Founded in 2000 by local landowners, the conservancy sponsors education events and clean-ups, including a year-long effort to remove debris after the flood. More than 153 tons of material were removed—trash, bikes, sheds, even a piano. Then 12,000 trees were planted to shore up the riparian zone. The

conservancy was also part of a coalition that removed an old lowhead dam—the only barrier on the river.

Not surprisingly, the conservancy's priorities often clash with those of conservative community leaders, who want economic progress without the shackles of environmental regulations. One of the biggest conflicts focused on the amount of phosphates and nitrates that could legally be discharged into the Harpeth from the city's sewage-treatment plant. Over several years, the conservancy gathered data showing that the plant was often contributing as much as 50 percent of the river's flow every day during low-flow periods. While this inflow was clearer than the river upstream, it was laden with chemicals that exceeded the limits set by the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation (TDEC), the state's regulatory agency.

Months of discussions turned into years of inaction, until 2014, when the conservancy and the Southern Environmental Law Center filed a federal lawsuit against the city for violating its permit.

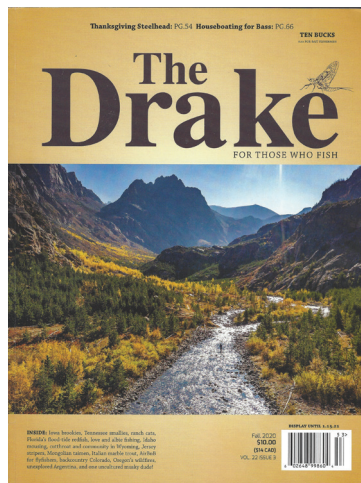
The EPA reviewed the suit and publicly backed it, but the City of Franklin hired a lawyer to defend its violations,

then filed a countersuit, arguing that the conservancy was abusing its power by filing on behalf of the river. A federal judge dismissed the countersuit more than a year later, paving the way for the original suit to go to trial. In the meantime, the City of Franklin and the Harpeth Conservancy reached a settlement out of court.

Among the agreements was that Franklin would fund ongoing data collection and issue immediate public warnings whenever sewage overflows occurred. More importantly, the city agreed to improve and optimize the treatment plant. Now five years later, data from the sewage plant shows that phosphate and nitrate levels released into the Harpeth—while still enough to endanger it during low flows—has decreased by 30 percent.

Throughout this year, the Harpeth Conservancy has celebrated its 20 years of advocacy and accomplishments. Battle fires may still smolder along the banks of the Harpeth, and the growing pains for Franklin and the county aren't over. But as more hikers, birders, paddlers, and flyfishers discover the river, there will be more voices than ever fighting to protect the Harpeth and its tributaries. ■

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