

Fly Fishing the Farmington River: Trout, Hatches & Tactics

With Steve Culton

D. Roger Maves: [00:00:00] Welcome to Ask About Fly Fishing Internet Radio, your source for learning more about fly fishing in cold water, warm water, and saltwater. Hello, I'm Roger Maves, your host for tonight's show. On this broadcast, we'll be featuring Steve Culton and he'll be answering your questions on Fly Fishing the Farmington River: Trout, Hatches, and Tactics.

This show will be 90 minutes in length, and we're broadcasting live over the internet. And if you would like to ask Steve a question, just go to our homepage at askaboutflyfishing.com and use the Q&A text box to send us your question. We'll receive your question immediately, and we'll try to answer as many of them as possible on the show tonight.

And while you're there, make sure you sign up to receive our announcements so you don't miss out on any of our future broadcasts. Just fill out the form on the right side of our homepage and we'll let you know when the next live show will be. This broadcast is being recorded and will be available for playback on our website about 48 hours after the show ends.

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And when you do, use [#askaboutflyfishing](#) and [#flyfishing](#). In fact, if you have a moment during the show, you know, do it right now and while you're enjoying the show and spread the good word. The content of this broadcast is copyrighted. It's the property of The Knowledge Group, Inc., doing business as Ask About Fly Fishing. When we return, we'll be talking with Steve Culton about Fly Fishing the Farmington River: Trout, Hatches, and Tactics

Fly Fishers International needs your support. Its conservation projects at both the national and club level are addressing critical issues of importance to fly fishers. The organization provides grants to help with the restoration of habitats like Wolf Creek in Idaho and Sands Creek in Delaware County, New York, and funds projects that collect valuable data about fish and their habitats like the peacock bass study in Miami, Florida.[00:02:00]

FFI serves as a strong advocate for fly fishing in all waters for all types of fish to preserve and to promote the arts of fly casting and fly tying, and to help ensure future generations can continue to enjoy these one-of-a-kind experiences. These efforts won't nearly be as effective without your support.

If you're not already a member, we invite you to join Fly Fishers International as they work to cultivate conservation, education, and community within the sport of fly fishing. Join Fly Fishers International today and help to support their fine work. For more information, go to their website at flyfishersinternational.org. Again, that's flyfishersinternational.org.

Before we introduce Steve, we'd like to let you know about the great prizes we have to give away tonight for our drawing. We'll be giving away a one-year membership to Fly Fishers International and a one-year membership to Trout Unlimited. Now, if you haven't registered yet for the drawing, you can do so now.

Just go to our homepage, [00:03:00] askaboutflyfishing.com, and look for the link under tonight's section that says register for a free drawing. Click on that link and fill out the form, and we'll announce the winners at the end of the show. We'll also be giving away a copy of Steve's book, Fly Fishing Guide to the Farmington River, courtesy of Stackpole Books. We've got a link right on the homepage to Steve's book, but also go out and visit Stackpole Books. They've got all kinds of publications on fly fishing, one of the best publishers around.

Now, here's how you can win. You must be the first person to answer the question I ask at the end of the show. The question will be about something that Steve and I talk about during the show.

You've got to submit your answer along with your name and location using the text box on our homepage. So listen closely and use your best typing skills, take notes, pay attention, and maybe you'll be the proud winner of Fly Fishing Guide to the Farmington River.

Tonight, our guest is Steve Culton. Steve has been writing about fishing since the first grade, when he composed an essay about an outing with his father. Since then, Steve's [00:04:00] work has appeared in magazines, remember these, like Field and Stream, American Angler, Fly Fishing Journal, The Drake, Fly Fishing and Tying Journal, Eastern Fly Fishing, Fly Rod and Reel, and Mid-Atlantic Fly Fishing Guide. He's a member of the Regal Vice Pro-Staff, a J. Stockard Pro Tyer, and his first book, Fly Fishing Guide to the Farmington River, was recently published by Stackpole Books.

Steve wears many hats: fly fishing instructor, guide, speaker, fly tyer, freelance writer, husband, and father. His fly fishing interests include trout, stripers, steelhead, smallmouth bass, and small-stream native brook trout. Whether he's greased line fishing 12-inch flatwings for stripers with a five-weight rod and a nine-weight line, or swinging old Yorkshire soft hackles for trout, one thing is certain: Steve likes to fish when, where, and how most other people don't.

Steve, welcome to Ask About Fly Fishing Internet Radio.

Steve Culton: I'm delighted [00:05:00] to be here.

