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one there, but it was a constant struggle. I was all fired up to catch a landlock on a dry, and at that game, I was batting a big fat zero.

One morning I spoke with a lucky angler who had taken two fish on a Henryville Special. Bingo! Since I had a bunch of those little devils hiding in my vest, I figured this was about to become a cakewalk. So armed with a Henryville Special on my tippet, I went off to do battle. In a few stream locations I could clearly see the salmon, and I had no problem presenting the fly dead-drift right over them. Yet I couldn't even get a half-hearted refusal. I lengthened the leader. I went to a finer tippet. I even began casting from my knees. No enchilada. Regardless of how gingerly I put the fly over them, those bad boys remained glued to the bottom. I was flummoxed.

On our last full day, by pure accident, I finally hit pay dirt. Distracted for a moment, I allowed my dry fly to skate across the current below me. Landlock on! I was in a state of euphoria. Upon releasing my prize, however, waves of disbelief washed over me. Why had all those drag-free presentations proved fruitless? Why on earth did a fly skating across the surface score? Was it pure luck? Had I just entertained the dumbest landlock in Maine? Or was there something about a "waking" fly that landlocks preferred? Believe me I spent plenty of time pondering those things as the van bucked its way back home.

In the intervening years I fished for landlocks in many other rivers, including the Upper Connecticut, the Androscoggin, the Roach, the Moose, and the Kennebago. It's been fun, but along with the adventure came a steep learning curve. The single biggest lesson was to never judge a book by its cover.

Brown trout and landlocks look like peas in a pod, but landlocks are far more moody and mercurial creatures. I have seen days when they boiled on top like bluefish, and days when they sat on the streambed like mummies in a museum. The former were all too rare and the latter all too common, especially in the fall. Equally mysterious, landlocks appear connected by some magic telepathy. Fish long enough for these critters and you'll see what I

mean. An entire pool, or even a stretch of river, can be a ghost town for hours. Then a shift in the wind or a drop of rain—or some perturbation undetectable to humans—suddenly has every landlock climbing on a hook.

Expect their quirky behavior to hold your feet to the fire and have you learning new tricks. I remember, for instance, walking to a beautiful pool below a dam, one late autumn afternoon. Out in the glassy glide was a respected local angler. Rather than embarrass myself by fishing next to him, I parked on the bank and watched, hoping to



Illustration | Al Hassall

pick up a tip or two. After casting upstream, he immediately raised his rod and did the "high-stick" nymph thing. Yet as soon as the fly got below him, he dropped the rod to the water, and pointed the tip straight downstream. Then with the fly hanging in the current, he leisurely smoked his cigar.

I'm not talking a few totes—two minutes might go by before he cast again. It had me scratching my noggin, but what happened next made my jaw drop. Much to my surprise, during one of these intermezzos, he suddenly hooked up. Turns out that soaking a nymph, or a streamer, straight downstream is a proven salmon slayer. It was news to me. You position yourself above where the fish are holding, and then dangle a fly directly in their face. Landlocks can tire of this pesky intruder, haul off, and smash it. Or at least so the theory goes. Whatever the reason, I've seen it work many times.

Love a good contradiction? Besides being attracted to a motionless fly, landlocks are also speed freaks. Allow me a minute to explain. For several years I've been making annual

autumn trips with a group of serious salmon anglers. They showed me a fly they affectionately called their "emerger." It consisted of a dubbed body and a short poly wing on a size 14 dry-fly hook. Nothing to it. Brimming with the panache you expect from an introductory fly-tying class, I paid it no mind. Yet here again I was about to receive a landlock lesson.

Much to my chagrin, these guys regularly got salmon to rise up and nail that homely creation. As simple as the fly was, however, it wasn't simple to use. To unlock its magic, you had to "skate" it at precisely the right speed over a landlock's head. This involves casting upcurrent of the target and then quickly applying a downstream mend. Yes, you're absolutely right; it's counter-intuitive to what you would normally do. But it's the belly in the line that causes the fly to accelerate downstream. And by controlling the belly's size, and position of the rod tip, you control the fly's speed. Get it right, and even lethargic landlocks lift from their lairs.

None of this is to say that typical trout tactics are useless on landlocks. Far from it. A drag-free dry or a dead-drifted nymph may do just fine. And of course, as most everyone knows, swinging a streamer down-and-across works too. Still if you treat landlocks strictly like trout, mark my words, you're headed for trouble. Sooner or later you're going to roll snake eyes. And when that happens, you might be out of luck for hours, or even days.

For me, the fact that landlocks are fickle makes them all the more fascinating. I'm forever thinking that right around the corner a new trick or a new fly awaits me. It's all about discovery. And even if the fish are cooperative, you can be waylaid by the conditions. River too high. River too low. Raining a monsoon. Sleet ricocheting off your brim. Yeah, problems come down the pike. And that's why to this day I still cross my fingers whenever I head north. It pays to be lucky with landlocks.

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Lucky with Landlocks

▲ ED MITCHELL



Illustration | Al Hassall

BACK IN THE 1980s I owned a beat-up Ford Econoline that had been converted into a camper. As much as I liked the van, it had some issues. Sporting random blisters of rust and green paint faded into a muddy olive, it looked AWOL from a junkyard. My friends quickly dubbed it the “Econosaurus,” which aptly fit its hulking silhouette. The woman I was seeing had a less flattering name for it, although her biggest gripe was with the bumper sticker stating “Save the Beaverkill.” No matter how I explained it, she remained convinced it was clever sexist remark aimed at female genitalia.

Still the van had its merits. For one thing it carried an enormous amount of gear. Absolutely nothing needed to be left behind. Want to bring the canoe? Want to bring the grill? Want to bring the washing machine? No problem.

And despite the fossilized French fries under the seat, and the crumbs permanently ground into the rug, it offered reasonably comfortable overnight accommodations. Yes, for all its glaring faults, it was a fine fishing vehicle. And the one that took me on my first landlocked salmon trip.

On that fateful May morning, I pointed the Econosaurus toward Maine’s fabled Grand Lake Stream. Joining me on the long trek was a Dave Foley, a sporting book dealer from West Hartford. With four days’ worth of junk food and enough hooks to hold back the Queen Mary, we hit the highway. Our hopes ran high as the big 302-cubic-inch engine galloped along, but within an hour bad luck struck. Just north of Worcester, Massachusetts, we hit the Mother of All Potholes, snapping the passenger-side front shock. Damn!

Immediately the tire began bouncing in the wheel well at a rate that would have made a Harlem Globetrotter proud. We were both a bit scared, but given the serious nature of any fishing trip there was no discussion of turning back. And so for the next nine hours every bump in the road became a heart-pounding, teeth-chattering event, requiring one foot on

the brake and eight white knuckles on the steering wheel. I’ll never forget it.

Little did I know at the time, but our bad luck with the truck would soon extend to the fishing. After checking into the cabin we ventured down to the river where we encountered many despondent anglers. Gripes included: low water levels, high water temperatures, not enough salmon in the river, and a record hatch of blackflies. Despite all that, a few folks were catching fish and I felt we would too. Haven’t all our years of trout fishing taught us enough to catch these critters? Hell yeah.

Well, the fishing turned out to be painfully slow. And the blackflies were painful. Still, we caught a fish here and

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