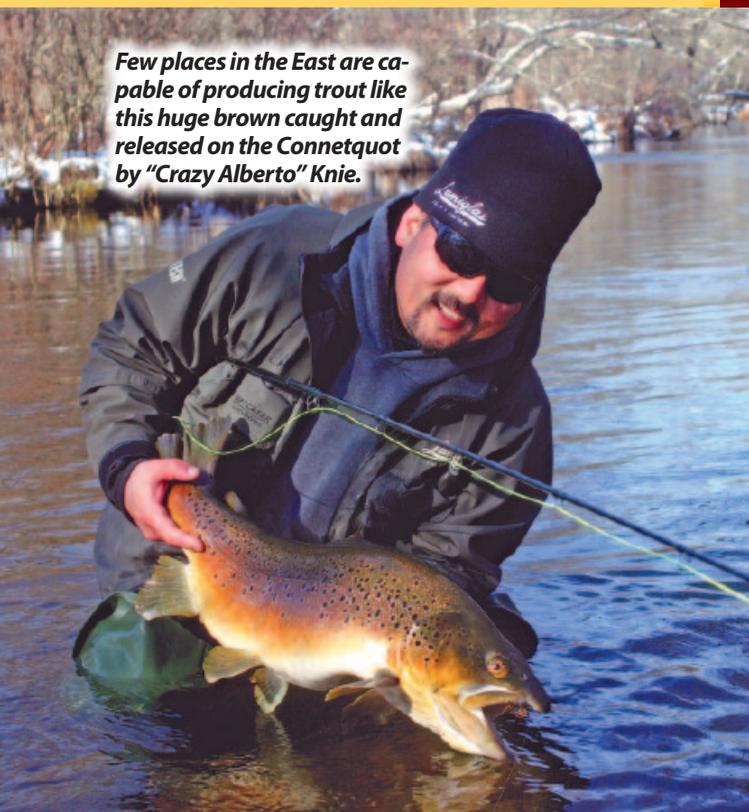
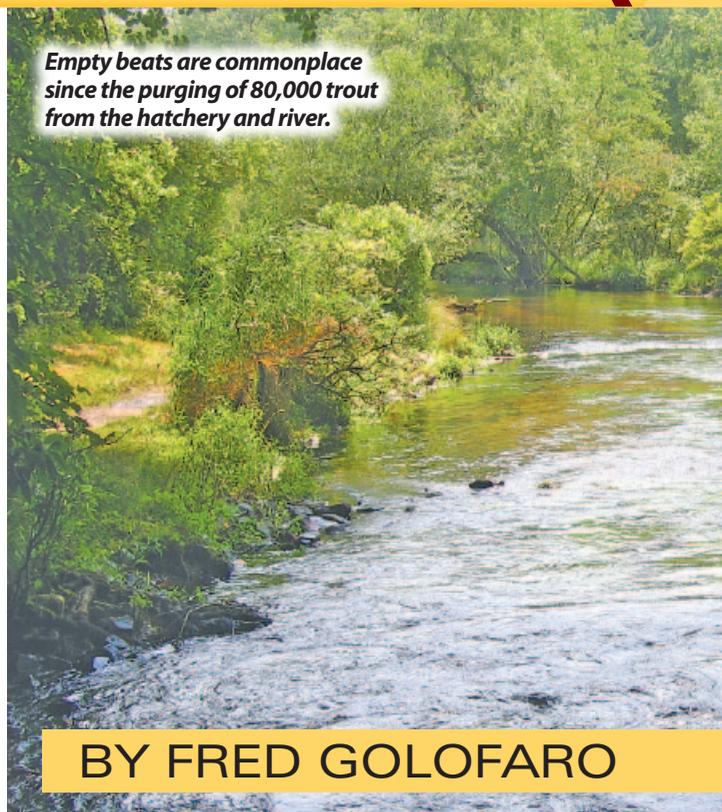


Few places in the East are capable of producing trout like this huge brown caught and released on the Connetquot by "Crazy Alberto" Knie.