D. Roger Maves: Well, delighted to have you. And coming into the fall season here, which is my favorite time of year, I'm sure it's yours as well out east, huh?

Steve Culton: Well, there's a lot to like about the fall. It would be difficult for me to pick a favorite season, because there are so many pros and cons to them, and I tend to fish... you mentioned all those fish in the intro that I like to fish for.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah.

Steve Culton: Some has their season. Now, like for example, steelhead is not a summer thing, so if I say-

D. Roger Maves: Yeah. ...

Steve Culton: Well, summer's my favorite, then I miss out on steelhead, so. Please, don't ask me the question, what's my favorite season, or what's my favorite species to fish for, 'cause the answer is yes.

D. Roger Maves: Oh, okay.

Steve Culton: The answer is yes.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah, all of the above, right? Yeah. All right. Well, let's start this out with a little fun here. Carl in Connecticut wrote in, he says, "Congratulations on your new book, which many feel is the new must-have reference guide to the Farmington River. It appears you're a cigar aficionado. So, what's your [00:06:00] brand, and what is the appropriate moment to light one up?"

Steve Culton: Um, it's a question that's difficult to answer because I'm not so much ... It's not like smoking cigarettes, which I've never done, but I think there you have, you tend to have a very distinct brand loyalty that does not waver. So with me and cigar, it's more of a style of cigar that I like, and I tend to like more full-bodied cigars.

Kinda like wine, I'm a wine drinker too. I like something that's robust and full and got a lot going on. So for the cigar aficionados out there, I mean, some of the brands that they might recognize that I like would be the Oliva V Series, the E.P. Carrillo series, Perdomo 30th Anniversary, of course, regular Padrons.

The appropriate moment to light one up is interesting because it goes one of two ways. I've noticed that [00:07:00] in the past, and I'm surprised more people don't know this, I mean, this is a scientifically proven fact, that you actually catch more fish when you're enjoying a cigar. So for example ... Yeah. Most people don't know that.

D. Roger Maves: Proven. Proven fact, huh? Yeah ...

Steve Culton: If I, if I'm having a-

D. Roger Maves: That's like a conspiracy theory.

Steve Culton: If I'm having a very slow day, I might decide, you know what? I just gotta spark up a cigar. Let's go. Let's get the ball rolling here. And if that was early in the morning, it would be something on the milder side if I was out steelheading or maybe hunting snook in the Everglades.

But most of the time, we'll use the Farmington River as an example. Uh, if it's summertime, and there's a very distinct rhythm to the hatches on the Farmington River, and usually around sometime between 7:00 and 7:30, I take a break, get out of the river, take a bio break. If I'm fishing wet flies, switch over to dry flies, and that's when I will light up my cigar.

And if I have the [00:08:00] right size and it's not too windy, I can nurse that until dark and enjoy it.

D. Roger Maves: Oh well, but sounds like a plan. Yeah, yeah. Well, that's interesting. I was, uh ... So the cigars are more like on the Malbec side or, uh, something big and fruity and-

Steve Culton: Yeah, yeah. Uh,

D. Roger Maves: So- Yeah, something you can chew on. Yeah ...

Steve Culton: Yeah, Zins, Malbecs, Cabs, all that. I don't-

D. Roger Maves: Yeah ...

Steve Culton: you know, it's interesting, I never drink when I'm fishing. I just don't do it. I'm focused on what I'm doing. I used to play in a men's hockey league too, and it would, I would be astonished. I'm going to the corner chasing the puck, and a guy would come in next to me on the other team going to get it, and I'd take a deep breath and say, "Holy Jack Daniels, Batman." Like, I just-

D. Roger Maves: Yeah.

Steve Culton: I, I don't know how anyone does that.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah, no.

Steve Culton: But I-

D. Roger Maves: No ...

Steve Culton: No drinking on the river or the lake or the ocean.

D. Roger Maves: No.

Steve Culton: Too much going on.

D. Roger Maves: That's right. Yeah, yeah. So what was your first experience with the Farmington [00:09:00] River?

Steve Culton: I've lived in Connecticut all my life, and the Farmington was a river that I generally always knew about.

I must have gone there the first time in the '70s, probably in the mid-'70s, and my dad would've taken me. My dad was my introducer to fishing, and especially trout fishing. So we would've gone sometime in the mid-'70s, and I distinctly remember one time, I remember it was the summertime, and I remember it was a warm but very cloudy day with some rain, and I remember being stunned by the temperature of the water because all I was used to were the freestone streams of Connecticut, which gradually got warmer and warmer and warmer.

