



## Androscoggin River, ME

Icing on the Cake

By King Montgomery

The Androscoggin, Maine's third-largest river, follows a convoluted 178-mile course from Umbagog Lake in the White Mountains of New Hampshire and Maine to its juncture with the Kennebec River in Merrymeeting Bay near Brunswick, about 20 miles from the Atlantic Ocean. As it flows out of Umbagog on the New Hampshire side of the lake, the river is trout water, with browns, rainbows, and brookies from the headwaters until about the vicinity of Rumford. Then smallmouth bass take over as the river slows, warms, and widens. There are a number of places above and below Rumford where you can catch bass and trout on consecutive casts.

The Abenaki meaning of "Androscoggin" is said to be "the place where fish are cured," which probably refers to earlier times when Native Mainers processed the alewives, smelt, shad, striped bass, eels, Atlantic salmon, and other fish that

congregated on their upstream spawning runs. At one time, Atlantic salmon went as far upriver as what is now Rumford, but the gauntlets posed by dams, pollution, overharvesting, and other man-made afflictions have doomed the once considerable migrations.

The Andro, as it is commonly known, was heavily polluted over the years, but considerable gains in cleaning up the river have been made by regional, state, and federal efforts. And yes, industrial, agricultural, and urban pollution remains problematic, but the river is getting cleaner and offers excellent fishing along its course, and the smallmouth bass are ascending to star status, at least for out-of-state anglers.

John Boland, director of fisheries for the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife (MDIFW), and an avid fly angler, joined me on the Andro on my last two trips, and he's a big fan of the river. He says, "Maine's smallmouth bass fishing is unparalleled, and, as a result,

most nonresident anglers that fish in Maine come for our outstanding smallmouth fishing opportunities. The [Andro] is accessible by powerboat, canoe, kayak, and by foot. For those interested in fast action for high-quality smallmouths, the Androscoggin River is a sure bet."

You can't get a much higher recommendation than that.



