

A person wearing a blue cap and a tan vest is fly-casting in a creek. The background features a large, rocky mountain range under a clear blue sky. The water in the creek is a deep blue, and the surrounding forest is lush green. The title 'The Creek' is written in large, white, serif font across the top of the image.

# The Creek

By Bruce Masterman (High River, Alberta)

**W**e call it The Creek. It is a place of solace, of beauty, of promise and of joy. Born at the foot of the Rocky Mountains, it is a small stream, in places narrow enough to jump across and shallow enough to wade in old sneakers. My wife Karen, daughters Chelsea and Sarah, and I possessively consider The Creek our own. It's a grandly egocentric notion, to be sure, but one that we cannot shake for we know it intimately, as a lifelong friend.

We have camped in a rustic streamside campground where tawny-coated whitetail deer grazed in the pinkish hue of the early morning sun. We have hiked beside its meandering, sparkling waters. We've thrown sticks in the water for our dog, Belle, then laughed as she drenched us with cold water shaken off her black coat. In winter, we have strapped on skis and glided on the snow beside The Creek, stopping to build a fire when the cold made fingers numb and boots had to be removed to rub feeling back into frozen feet. We have cycled down the valley,



dodging rocks, ground squirrel holes and the occasional cow pie and bear poop.

Especially, though, The Creek is where we have spent more hours than anyone deserves casting flies for the plentiful eastern brook trout that live there. The girls learned to fly-fish here, after graduating from spin-fishing with bait in lakes. They liked it especially because the furred and feathered flies were pretty and it was fun to get in the water to meet the fish in their element. The Creek is where they shed tears of frustration and fought to focus while fine-tuning their casting skills with supple graphite rods and light nylon tippet that the devilish wind would conspire to tangle in the willows along the bank.

The Creek was where the girls and

I fished together while Karen patiently watched, read a book, played with Belle or took pictures. We three fly fishers spent countless hours trying to entice the small gorgeous trout to give us a few minutes of excitement before we played God. Whenever a hooked trout struggled in our hands, we always discussed whether to gently release or kill it and take it back to camp to cook on a forked willow branch over the fire, like a smokie with fins. The girls never killed trout they'd catch in The Creek. Yet they eagerly roasted any that I chose to keep, the process generally preceded by comments like, "Sorry, trout, that you are dead, and thank you for your life, but you sure taste good."

In springtime, The Creek undergoes a transformation that is at once cleansing

and violent. In the few weeks after ice-out – when warm temperatures and winds have peeled back the water's icy seal – the current runs clear and shallow. Velvety pussy willows sprout on the bank. But the gentle flow of early spring dramatically changes when the hot sunshine is extinguished by heavy rainfalls, rapidly melting the winter snowpack in the headwater's valleys, forests and alpine meadows. When that happens, great gushes of water rage down The Creek, turning it into a raging muddy torrent that spills over the banks, flushing out silt and deadfall, before the water returns to lower levels and increased clarity.

One such spring, a powerful flood hit the valley and The Creek turned wilder than anybody could remember.



Sarah fishing in The Creek

(Photo by Bruce Masterman)



Like molten lava, deep cocoa-coloured water swept relentlessly over the valley, tearing out wooden bridges, uprooting mighty pines and rolling boulders the size of small cars along like bowling balls. Downstream communities sustained severe damage. Cows, sheep, deer and other wildlife drowned. A few days after the flood subsided, our family visited The Creek to see if it was okay. It wasn't. Struck speechless by what we saw, we silently scanned the devastated valley from our vehicle, and then got out for a closer look. Broken tree trunks jutted from the banks. The rocks were covered in a thick sandy silt. Familiar trail signs were gone.

But what really struck us was that The Creek itself had moved – in places almost 100 metres – to a new channel the flood

had carved in the valley floor. An old rutted logging road that used to run along one side of The Creek now straddled it. We surveyed the valley in shocked silence as we played witness to nature's raw power. Suddenly, Sarah and Chelsea – then 10 and 13, respectively – clambered over the rocks to where the streambed had been just a few weeks earlier. Seconds later, with shrill shouts of alarm, they beckoned Karen and me to join them.

The girls were standing beside a foot-deep pool of water barely two metres square. Before the flood, it had been part of The Creek's main stem; now it was an orphaned pool, cut off from the flowing water and destined to dry up within a few weeks. At first glance, the pool looked barren of life, but the girls knew differently.

"Look," Chelsea said, pointing frantically. "There's a trout."

I followed the path of her finger to the middle of the pool. A brightly spotted brook trout seven inches long swam slowly over the rocks lining the bottom. A slow scan of the rest of the pool revealed several more small trout.

"Won't they die?" asked Sarah, brown eyes wide with concern.

"Yes, they will," I replied. "If predators don't get them, the water will soon be gone and they will die."

Both girls became pensive, their faces dark with sorrow and thought.

"We'll save them," pronounced Chelsea, with a familiar determined tone that I knew meant there was no stopping her.

"Let's get going," Sarah instantly added.

At that, the girls waded into the pool and, after a splashing flurry of missed chances, each scooped up a trout with their hands. Then, gently cradling the fish in their hands, they ran over to the newly-formed channel. After kneeling at the edge of the flowing water, they lowered the trout in a calm back eddy. They waited patiently for the fish to regain their strength before opening their hands and watched them swim into the current. Then the girls bolted back to the pool to try to save the rest.

All afternoon, Sarah and Chelsea hurried from stranded pool to stranded pool, hand-catching dozens of trapped trout and releasing them into the flowing water. Plastic bags that once held sandwiches in the girls' backpacks eventually were recruited for the rescue operation. The bags were filled with water, and the trout - like goldfish going home from a pet store - were carried in them overland to the stream - and freedom.

At one point, I stood silently in wonder,





marveling at our daughters' compassion and determination to save the otherwise-doomed trout. One day, we hoped to catch – maybe even eat – some of these trout. But I knew the girls' motivation went far beyond that short sighted goal. They felt it was their mission to give the fish a chance. Nature's way would have been to let the trout die in their disconnected pools, their flesh nourishing insects, birds and animals – the whole circle of life thing. The girls, however, would have none of it. Not this time.

Watching them running back and forth, moving trout after trout from pool to stream, I couldn't help pondering about how this moment had come to be, about the paths they'd taken that led to their selfless act of salvation. At that stage of their lives, we'd been exploring nature together for several years. Starting when they were old enough to understand, we had discussed together the need to be environmentally responsible, to take care of nature, to respect it.

The girls had fished since they were toddlers, when I introduced them to an activity that I'd loved since I was a kid. Fishing brought back pleasant memories from an oft-troubled childhood and had helped me through stretches of personal rough waters. I was an adult before I really understood the healing power of nature, and our role in it, and how fishing was about much more than just catching fish.

Watching the girls that day, I knew they'd already made that connection. They'd learned much more than I had by their age. This natural classroom had taught them well.

We call it The Creek.



Chelsea uses a willow branch as a rod to catch a brook trout

(Photo by Bruce Masterman)

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