And we went up to the Farmington River, and boy, that water was cold, and there was a fog bank over it. But I still remember that day.

D. Roger Maves: [00:10:00] Yeah. Yeah. That's a nice memory.

Let's start with the river itself. How did the Farmington evolve from what it was, let's say, 35 years ago into the blue ribbon trout fishery we know today?

Steve Culton: It's a really complex question with a series of answers, because for many years there was not a dam in the sense of one that creates a tailwater or is the stop, the cork, as it were, for a reservoir. It was basically free-flowing, and there, there were a few dams, but they were industrial in nature and not meant to store any water. So, in the mid-'50s, we had a devastating hurricane, I think it was Hurricane Carol, that came through, and the flooding in the Northwest Hills of Connecticut was terrible. And so Hogback Dam, which is what creates the tailwater, was built as a flood mitigation control. And then in the very [00:11:00] early '60s, someone decided, "Well, that's probably not enough. We need to put another dam," so they put what's called the Colebrook Dam in above Hogback Dam. It really doesn't have anything to do with Hogback, you know, for anglers.

So, you know, we've had this tailwater now for, you know, over a half century, and gradually... So that was one huge factor, obviously. The second factor, I think, would be the evolution of catch and release as a thing, and the development of the survivor strain brown trout. I'll talk about that in a second.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah.

Steve Culton: So catch and release, everyone knows the, the saying attributed to Lee Wulff of game fish is too precious a resource to be caught only once. I'm proud to say, I'll do a little bragging here, I also distinctly remember this. We kept all our trout growing up, and we ate them.

And I [00:12:00] remember probably being 14, 15 years old, and I remember just getting really unhappy watching these trout slowly strangle on a stringer. And I was fishing the Black Ledge River with my dad. It was a warm, sunny May day, I remember that too. And I caught this really nice trout, and I put him on the stringer, and I'm walking in the stream, and he's shaking around.

And I remember looking down and said, "Nope, no more." And I let him go. I have no idea if he was mortally wounded or not, but I let that fish go. Not kept a trout since. That was long before catch and release was a thing.

But the state of Connecticut initiated catch and release first on the Willimantic River, then on the Housatonic River, and eventually on the Farmington River.

And so that became a thing. You know, you can catch these fish and put them back and come back and catch them the next month. So that really, I think, kick-started the notion that, hey, we might have a fishery here that not only you can [00:13:00] fish in 12 months, but we actually get some spawning going.

And that leads to the Survivor Stream program, which is part of the fisheries management, the Connecticut DEEP, which is Department of Energy and Environmental Protection. The Survivor

Stream program has been going on for decades That's really a separate question to get into the details of that. But in its basic bottom line, two sentences, it's they go into the river, they collect wild and holdover fish, they take them back to the hatchery, they spawn them, they put the progeny back in the river.

And so now in the permanent trout management area of the Farmington River, every year when they do their surveys, up to 50% of the trout that they sample are wild fish, and 25 to 50% of the fish that they stock in the Farmington River within the permanent trout management area hold over at least one year.

So that's huge. The [00:14:00] fact that you can now go there and know that we have cold water, that we have a robust, vital wild trout population, and plenty of stock fish, too. You know, you put those two things together, plus easy access, and boom, there it is. You've got a trout park.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah. Yeah. It also has, what, a wild and scenic designation, right?

Steve Culton: Yes. Yes. And that's part of a talk I do on the Farmington River, and I mention that, and I say just in case, because if you think of it's got a wild and scenic designation in the abstract, that means nothing to nobody. You might, as an angler, say, "Well, big deal. So what? Who cares?" And I get it, because I'm as cynical as the next guy.

Wild and scenic is important for anglers it, uh, because it means that nobody can dam, divert, siphon off, [00:15:00] redirect, or do anything to the flow of the river. And it's ironic, isn't it, that it all starts with a dam to create this wild and scenic area. For those of you who don't know in the audience, the wild and scenic designation was created by an act of Congress, and its mission is to protect and enhance rivers that are regionally and nationally significant. And the Farmington River's wild and scenic designation is for 15 miles from the base of the dam to its confluence with the Nipmuc River in Canton. It's also a partnership wild and scenic river, and what that means is that it's not just the federal government that oversees it. Local towns are involved. Every town that the river goes through in the wild and scenic area is on the board there.

Local fishing groups like the Farmington River Anglers Association are part of that. Grassroots organizations that care about the health of the river, like the Farmington River [00:16:00] Coordinating Committee, they're a part of that. So once again, that's a win for trout anglers everywhere, being wild and scenic.