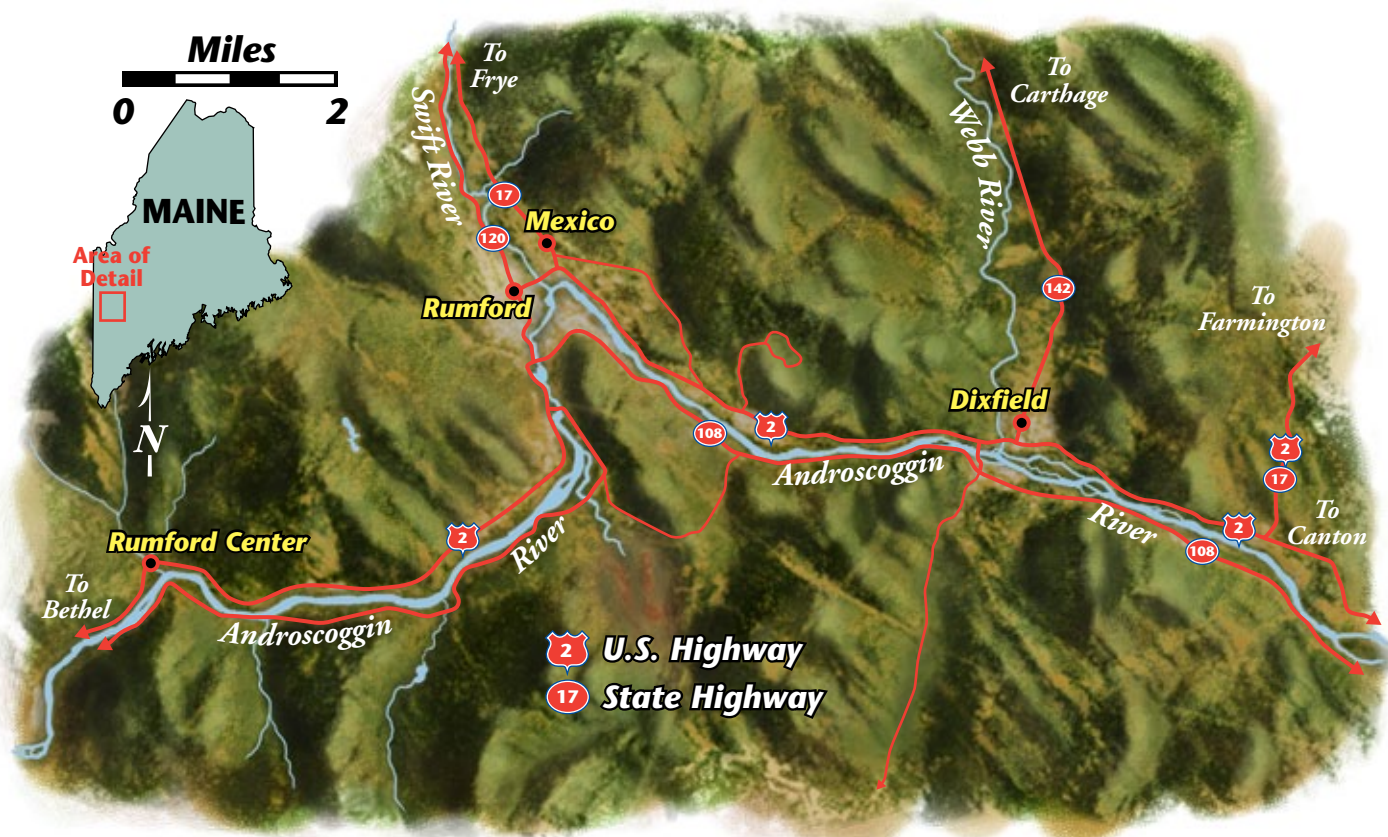
ALL PHOTOS BY KING MONTGOMERY

*A yellow/olive Clouser Deep Minnow attracted the attention of this colorful smallmouth. Anglers might not catch large numbers of bass, but a day on the Andro may yield fish that average about 2 pounds (above). Guide Bob Duport finds some quiet water where Lefty Kreh and guide Bonnie Holding can cast for smallmouth bass. Late summer in parts of Maine delivers early-fall conditions (left).*

### The Other Fish

Bill Pierce, the affable former director of marketing for the MDIFW, greeted me and my fishing companion, Lefty Kreh, as we approached the luggage carousel at Portland International Jetport. Pierce, who now works for Rangeley Lakes Heritage Trust, had invited us to sample Maine's storied smallmouth bass fishing, a tradition currently in its fourth year. The Pine Tree State is well known for superb angling for landlocked salmon and trout, particularly native brook trout. But many of the rivers, especially away from their headwaters, are home to healthy populations of chunky and spirited smallmouth bass. Many Mainers have long viewed the smallie as a lesser fish; some have even been known to call it a trash fish, at least compared with the salmonids. Go figure!

On our first trip we met up with Blaine and Bonnie Holding, who accompanied us on our adventure drifting



the Andro that year and the next. Bonnie is a top-notch registered Maine Master Guide—the state has one of the most stringent guide-certification programs in the country—and Blaine is a proud member of the Maine Warden Service; he was the outstanding warden of the year in 2006. Both are avid and wicked good fly anglers (to use the Maine vernacular).

Pierce rowed one ClackaCraft drift boat and Farmington guide Michael Jones maneuvered the other, the first year, and one day Bill Swan, licensing director for MDIFW, relieved Jones at the helm. We fished the Rumford, Mexico, and Dixfield stretches of the river, and, although the action was not hot and heavy that late summer, the fish we caught were relatively large, very healthy, and gave a good accounting of themselves. We caught enough fish to be quite happy.

The second year on the river was much more productive for numbers and size of healthy, willing fish—that's just the way fishing is sometimes. That year we were assisted by guides William Clunie, Lauren Parker, and Bob Dupont, all superb professionals and nice guys.

"Get that darn trash fish off my line," admonished Kreh with a grin as Jones moved to unhook a gorgeous 16-inch brown trout that hit a streamer that year. The Mainers on board the two boats

grimaced a bit as Lefty chuckled. You see, after bonefish, smallmouth bass are his favorite fish, and they are his favorite freshwater fish. "No one ever got a heart attack fighting a trout," he's fond of saying. He thinks very highly of smallmouth.

"Here, cast this for a while," said Jones later as he handed me a popper he'd just as soon I not photograph or describe in too much detail. My weighted streamers, cast on both floating and Teeny Mini-Tip lines, were pick-



ing up an occasional bass, but it was time for a change. I took the bug—hard-bodied with rubber legs—and looked around. It was midday, about 80 degrees, and the sky was the color of a bluebird. I didn't hesitate to tie on the fly because I'd been here before: sometimes the best time to throw a surface fly is right smack in the middle of a hot day. Sure enough, I took several bass along the bank and rocks, and they averaged close to 2 pounds. They attacked the top-water offering with abandon. Lesson: try a popper, slider, or diver during the middle of the day. You'll be surprised how aggressively fish attack it.

