

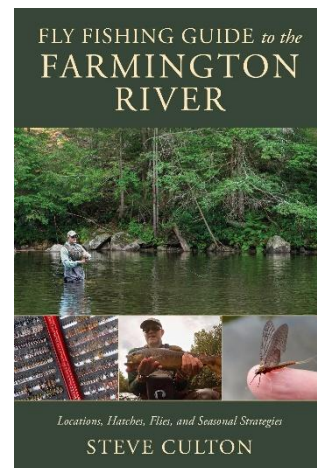
Hooking Up **By Carl Ochnio**



Steve Culton is an outdoor writer, guide, and instructor specializing in fly fishing. His work has appeared in *Field & Stream*, *American Angler*, *The Flyfish Journal*, *The Drake*, *The Fisherman*, *Flyfishing & Tying Journal*, *Eastern Fly Fishing*, *Fly Rod & Reel Online*, and the *Mid Atlantic Fly-Fishing Guide*. He describes himself as "Just a guy who loves fly fishing." His website is www.currentseams.com

First of all, congratulations on your upcoming book focusing on the Farmington River. When it be available, and how will folks be able to purchase a copy?

The Fly Fishing Guide to The Farmington River, published by Stackpole, is on track for release around June 1st. It will be available locally at UpCountry Sportfishing and The Local Fly Shop in New Hartford. I'm confident both Orvis stores in Connecticut will carry it, as well as The Compleat Angler in Darien. Amazon will also stock it, and I plan to have copies at my presentations, fly expos, and shows. Also, I encourage folks to check my website, as I am considering making a limited number of signed copies available there.



What inspired you to write a book about the Farmington?

I believe the Farmington River truly deserves this book, and this is what inspired me to start putting it together. Over time, I've noticed that many clients and anglers are often overwhelmed or intimidated by the river's size and complexity, and are unsure where to start. This book aims to address those issues. I think readers will find that the Fly Fishing Guide to the Farmington River offers detailed, fly-fishing-specific information that anglers will find extremely helpful.

How long have you been fishing the Farmington, and do you see it as your home water?

I have been fishing the Farmington River since the mid-1970s and consider it my home water. My earliest memories are of spin fishing with my dad and casting worms up near the Hogback Dam. I considered myself to have been a pretty good spin fisher, yet I clearly recall the day I realized there might be something to this fly-fishing approach. I had my spinning rod and was in the upper part of The Church Pool, in the midst of a Hendrickson hatch, with the water just boiling with trout. I licked my chops, thinking about what I thought was about to happen, and they did not touch my worm, because they were selectively feeding on Hendricksons.

Up until that day, I could normally wade into a pool, and if there were fish there, I would be on them. That was the first time I epically failed, and it was the moment when I thought, "Oh, there might be something to this fly-fishing thing," and the seed was planted.

Catching a trout on a fly rod is a memorable moment for many anglers that often stays with us forever. Do you recall that moment? Was that when you realized fly fishing was meant for you?

Yes, it was either May or June, and I was in the riffles that led into the Boneyard. I was using a Blue-Wing Olive parachute pattern, probably about a quarter-century ago. It was my first trout on a fly rod, and I just thought, well, this is harder and better, and I like it more. And I have been doing it ever since. What's special about that memory is that I was using my dad's old Tonka Queen bamboo rod, which he got back in the '50s. It wasn't an expensive rod, but it was how I learned to fly fish with that 7-foot-9-inch, 5-weight rod. What is really cool is that I just had it recently restored and still use it.

While researching the book, did you uncover any historical facts or information that really surprised you?

*I'm a history buff, and although this book primarily focuses on angling, I came across some intriguing information. I share some of it, and even extremely knowledgeable anglers like local guide **Antoine Bissieux, named Orvis's 2025 Guide of the Year, and Torrey Collins, manager of UpCountry Sportfishing in New Hartford, will learn a few things.***

I am most proud of how it provides detailed, comprehensive information on DEEP's highly successful Brown Trout Survivor Strain program. I believe those efforts have played a significant role in the success we are seeing on the river today. I spoke with the key individuals involved in that effort, including Bill Hyatt (former Chief of the Bureau of Natural Resources at CT DEEP) and Neal Hagstrom (Senior Fisheries Biologist at CT DEEP).



Many anglers might not be aware that one hundred years ago, the section of the river we now call the Boneyard did not exist. That area was known as Greenwood Pond. I provide background on why there are abutments in the river that mark the beginning of the Permanent TMA. I explain why dams were built above Riverton and how they have contributed to the river becoming a tailwater. I also provide information on the reasons for the recent discharge and flow issues on the river. I think readers will find it interesting.

How long have you been guiding, and how many days per year do you guide? Could you also share your philosophy and approach to guiding clients?

