Hike and Learn

Stover Creek Brook Trout Habitat Improvement

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STOVER CREEK BROOK TROUT HABITAT IMPROVEMENT PROJECT

Figure 1 – Stover Creek is located on the north slope of the Blue Ridge Mountains in the Chattahoochee National Forest in north Georgia. Click map to enlarge.

As you walk the Appalachian Trail along Stover Creek **(see Fig. 1)**, near the second foot bridge you will observe a series of log structures in the stream (approximate GPS location N 34.65994/W 084.18998). These structures were installed by volunteers from Trout Unlimited, who worked with personnel/staff from the US Forest Service and Wildlife Resources Division of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources to improve habitat conditions for the brook trout.

Cold, clean water, adequate cover, plentiful food and trees – these are just some of the requirements for good trout habitat. While many people probably don't spend a lot of time thinking about the living requirements for the **brook trout**, fortunately for the "brookie" (as the fish is affectionately known among anglers), there are some people who do. They not only care about the fish's habitat needs, but they are willing to spend time doing something about it. During the summers of 2008 and 2009, Trout Unlimited volunteers provided more than 700 hours of donated labor while assisting with the installation of 45 habitat improvement structures.

Stover Creek is a typical cold-water stream, winding for 1.5 miles through the **Chattahoochee National Forest** in Fannin County. As with many North Georgia streams, this portion of Stover Creek was relatively shallow and slow-moving, with limited habitat for trout. Biologists, who evaluated the stream, laid out a series of structures that are designed to create deeper pools, flush sediment and provide overhead cover **(see Fig. 2**). Types of structures included wedge dams, K-dams, cover logs, channel constrictors and deflectors. Each of these structures has a purpose. Some are designed to provide cover for the trout to hide from predators, and some are designed to create pools and fast-flowing water to improve feeding and reproduction.

Figure 2 – In-stream structures, such as these deflectors, are built with natural materials that reduce degradation of the stream environment and improve trout habitat.

Brook trout have declined across their range throughout the Eastern United States for a number of reasons, including poor land use practices, degraded habitat and the introduction of non-native brown and rainbow trout, which can often out-compete native brook trout. In Georgia almost all of the cold-water trout streams are located on the Chattahoochee National Forest. In recent years the US Forest Service in cooperation with the Georgia DNR and Trout Unlimited has worked to restore brook-trout habitat on a number of these streams. In Stover Creek, a natural barrier was also strengthened to prevent further intrusion of rainbow and brown trout into the upper portions of the stream.

Figure 3 -- Workday on Stover Creek combined the resources of several public and private organizations.

Another aspect of providing for healthy habitat for the brook trout is to ensure proper management of the surrounding forest. Maintaining healthy streamside forests prevents sediment and pollutants from entering the stream and also provides adequate shade to maintain cold water temperatures that brook trout require.

The Stover Creek project was a cooperative effort involving biologists from the **GDNR/Wildlife Resources Division**, the **USDA Forest Service** and volunteers from several local chapters of **Trout Unlimited**. The project was funded by a grant from **TU's Embrace-a Stream flagship grant program** secured by the Gold Rush Chapter and Oconee River chapters of Trout Unlimited, and a grant provided by the **US Fish and Wildlife Service Eastern Brook Trout Joint Venture**.