D. Roger Maves: You know, with there's been a lot of activity out west of removing dams.

Steve Culton: Yeah.

D. Roger Maves: Um, has that come up on the Farmington about removing these two dams that have made-

Steve Culton: Well- ...

D. Roger Maves: The tailwater what they are?

Steve Culton: No, th- no, that's never gonna happen-

D. Roger Maves: Okay

Steve Culton: Because of the need for flood control. And I think especially now, the new normal, you're in Colorado, I don't need to tell you, the new normal is feast or famine with rain. It's either too much-

D. Roger Maves: I know. Yeah ...

Steve Culton: or it's too little. We had, last year in Connecticut, we had a pitiful rainfall summer. This summer in Connecticut, it was dry as a bone for months, and since July it's been plenty wet.

They actually now, in September, if the reservoirs have a surplus, they actually need to bleed water out of them because of hurricane season. [00:17:00] So those dams aren't going away. There's only two dams on Farmington River. They're both below the wild and scenic areas. One of them belongs to the now defunct, uh, Collinsville Ax Factory.

That dam, I believe, is not going anywhere. However, it has been rebuilt to some extent with a fish ladder. And then below that there's another dam that really does no harm to the river. That is scheduled to come out. I don't have a date on that, but-

D. Roger Maves: Mm-hmm. Mm ... uh,

Steve Culton: It causes ponding of water. It'll be really interesting to see what happens to the river when they take that second dam out.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah. Interesting. Okay. What makes the Farmington different from other major trout rivers in New England area?

Steve Culton: Well, certainly the tailwater thing, right?

D. Roger Maves: Okay.

Steve Culton: I don't... For, because it's a tailwater, and because the flows are now- There were some flow issues, which we can go into if you [00:18:00] wanna talk about that, that have been solved. So now the DEEP is sort of the major stakeholder in determining flows to make sure that they're never so low that wildlife and fish are getting hurt or damaged or suffering. But the... I don't think you can overemphasize enough the fact that it's a tailwater. That's what makes it different. I think the other thing that's unique about it, you might say, "Well, you know, you can go up to Maine and catch plenty of wild fish," and that's true, but the beauty of the Farmington, again, is that you can go on the Farmington and be kinda lost in the wilderness and lost in the beauty of the place, and then a big box truck goes over the bridge that you're fishing under and you're reminded, "This is a major artery I'm fishing under."

This is in civilization." So it's really, you know, centrally located. It's easy to get to. You know, the [00:19:00] other famous trout stream in Connecticut is the Housatonic River.

D. Roger Maves: Right.

Steve Culton: And, uh, I once wrote a magazine article about the Hoosie where I quoted someone from DEEP who said, "The Housatonic is a smallmouth bass stream that thinks it's a trout stream," because it just gets too warm in the summertime. So.

D. Roger Maves: Does it? Yeah. Yeah.

Steve Culton: Yeah.

D. Roger Maves: And so it's the damming and the tailwaters keep the water cool, consequently good trout fishery.

Steve Culton: Yeah.

D. Roger Maves: Um, yeah, yeah. Okay. And Housatonic doesn't have any dams on it? No, it's not a tailwater at all?

Steve Culton: The Housatonic doesn't. The Housatonic is a free-running river now.

D. Roger Maves: Okay.

Steve Culton: And that's not to say that trout don't hold over there.

It's not to say that trout don't spawn there. The problem is that in the summertime, you really... You know, you can't be targeting trout with traditional ta- period, because, you know, the ones, the trout that are in the Hous in the summer that are alive in [00:20:00] August have been hanging on the bottom, hanging on for dear life.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah.

Steve Culton: And part of, part of the problem with them spawning is that DEEP has discovered that in some cases the females are so using so much fuel to survive, they're reabsorbing their eggs. They got nothing for output when it's time to spawn.

D. Roger Maves: Wow. Oh.

Steve Culton: There, and having said that, you will catch an occasional small wild brown on the Housatonic, but I, I'm a big smallmouth guy and I caught several very nice holdover trout this summer on the Housatonic, not targeting them.

And of course, when you see, when you're fishing in water temps that are 78, and you see you've got a brown trout on your line, and you're-

D. Roger Maves: Hmm ...

Steve Culton: Fishing with a 1X tippet, you just rope that thing in. Uh-

D. Roger Maves: Yeah ...

Steve Culton: and both fish went back into the river no worse for the wear as far as I could tell. But, um-

D. Roger Maves: Well, good. Good. Good to [00:21:00] hear. Yeah.

Time to take a break here, Steve. So if you give me just 30 seconds, we'll take a break and then we'll be right back talking with Steve Culton about the Farmington River in Connecticut .