I'm guessing just shy of a couple of decades. I have so many interests (writing, presentations, fly tying) that I am involved in that I have chosen to guide on a part-time basis. I get the most enjoyment teaching and want my clients to understand that our sessions together will be educational and, hopefully, provide a solid foundation for them to build on. I would say that this is the focus of my guide business, and this is what I tell people when they contact me. If a client is solely interested in going out on the river and catching as many fish as possible, then I'm probably not their best fit. I'm a teaching guide, and I believe many of the guides on the Farmington River share this outlook. I want a client to say, I'm not good at nymphing. Can you help me? And my answer is yes. Someone might say, I saw your presentation about wet flies. I have no idea how to do that, or I want to make sure my drifts are good, or I don't know where to start on this river. So those are the things I can help clients with.

What can a client do to make the day on the water with a guide as pleasant as possible for everyone?

I encourage clients to be honest with their guides about their abilities. For example, don't tell a guide you're a really strong wader when you're not, because the guide will use that information to plan where to fish that day. Be honest about your skills and capabilities.

It's important to share your goals for the day with your guide. Last summer, I went to Montana to fish and used two different guides. I told them I wanted them to teach me and tell me what I could do better. I hoped that by the end of the day, I would get off that drift boat a better angler than I was when I got on. I didn't go to Montana just to catch fish; even as a teaching guide myself, I wanted to advance my skills.

Over the years, what are some of the most significant changes you have observed in fly fishing?

Undoubtedly, it is the rise and popularity of euro-style nymphing. My response to this is different: "When the rest of the world zigs, Steve Culton zags." While many have adopted the latest European fishing sensation, I have chosen to stick with one of the oldest techniques: wet fly fishing. Surprisingly, these disciplines can be quite similar. When nymphing on the river, I usually will use the drop-shot method. It works well for me, and I enjoy it, but I'm not closed-minded to other tactics. I especially like the Euro dry-dropper technique, which intrigues me because it shares many similarities with wet fly fishing.

Do you have a favorite new or hot fly-tying product on the market, and what advantages does it offer?

I often joke about new must-have products, for example, the latest top-secret UV dubbing that just hit the market, and then I wonder how Joe Brooks could have caught all those trout without it.

Basically, I'm not a gearhead, and most of what I use are traditional materials for tying flies. I'm probably not the best person to tell you about the latest products. I was happy to find an exceptional Hungarian partridge skin at a recent tying symposium. In terms of hardware and in the interest of full disclosure, I'm on the Regal Pro Staff, but I love my Regal vise because it's a good, solid vise that works every single time and does what I need it to do. Another product I like using are my Renomed tying scissors. I bought my first pair last year after seeing other tyers use them, and I love them. I've had them for over a year, and they're as sharp as they were when they came out of the box. Again, I'm not a gearhead. I don't need a lot of fancy gear, but I enjoy my Stonfo adjustable-tension bobbin because adjusting the thread tension is so easy.

Is there a CT hatch you think is overrated?

Not overrated, but I believe some Connecticut hatches can be disappointing because our anticipation is high, only to be thwarted by environmental factors we can't control, such as high runoff. I do have a love/hate relationship with Hendricksons: I hate it because, after being cooped up all winter, I understand everyone's excitement. While I don't want to deny anyone the joy of fishing on the river, the crowds can be overwhelming. Yet, I love it because there's hardly anything else like it. It's one of the few hatches where I can be confident that I'll see greedy white mouths eagerly taking surface duns. It can be truly amazing.

Is there a hatch on the Farmington that you think anglers underappreciate?

My answer is caddis flies, for multiple reasons. They can be found just about everywhere; there are a bajillion of them, and they're an exceptionally important food source for trout.

You will hear anglers eagerly state that they are going to fish the Hendrickson or the Sulphur hatch, but few mention caddis. In my opinion, it's a huge mistake to overlook this hatch. Here are two reasons why I think the hatch is undervalued and underrated. One is that there's no specific window for it. Some hatches are offered for a limited time only and are a finite resource. Hendricksons are active in April or early May, and you won't find Sulfurs hatching on the Farmington River during the winter. Caddis are generally available to trout year-round. Anglers may not see surface hatches, but caddis are available and remain a viable food source for trout.

The second reason is that the water surface might be covered with caddis adults, and the trout seem to be eating, but they may not touch a single adult on the surface. They're taking the emergers, and I have gained a massive appreciation for caddis through fishing for them with wet flies.

Regarding the Farmington River, many anglers feel the hatches were disappointing this season. Do you think that is accurate, and do you have any ideas about why?