Jones, also a registered Maine Master Guide, is an excellent angler and caster, and he was pleased when I offered to row while he fished. He caught a bass almost immediately, and Bonnie was hooking up now and then from the back of the boat, too.

### Arrange the Terrain

The Androscoggin is wide in the Dixfield area, presenting a lot of water for anglers. So the logical thing to do is to break up the river into the parts likely to hold bass.

We concentrated on the shoreline, which can drop off sharply to deeper water; rocky points and rock walls, which draw bait and smallies; grass and weedbeds, which always are a good bet; and natural and man-made structure, such as old rock and log cribs, and various old and newer bridge pilings and abutments.

Fish also are found in the middle of the river, and not just on or near obvious cover or natural or man-made structure. Rock ledges along the bottom provide current breaks and create feeding lanes for the bass. If the current is particularly swift, a sinking-tip line can get and keep the fly down long enough for a fish to find it.

Look for steep banks that drop into the river where the current is not too strong for the fish, where the water along the shore is relatively deep with deeper, faster water nearby—prime spots for bass to hang out on a hot day waiting for food to happen by. Try a popper up against

the banks, and swim a Clouser Minnow or other sinking streamer perpendicular and, if the current will let you, parallel to the shore as best you can.

Blown-down trees in the water almost always hold bass and other fish, and if an eddy swirls nearby, even better. Keep the fly as close to the tree limbs as possible, and try surface and subsurface offerings.

Shoreline weed and grass beds also provide good habitat for smallmouth bass that seem to hang out on the edges waiting for the breeze to bring insects into the water. Dragonflies and damselflies flit about, and sometimes fall to splashing bass. Small frogs and other amphibians live amid rushes and grasses, and they always are welcome on a smallmouth's dinner plate.

### Gearing Up

On the Andro, I like 7- and 8-weight lines matched with both floating and sinking-tip lines. Lighter rods will work, but they don't handle the fish as efficiently and don't cast bulky flies as well. The new generation of bass-specific fly rods less than 8 feet long are ideal for smallmouth. I carry



Anchored near the Rumford paper mill, guides Michael Jones and Bonnie Holding watch as Lefty Kreh works his magic with a fly rod (above). The Androscoggin River flows cool and fairly clear near Rumford, where smallmouth bass have taken over from trout. The riverbanks are not very developed beyond the towns in this stretch (left).

the Sage Largemouth rod and Smallmouth rod, using the former for the largest flies and the latter for smaller offerings. And I use the Sage Bass Taper lines that come with the rods. Most of the major rod manufacturers now offer models engineered for the demands of bass fishing.

I use knotless tapered leaders, both monofilament



Maine shore lunches are legendary, and are a welcome part of trips on the smallmouth rivers. Here Lefty Kreh sips hot coffee while Bonnie Holding sets up a folding table on a small beach.

and fluorocarbon, from Frog Hair, along with what I call “Lefty Leaders.” These are hand-tied leaders with half of the leader being a 50-pound-test butt section (on a 9-foot leader, for example, the first 4.5 feet is 50-pound monofilament). The forward half of the leader tapers in 1-foot sections of 40-, 30-, and 20-pound mono, respectively, and then includes an 18- to 24-inch tippet of 12- or 15-pound mono or fluorocarbon attached to the leader with a surgeon’s loop or perfection loop. These leaders can be tied in a variety of lengths and really turn over flies nicely.

Effective Androscoggin flies include the usual suspects: hard-bodied poppers that create plenty of commotion on the water; the ubiquitous weighted Woolly Bugger in dark colors;

Clouser Deep Minnows in brown/white and chartreuse/white; and large terrestrial patterns drifted and skittered close to the banks. Overall, however, my favorite fly for smallmouth bass on the Andro, or anywhere else for that matter, is Lefty’s Bug, also called the Potomac River Popper. The body is cork, balsa, or foam, and has a simple tail of squirrel tail or bucktail. It can be fancied up by painting or gluing on eyes, adding hackle of various natural and synthetic materials, or gluing in a piece of 40-pound-test wire as a weed guard. The possibilities are endless, but simpler often is better. I like black, chartreuse, and yellow, and white works now and then, too. Lefty’s Bug, tied in smaller sizes, is a killer panfish pattern all over the country.