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You're listening to Ask About Fly Fishing Internet Radio, and we're talking with Steve Culton about Fly Fishing the Farmington River. If you'd like to ask a question, just go to our homepage and use that [00:22:00] Q&A text box to send us your question.

Steve, I always ask my guests, you know, what's going on in your fly fishing world, so, uh, tell us a bit about what's happening.

Steve Culton: Well, much is going on with the... As you can probably hear, I'm very excited about the book. For years, people have been asking me, "When are you gonna write a book? When are you gonna write a book?"

Well, look, Ma, I wrote a book. Um, that's keeping me really busy. That is the, uh, publicity tour, as it were. It's, uh, I feel like a wannabe rock star. My northeast tour, I got dates all over the northeast this fall and this winter promoting the book at local fly fishing clubs and Trout Unlimited chapters. I had a talk last night. I'm doing this tonight. Tomorrow, I'm going to Philadelphia. So it's all good. I love doing it. I love speaking. I'm a regular at the fly fishing shows in Lancaster; Edison, New Jersey; and Marlborough, Mass. I'm doing the International Fly Tying [00:23:00] Symposium in November.

And I also run a website. I have my own website. It's called currentseams.com, and most weeks, I try to put up two or three bits of original writing on. It's not a newsletter. It's not other people's work. It's all me creating original content. And as a writer, I also use the website as a depository for just about every magazine article I've ever written, you can find there.

And sometimes I write articles just for my own website. You can find fly patterns on there. I mean, I do everything. It's, uh, I'm a teaching guide. I'm a fly fishing educator, I guess. You know, I talk about a variety of topics. I love teaching, love talking about fishing. I'm on Instagram, too,

stevecultonflyfishing.com And I, the stuff I put on there is separate from what I put on Current Seems too, so I would think [00:24:00] people, you know, I won't put up a picture on my website and then put up the same picture on Instagram.

I like, it's kinda like the Beatles used to never put their singles on their albums. You had to buy the 45. It was like, you know, they didn't wanna make you pay for the same thing twice. So I try to do original content in both. You can sign up to get an email alert for the website. It doesn't, you know, I call it getting a subscription. Doesn't cost anything. You just go there and you don't miss anything about what I'm doing, where I'm headed, where I'm fishing, what I'm tying, what the latest hot fly is for me.

D. Roger Maves: Okay. All right. Sounds like a nice place to go and spend a few hours. So thanks for sharing all that with us, and, uh, like you said, looks like you got a busy fall coming up, and, um, lots of-

Steve Culton: Maybe, maybe I'll get to do some fishing at some point.

D. Roger Maves: Maybe, yeah. Well, all these places you're going, uh, somebody should take you out as a guest I would think. But, um- . Yeah, gotta work on that. [00:25:00] All right. Well, let's get back into it here.

You know, if somebody was coming to the Farmington for this first time, can you kinda give us a verbal tour of the river from where the good fishing starts on down, and maybe you can talk about, 'cause I think in your, your book you broke out different sections.

Maybe you can kinda give us a picture of those, the different sections and how they differ from one another.

Steve Culton: Yeah. So the Farmington in Connecticut is about 60 miles long, and really what the book focuses on are the 22 miles of prime trout water from the base of the dam in Heartland, Connecticut, down to the Steel Bridge in Unionville, Connecticut.

That is called, that entire stretch i- right now is called the seasonal trout management area. That entire 22-mile stretch right now is catch and release only until the second Saturday in April when the seasonal trout management area [00:26:00] becomes a catch and keep area. You can keep two trout 12 inches or better.

And that's, within that in the middle is what's called the permanent trout management area, and that's about five and a half miles long or so. The permanent trout management area is exactly what it sounds like. It's no kill, barbless hooks only, single barbless hooks, which doesn't mean you can't fish more than one fly. You can, and I do.

It just means you can't use doubles or treble hooks. Uh, that's catch and release 24/7, 365 days a year, or six if it's a leap year. Um, but your question's more about the water type, and it really does change. For example, the area up by the dam from the base of the dam down to Riverton, it really is totally different from anywhere else on the river.

It's the warmest water in the wintertime because it's closest to the dam. It never freezes, okay? It's the [00:27:00] coldest water in the summertime because of its proximity to the dam. And also because of the cold water, it's less fertile, and because it's coming out of the bottom of a lake, the water up there is less fertile, so you have a little bit less bug activity up there.