Yes, though I'm not an invertebrate biologist, I can give you my educated guesses. I've also noticed that over the last decade, it's either feast or famine with water and rain. We either have too much or not enough. There's no middle ground. It seems to be the new normal, feast or famine with rainfall. I think global warming and shifting weather patterns have contributed to the recent downturns. As Bob Dylan said, the times they are a-changing, or, in this case, the weather is a-changing.

The recent flow disasters on the river, where the water was exceptionally low in the summer, could be a contributing factor.

And then I think there are probably environmental factors too. One issue with the Farmington River is that it's so close to civilization that it's affected by it. Whatever melting agents they put on the roads, we really don't know what impact that's having. That has been a blessing and a curse, as long stretches of the river are adjacent to roadways, but stuff is being washed in.

What is it about fishing that fits or speaks to your personality?

Here are two things. One is that I'm a massive introvert, so fly fishing offers me a peaceful retreat and is a wonderfully soothing exercise in solitude and meditation. Recognize that being an introvert differs from being shy, as introverts will draw their strength and energy from within. The other thing that speaks to me is that I don't read my horoscope every day, and I'm not into astrology. Now, having said that, I'm a Scorpio, and that's a water sign, so I feel that the water is where I'm supposed to be. My youngest son can't understand how I wade in Pleasant Bay on Cape Cod at night, which is known as a hotspot for Great White Sharks. I simply tell him it's because I'm supposed to be there. So, there you go. I gain great energy from the water and being immersed in it.



If you were limited to fishing for only one species of fish for the rest of your life, what would it be?

Just limiting it to one species is particularly hard for me to answer, so I'm going to qualify it. Today, I would say it's steelhead. Steelhead fishing is maddening. You can do everything right and not land a fish, and then you can do everything wrong and land the fish. You can stand in the water and see the fish in front of you, bonk them on the nose with the fly, and they don't eat. I don't believe there's any endeavor in fly fishing that is more unfair than steelhead fishing. However, when it all works out, it is absolutely glorious. And the way they fight, they make it clear in no uncertain terms that they object strenuously to that hook in their mouth.

If you had the opportunity to take a destination trip anywhere in the world, where would you go and what would you be fishing for?

Probably the Everglades for snook and tarpon. I really like the Everglades. Surprisingly, I don't travel much, but I've enjoyed past fishing trips there. It's such a mysterious, vast place that an angler could spend their whole life fishing it and still not fully understand it. Plus, the fish are incredible.

Do you have a favorite fishing quote you would like to share?

Here are a couple of my favorites. Stu Apte, tarpon king extraordinaire, once said, "To play him long is to play him wrong." I see way too many people overplaying all sorts of fish species. I encourage anglers to get a fish into the net as quickly as possible.

The other is from Joe Brooks, "Three false casts should be sufficient, two is better, one is perfect," which I interpret as saying that flies in the water catch more fish than those in the air.

Do you have any fishing mentors?

Absolutely and positively my dad. He taught me how to trout fish. I would study what he was doing because he was one of the 10% of anglers who caught 90% of the fish. My dad was always catching them; he was a fish-catching machine. I would watch him to see what he was doing, where he was fishing, and how he was fishing. How many split shots did he have? What was he using? I asked myself why he was fishing there. I didn't ask him many questions. It was more observation; I studied his every move, and he has been a huge influence.

Do you have any fishing superstitions? Favorite hat, etc.

Interesting question, and yes, I have some superstitions. I'm very attuned to numbers and consider them important. I was at an amusement park or fair, and about five or six years old. They had a spin-the-wheel game. I distinctly remember choosing 7 and 13. I don't recall which number won, but one of them did, and since then, these numbers have been my lucky ones. For example, when tying an improved clinch knot, I'm supposed to make 6 turns, but I always do 7 because 7 is my lucky number. While night fishing on a flat, I often use these numbers to guide my actions—either the number of casts or the steps I take. I might cast 7 times in one spot, then move 13 steps east to cover more water. Sometimes, at the end of the night, I'll take 13 more casts before leaving. When fishing a pool, I usually do 7 casts; if I don't catch anything, I move on.

It appears you enjoy smoking a cigar while on the river. What conditions must be met for you to light it up?

I do really enjoy a cigar while fishing. The moment I choose to stoke one up is about timing, and some of it's conditional. For example, if I'm fishing for 5 hours and I'm going to have 2 cigars, I want to space them out. If I'm fishing into the evening, I might have one at 4 in the afternoon. Depending on its size, that could take me to 5:30, and then I will light up the second one, and it should last me till the end of the day. If I'm in the woods, I want the animals to know that I'm there, and bears are going to smell a cigar before they see me. That's for sure.

When fishing for steelhead, I won't light up until I hook a fish to celebrate. And if that's not happening, I will sometimes light one up because, as we all know, you often catch steelhead when you're smoking a cigar than when you're not. I don't know if your anglers are generally aware of that!