Empty beats are commonplace since the purging of 80,000 trout from the hatchery and river.



BY FRED GOLOFARO

THE CONNETQUOT DEBACLE

Did the DEC's efforts to combat the IPN Virus needlessly destroy a world class trout fishery? You decide.

There are few words to describe the travesty that has taken place with the Connetquot River State Park Preserve trout hatchery, and the trout fishery within the preserve. New York State, and the freshwater division of our Department of Conservation in particular, in all its infinite wisdom has managed to destroy a world class trout fishery that once drew anglers from every corner of the United States, as well countries like France, England, Italy, Japan and Australia, and was routinely featured in national magazines. This questionable effort also threatens to destroy or forever alter a hatchery that was first constructed in 1870 and is recognized on the National Historic Registry.

The reason for eliminating 80,000 trout from the hatchery and river by expanded bag limits and allowing the trout to migrate downstream and into the tidal section of the river was to curb a virus known as Infectious Pancreatic Necrosis (IPN). While scores of trout fishermen plying the pool at Bubbles Ball and adjacent Rattlesnake Creek benefited from the bounty released in park waters, the move effectively emptied waters within the preserve of its once robust trout population as the Department of Conservation (DEC) sought to eliminate IPN from the hatchery.

The big question is why DEC reacted with such extreme measures to a "disease" that is common throughout the trout's range in the continental United States and is en-

demio to 40 percent of the hatcheries in Great Britain. IPN is not communicable to humans, it is not a threat to those who handle or consume infected fish, and it is not even considered a problem in most states or other countries. IPN has had no discernible impact on the propagation of brook, brown or rainbow trout in the Connetquot hatchery. Many other forms of wildlife such as osprey, seagulls, herons, kingfishers, raccoons, muskrats and eels which inhabit the park carry the virus, with no apparent harm to themselves. Evidence of the IPN virus has also been found in crustaceans and shellfish. It primarily affects fry and fingerling trout, and there is no evidence of increased mortality as a result of the virus. The mortality rate at the hatchery has remained fairly consistent at around 15 percent for more than 50 years.

Now consider that even if the DEC's efforts at eliminating the virus are successful, what guarantee is there that the river and hatchery will remain free of IPN, given all of the potential carriers, including those fish that return from the tidal reaches of the river to the park's waters? IPN could easily be reintroduced from the Estuary and Great South Bay, since the virus has been detected in saltwater fish. The DEC's position all along has been that they are obligated to make sure that "clean" fish are produced for stocking, but they have no control or mandate over what happens to them after they are stocked. Maybe you can make sense

PRESS CONFERENCE AT CONNETQUOT

Islip Town Supervisor Phil Nolan is hosting a press conference at 11 a.m. on Tuesday, August 18 at the Connetquot Hatchery to discuss the impact of the hatchery closing. All users of the park are invited to attend.

also threaten the hatchery's place on the National Registry of Historic Buildings, may violate the deed and grant terms which created the preserve, and could impact the river and estuary ecosystem.

The big question now that they have moved ahead and are facing costly solutions to correcting "the problem," is how they expect to pay for it given the state's current fiscal crisis. It will cost millions to replace the hatchery to abide by the current federal water pollution act, and according to several state legislators, the odds of coming up with that funding would be slim to none. Add to that, every state department is facing budget cuts, including DEC and State Parks. I'm especially frustrated because this past winter I penned an editorial questioning the direction DEC appeared to be taking. Just prior to going to press, I received a phone call suggesting I hold off on running the editorial which was critical of the DEC's actions to that point, based on a meeting held that day which seemed to offer hope of