It's also above the Still River, and the Still River is a major tributary to the Farmington River. So it's possible, I mentioned feast or famine, it's possible that we get a feast rainfall. We get two inches of rain overnight that falls in four hours, and the Still River jacks up to 1,000 CFS. Everything below the river on the Farmington will be a thousands of CFS torrent of chocolate milk.

But the area from the dam above that is very likely gonna be running clear. So that's unique about that, too. As the river meanders kind of south, southeast, it gradually begins to [00:28:00] widen. I mean, much of the river follows a pool run, riffle format. Repeat, pool, run, riffle. It's got boulder fields, pocket water, and by the time you get down to what I call the mid-river, it's substantially wider and deeper than what's up by the dam.

And by the time you get down to what I call the lower river, which would be from Collinsville down to Unionville, it's even wider and bigger. It's almost reminiscent of a western river in its size and scope down there. Now, the downside to fishing downstream there is, depending on air temperature and depending on flows, you're gonna get a warming of water down there.

It's unavoidable. Some summers it's not incredibly hot, you know, there's no heat waves, or very few of them, or there's plenty of water in the system, and the water doesn't get that warm. In other summers, the flows are down [00:29:00] a little bit, deeps got a ... we're in a drought and, you know, I tell people, "If you're gonna fish this river in the summertime, you must carry a thermometer as a responsible angler."

And, you know, once ... My cutoff's 68 degrees. If that water's 68, I'm not fishing. So the river truly is unique and changes as it goes, you know, farther from the dam.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah, yeah. Where do most of the fishing activity up in the tailwater area, or is it spread out throughout the whole system?

Steve Culton: Well, one thing I'm hoping with this book, I'm hoping that people are gonna read it and realize how much water that is.

One claim I can make, I don't know of anyone else who's done this. I'm not saying no one else has, but I don't know of anyone who's done this. I have now in my life, I didn't do it all at once, I have now in my life walked, waded, and/or fished the entire 22 miles from the base of the [00:30:00] dam down to Unionville, and I'm hoping... I was astonished. Here's a guy who writes a book about the Farmington River and realizes, "Holy cow, I've never fished this before. Oh my goodness, I've never fished this before." I was stunned by how much really cool-looking water I had not fished. I've got a little list that I, I made and kept. I'm hoping that the book will help spread people out.

D. Roger Maves: Mm-hmm.

Steve Culton: But I would say the vast majority of... Nah, I wouldn't, not vast majority, but definitely the permanent trout management area, which is sort of the mid-upper section of river, that definitely gets the most angler traffic because that's where most of the wild fish are.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, that makes sense.

Steve Culton: They have really solid hatches there. It's also seasonal. You may have, again, in the, in the wintertime, we had a vicious winter in 2025. Parts of the river and the permanent trout management area were frozen over [00:31:00] solid. You could w- it's almost unheard of to be able to walk across the Farmington River. Not that I tried it.

I'm not that foolish. But it's the same weather up at the dam, two miles below the dam, completely open water-

D. Roger Maves: Right ...

Steve Culton: Just because it's out of the dam at 38 degrees and doesn't have the time to freeze.

D. Roger Maves: Right. Yep, yep. Yeah. You get a lot of that in Colorado, you know? Same kind of thing.

Steve Culton: Mm-hmm.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah.

Steve Culton: Mm-hmm.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah.

Is there a season in Connecticut? Because of the tailwater, you know, a lot of people out here in the West fish tailwaters all year round. Are you able to do that there?

Steve Culton: We are. Farmington was one of the first, uh... They've recently changed the regs in Connecticut. You're now able to fish almost, I believe, don't quote me on this, I think you can fish almost any river 365 days a year.

The Farmington was one of the... It wasn't always that way. Some streams were closed, but no, the Farmington's open for business all year round.[00:32:00]

D. Roger Maves: Okay. Okay. Jack Higgins in Maryland wrote in and says, "Is, is the Farmington wade-friendly? I'm looking for a wade-friendly water for my 79-year-old legs."

Steve Culton: Jack, I feel your pain, brother. I feel your pain. I, I went, uh, I would describe myself as a fearless wader. I would describe myself as a competent, confident, athletic wader. Having said that, I fall into the river at least once a year because I'm not looking where I'm going.

Is it wade-friendly? Yes. Is it wade-unfriendly? Yes. It really depends where you go, Jack.