Tell folks about something you are doing better on the water today that you weren't doing five years ago.

Over the last five years, my steelhead fishing has significantly improved. I'm catching more fish, and it's not just because I'm fishing in more productive locations. I've become better at identifying likely holding areas, reading water, and noticing strikes that I previously might have dismissed as just the bottom. I believe the hook set is the largest determining factor on whether or not I land a steelhead. I've been honing my hook-setting skills, mainly by learning from guides. Although I also guide anglers myself, I'm always eager to learn new techniques. A major factor in my recent success is learning from and fishing with highly skilled steelhead guides.

Do you ever lose confidence when fly fishing, and how do you work your way out of it?

My confidence doesn't necessarily waver in myself, but it does in the fishery at that moment. If I can walk into a pool and feel that fish should be there, I usually don't lose confidence in my abilities or what I'm doing.

However, if I should begin to lose confidence in a location, I try to work my way out of it with persistence, covering water, and aggressively searching for the fish. Eventually, I reach a point where I lose faith in the spot and think, "See you later." You can't catch what isn't there or doesn't want to eat. I'll evaluate myself: if I'm skunking but still fishing well, there's nothing more I can do. If you're fishing effectively and they're not feeding, your options are to keep trying or to find another, more promising spot.

What are some of the qualities or characteristics that distinguish a good fly fisher from a great fly fisher?

*Well, I have a presentation titled "**The Little Things**," and often it's the little things. I'll use the 401(k) metaphor. You put a little bit aside every week, and the interest compounds. One day, you're rich. It's the*

same with doing little things in fly fishing. All the things learned bit by bit along the way add up, and one day you're rich in fish. In my opinion, this is what separates good anglers from great ones. Believe me, I've seen a lot of great anglers, and they're consistently doing seemingly insignificant things very well. Their casting is good, and I'm not talking about distance. A great angler can, without a lot of difficulty, put a fly exactly where it needs to be, without a second thought.

Then there is the presentation of the fly. There's a story about an old-timer and a younger angler on the river, fishing the same pool. The old-timer is out-fishing the younger angler by a significant margin. The younger angler sees him and says, "Hey, what are you getting all those fish on?" And the veteran angler responds, "Presentation." The wrong fly presented correctly is better than the right fly presented incorrectly. The top 10% group of anglers generally excel at presentation.

Do you believe anglers are overlooking potential opportunities by not using swinging wet flies and soft hackles?

I highly recommend it, and if an angler is not swinging wet flies or soft hackles, they are really missing out on fish. At certain times, swinging or fishing soft hackles can be the most productive way for taking fish. Anglers tell me they get to the river and nothing seems to be happening, and nothing is rising, and they have no idea what to do. That is an excellent time to swing a team of three wets. Great way to cover water, keep moving, and find fish eager to eat.

What is your favorite hatch to swing wet flies and soft hackles to?

Absolutely, Sulphurs! Because of the bug's nature, Sulphur emergers will stay in the drift for a long time, making them ideal for soft hackles. When I see trout splashing at the surface during a Sulphur hatch, they're usually ignoring the duns and targeting the emergers just below the surface.

Backups are caddis, Iso's, and the Hendrickson hatches on the Farmington. During the early part of the Hendrickson hatch, I will toss soft hackles and take fish after fish after fish while the dry fly anglers around me are struggling. At some point, the tables will turn, and the dry fly guys will start hooking up, and my success rate will tank. That is the moment I will make the change and start fishing the top. I go into this in much greater detail in my book.

What was the most recent fly-fishing book you have read?

*A publisher recently asked me to review Ed Van Put's book, **'Flyfisher's Revelations: Practical Tips, Strategies, and Wisdom from Fifty Years of Experience.'** I truly enjoyed reading it and wholeheartedly recommend it. While it focuses mainly on the Delaware River, many of its hatches are similar to those on the Farmington, making it just as useful there.*

Do you have a favorite fly-fishing book you recommend to others?

Yes, Trout Lessons by Ed Engle is at the top of my list. It is a wonderful read with helpful instructions and clear how-tos. One of the fly patterns in his book will be featured in mine.

You're known to be passionate about fly fishing, but do you have other hobbies or interests as well?

I am a passionate gardener and enjoy maintaining a 1,000 sq ft vegetable garden. One of my other passions is cooking. I consider myself a serious cook, and one of my specialties is my hot sauce. In addition, I grow roses. I am not an expert or a connoisseur, but I am a big red wine fan and a single malt Scotch guy. I like to golf and am a big vinyl record fan. I love analog and built my own amp and speakers for my home stereo system.

Is there anything we forgot, or anything you would like people to know?

I want to point out that the shortest distance between two anglers is a smile and a wave! I encourage people to be kind to one another as they share the waters on our rivers and streams.