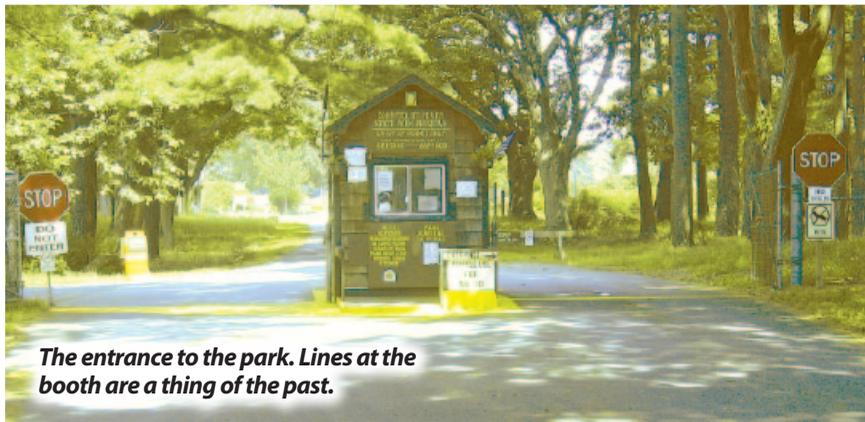
resolving the issue in a positive way. I pulled the editorial, and shortly after found out that the DEC moved ahead and was in the process of having the hatchery emptied of trout. Prior to that, people like Assemblywoman Ginny Fields, Lawrence Merrymann – conservation chair of the Great South Bay Audubon Society, Richard Remmer – former chairman of Friends of the Connetquot, and Dr. Richard Steinberger, who did extensive research on this issue for the Idle Hour Fly Fishers, all questioned the direction DEC was taking and outlined the ramifications of their actions to Carol Ash, Commissioner of the New York State Office of Parks,

Recreation and Historic Preservation and State Historic Preservation Officer, and DEC Commissioner Pete Grannis.

Who is ultimately responsible for the Connetquot disaster and why did the project move ahead despite all of the warning signs and potential negative effects? One has to wonder if there was another agenda at work here, or were the decision makers so blind to the obvious ramifications?

If all of the above is not bad enough, consider that a hatchery which has operated successfully and continuously for over 140 years now lies dormant; IPN has probably been endemic to the river for over 25 years, and possibly 100; The Connetquot hatchery was one of the most successful programs in the state for brook trout, and trout have been successfully bred here for over 50 years. Connetquot trout are mostly free from boils, square tail and other diseases, and the mortality rate for fry, as noted earlier, has not significantly changed in over 50 years.

If you would like to express your frustration at the DEC's decision to pursue cleansing the Connetquot Hatchery of IPN, direct your comments to DEC Commissioner Peter Grannis, New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, 625 Broadway, Albany, NY 12233-1011 (518-402-8545) or email dpaeweb@gw.dec.state.ny.us. You can also direct your calls to Chart Guthrie in Freshwater Fisheries at 631-444-0280. 🐟



The entrance to the park. Lines at the booth are a thing of the past.

of that, but I can't! If DEC was overly concerned about stocking infected fish, fish raised in Connetquot could have been used solely for stocking the park's waters, with no fish being brought in and no fish sent out. This would have maintained the high quality of the fishery while DEC took the appropriate time to consider its options.

By stumbling ahead with this cleansing effort, they have only succeeded in destroying a serious revenue source for the state at a time when New York can ill afford to lose a penny. A recent call to the park inquiring about the availability of a beat on that day revealed that there were only two reservations for the park's waters. Prior to this atrocity, it was common to have to reserve a beat a week in advance. Very simply – no one is willing to pay \$20 to catch nothing. Walking the banks of the river on a recent visit to the park, I did not see a trout along a stretch covering seven or eight beats.

The hatchery itself was a major draw, attracting thousands of visitors to the park. Who is going to pay the entrance fee to see empty concrete ponds? This decision also impacted on neighboring businesses which catered to the park's fly fishermen. In fact, Parkwood Outfitters, just down the road on Sunrise Highway, is closing its doors as a result of the drastic drop in business resulting from the current state of the fishery. The DEC's actions