There are some sections where I won't, as a guide, I won't take people. I mean, I ask all my clients before I take them out, "What's your wade ability? How athletic are you? Are you in good shape? Can you manage this?" And some people are, you know, telling me right away, "No, I've got some limitations here." So that immediately knocks a whole bunch of water that I like to go into [00:33:00] off the list, but all is not lost.

So Jack, one thing I did in the book was I took great care to talk about access to pools and water types. Like for example, I use, there's a pool called Campground Pool, which would be a place where, which is, I would call that wade-friendly water. The upper end of Campground Pool would absolutely be wade-friendly.

But what I wrote in the book, Jack, was, "Don't park on East River Road and try and get into the river on that side," 'cause you have to go down a really steep embankment that's got roots and rocks and bra- and you're g- if you have mobility issues, you're not gonna like it. Come in from the west side, which is a lot easier. There's a trail. There's some wooden steps. So the answer is yes, it can be wade-friendly, but you gotta try and find where those places are.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah. Yeah. Okay, good to know. Can you float the river with any kind of craft?

Steve Culton: It's not a float river. [00:34:00] You do occasionally see them, but the answer is yes. But, if there's a really heavy rain, I'm one of the few people who actually will go out when the river floods, just because I, I like the solitude and I like fishing in conditions like that.

That's the only time I'll ever see a watercraft, and nine times out of 10 they're inflatable rafts. You know, nothing like a drift boat that you would see, say, on the steelhead rivers in the Northeast or out West. Uh-

D. Roger Maves: Kayaks?

Steve Culton: You can, sure, a kayak. There's so few places on the Farmington that you can't wade.

I've fished from a kayak twice in my life, and it just wasn't for me, so.

D. Roger Maves: Oh, okay.

Steve Culton: I'm kind of an organic guy. I like getting into the water. I, I'm gonna go back to Jack's question, too. What I would say for Jack and for anyone, and I tell all my clients this as well, do yourself a favor, get studded boots and get a wading staff.[00:35:00]

D. Roger Maves: Mm-hmm.

Steve Culton: Those two things are gonna be huge on the Farmington. Studded boots and a wading staff

D. Roger Maves: Okay. All right. Let's see. Time to take another break here, and then we'll come back, talk more about the Farmington and more about the river, and start talking about hatches and choosing flies and that kind of thing so we can catch some fish. So hang tight. We'll be right back.

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You're listening to Ask About Fly Fishing Internet Radio, and we're talking with Steve Culton about Fly Fishing the Farmington River. If you'd like to ask Steve a question, just go to our homepage at askaboutflyfishing.com and send us your question in that, uh, Q&A text box.

All right, Steve, question, if I only had two or three days to fish the Farmington, what portions of the river would you suggest I concentrate on to experience what makes the fishery special?

Steve Culton: That's one of those questions where I would ask follow-up questions, be like, "Well, what month is your-"

D. Roger Maves: Can you wade? Can you wade? Yeah.

Steve Culton: What month is your two to three days in? [00:37:00] But in the abstract, if you have only two or three days, I think you absolutely would wanna spend some time in the permanent trout management area. It's, uh, beautiful water. It's varied water. Like I said, you got everything from classic dry fly pools to, uh, boulder fields and pocket water, and then some shallower riffley and run-type water.

So definitely that. As a matter of fact, I would say if you have only two or three days, you could do a lot worse than just staying in the PTMA. And I tell people, the, the PTMA is bordered by East River Road, which runs up the east side. You wanna guess what the name of the road is that runs up the west side? Take a guess.

D. Roger Maves: West- West River Road.

Steve Culton: West River Road. Well done, young man. Well done. There are all kinds of packed dirt pull-offs [00:38:00] on East and West- West River Road, and I tell people, if you wanna learn the river, start at Church Pool, which is where both of those roads begin. Start at Church Pool, pick a road, east or west, and head north, and pull over at the first dirt pull-off you get to, and there's a trail near there, and it goes through the wood walk, and it takes you to the river.

Go fish there. There's a reason that pull-off is there. And go there, and if you don't like it, drive north. You might be driving 100 yards, you might be driving 300 yards, but there's gonna be another packed dirt pull-off. Pull over, get out, and walk in there and see if you like what you see. There's so much wonderful water on this river I'm gonna stick with that as my answer.

D. Roger Maves: Sure. Yeah, that's a great answer. As you just said, the Farmington contains pools, riffles, runs, pocket water, braid side channels, all those kinds of things. What types of water tend to be overlooked, and where might anglers be walking past good trout?