### Lefty’s Potomac River Popper

By Lefty Kreh



- Hook:** 2X to 3X long, sizes 1/0–4
- Thread:** 3/0, color of choice
- Tail:** Squirrel tail or bucktail
- Body:** Flat-bottom cork, balsa, or foam, with downward-slanting cut face
- Eyes:** Paint or glue-on (optional)
- Weed guard:** 40-pound wire stuck in body and adhered with Super Glue (optional)

### Floating the Andro

You will need a boat of some sort to properly fish the Androscoggin. The river is impounded by dams at various locations, so floaters must plan trips accordingly. At least two dozen sites provide public access to the river, along with adequate parking. The best map of the river, showing the dams and access points, is the Appalachian Mountain Club’s *Androscoggin River Map and Guide*. The *Maine Atlas & Gazetteer* by DeLorme Mapping also is an invaluable reference, and I don’t leave home without it.

Rather than try to figure things out on your own, however, I highly recommend you use the services of one of Maine’s superb Master Guides for a day or two, or at least half a day, to learn the river. A good guide can teach you more about the Androscoggin in a day than you might learn on your own in months or even years.

### Medicine for the Soul

The Androscoggin displays myriad personalities, from its high-lake source to its terminus at Merrymeeting Bay, and it offers a variety of game fish from beginning to end. Trout occupy the upper reaches, but thereafter the river reigns as smallmouth bass water—and one of the premier smallmouth fisheries in New England, with prime fishing from spring through fall. In fact, the part of the river I recently fished with Kreh might well be the Andro’s best stretch of bass water. Dave Boucher, regional fishery biologist with MDIFW, says, “The reach of the Androscoggin River from Rumford Falls to Livermore Falls, including the four small impoundments in Jay and Livermore Falls, offers excellent fishing for smallmouth bass. Bass are abundant here, and their size quality is excellent, with many fish in excess of 15 or 16 inches long. The best time to fish is from late May to early July, and then again in the fall.”

Kreh and I always have a great time on our Maine smallmouth adventures, and we always look forward to returning to the Andro. We both love Maine—I consider it my soul home and hope to live there someday—and it is the state’s solid, friendly, and sincere people who help make it so. The great fishing is just icing on the cake.

Yes, Maine offers excellent fishing for trout and landlocked salmon in its many lakes, ponds, and streams, and striped bass, bluefish, and other salty quarry ply the state’s coastal waters. But the smallmouth bass fishing—along with a lot of other fine things such as lobster, whoopie pies, saltwater taffy, clean and cool air, the scenic rocky

## Androscoggin River NOTEBOOK



**When:** May–September; into October if the weather holds.

**Where:** South-central ME near Rumford, Mexico, and Dixfield area.

**Headquarters:** Dixfield.

**Appropriate gear:** 8- to 9-ft., 7- or 8-wt. rods, floating and short sinking-tip lines, 12- to 15-lb. tippets.

**Useful fly patterns:** Lefty’s Potomac River Poppers in black, chartreuse, yellow; large hoppers and dragonflies; sliders and divers; Clouser Deep Minnows in chartreuse/white, olive green/white, brown, tan/white; bead-head Woolly Buggers in black, olive, purple; Clouser Crayfish in brown and olive.

**Necessary accessories:** Polarized sunglasses, hat, water bottles, sunscreen, insect repellent.

**Nonresident license:** \$11/1 day, \$23/3 days, \$43/7 days, \$47/15 days, \$64/annual. Available online at [www.mefish-wildlife.com](http://www.mefish-wildlife.com).

**Fly shops/guides:** *Bethel:* Sun Valley Sports (Orvis), (877) 851-7533, [www.sunvalleysports.com](http://www.sunvalleysports.com). *Brunswick:* Merrymeeting Flies, (207) 729-6777, [www.mflies.com](http://www.mflies.com). *Dixfield:* Moose Rock Guide Service (William Clunie), (207) 562-7564, [www.moose-rock.org](http://www.moose-rock.org). *Farmington:* Aardvark Outfitters, (207) 778-3330, [www.aardvarkoutfitters.com](http://www.aardvarkoutfitters.com); Michael Jones, (207) 939-4221. *Freeport:* L. L. Bean, (877) 755-2326, [www.lbean.com](http://www.lbean.com). *Kingfield:* Western Mountains Fly Fishing (Bob Dupont), (207) 235-2573, [www.westernmountainsflyfishing.com](http://www.westernmountainsflyfishing.com).

**Book/maps:** Appalachian Mountain Club *Androscoggin River Map and Guide*, (800) 262-4455, [www.outdoors.org](http://www.outdoors.org). *Maine Atlas & Gazetteer* by DeLorme Mapping.

coastline, and much more—is what keeps me coming back. And the admirably managed Androscoggin River is a fine flagship for Maine’s bass waters. ➤

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