Steve Culton: Oh, I love that question. So I'm [00:39:00] known, I've got some renown as a wet fly angler, and one of the things I like about wet fly fishing is that classic wet fly water, which is...

Which I define as one to three feet deep, moving at a good walking pace, and with a modeled surface that indicates structure on the bottom. It's also, some people call that the bee water. There's so much bee water on any river that most people don't pay a lot of attention to. So that's the kind of water that I like to fish at a certain time of year.

I'm not targeting that water in the winter, nor am I swinging wet flies. Okay, I fish wet flies in the winter, but they're part... That's an answer to a different question. But definitely that kind of water is something I look for, and for me, I love treacherous boulder fields that no one [00:40:00] else will go into, 'cause they're very difficult to wade.

You know, I don't feel like you're ever risking life and limb, but they're not easy, and a lot of times you don't see people in them. But there's fish there. So if you're into... I like fishing where other people don't.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah.

Steve Culton: That's my answer to that.

D. Roger Maves: All right. What about the water releases from the dams? Do they change the flows significantly, and do they affect where you fish?

Steve Culton: Yeah, not so much anymore. We had some flow issues a few years back, which I won't go into the details. Those have been solved. They no longer do dramatic cuts and bumps, at least as a general practice they don't. I'm sure if there was some sort of emergency where they needed to bleed water out of the dam, if there was a hurricane coming, they might do that.

But the answer is yes, but really I do pay attention to that, but [00:41:00] in a roundabout way. Something I mentioned before, like for example, if the releases are low and it's summertime, and it's been warm or even hot, that's gonna kinda cross out the lower end of the river for me.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah.

Steve Culton: Just because of the temperature.

So I do pay attention to it. I pay more attention... I pay just as much attention to what the Still River is doing. Because, you know, if they're, once again, let's say it's the summertime. If they're releasing 100 from the dam, and we get a big rainfall and the Still's flowing at 900, that makes 1,000 total. But 900 of that is warm water coming from the Still, so that's also gonna have an influence on how far away from that I'm willing to go. And again, I'll say this again, get a good stream thermometer and use it.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah. Okay. Okay. If Farmington does get, you know, considerable fishing pressure, how [00:42:00] would an angler adjust where and when and how they fish when, you know, the popular areas are crowded? You pull to one of these pullouts and there's already three guys there.

Steve Culton: Yeah.

D. Roger Maves: What's, um, what's the plan then?

Steve Culton: Yeah. It's tough. My general advice to people is if you have your heart set on fishing a glamour pool, glamour dry fly pool, like say Church Pool or Greenwoods or Campground Pool during a glamour hatch like Hendricksons or Sulphurs, get there early.

Get there well before the hatch. You know, I tell people, know what your hatch windows are, when bugs are gonna start popping, 'cause sometimes, yeah, Hendricksons, you don't see the duns on the water until about 2:30, yeah, on most days. But it's not unheard of to get your, lock in your spot by around noon or 11:30.

You gotta go there early i- if you wanna kind of [00:43:00] bookmark a spot for yourself there, or reserve a spot. One thing I always tell people, and there's an example in the book too, is I think courtesy and politeness goes a long way. I have a photo in the book of, uh, it's at Campground Pool and I was fishing at the head, and I think anglers also, both ones that are already in the water and ones that are approaching the river, I think we all need to be realistic in our expectations about sharing the water.

It's not realistic to think that on a really nice day during a popular hatch at prime fishing hours, that you're gonna have a place to yourself. So if we accept that, then let's all try to get along. And these three guys came into Campground, and they stood on the riverbank and they said, you know, "Excuse me, what are your plans? You going up or down?" I said, "I'm really happy here." And they said, "Well, can we go in above you?" And I said, "Absolutely, and let's, you know, let's, let's work out a reasonable distance between us, and if I start [00:44:00] catching a whole bunch of fish and you're not, we can get a little rotation going." I really encourage stuff like that.

It's polite, it's civilized, and I think we all in the world could do with a little more politeness and a little more civilization. You know, pay it back, pay it forward. I believe in karma, so, uh, always ask if you can share the water. Try to make room for other people. It is, after all, a, uh, public resource.

I've also, going back to the very first question you asked me, it never hurts to have extra cigars. "Excuse me, sir. Are you a cigar smoker?" "Oh, yes I am." "Yeah. How about if I come out and give you one of these?" And all of a sudden we're buddies and it's okay for me to fish next to him.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah. Yeah.

Steve Culton: Give away flies.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah, somebody

Steve Culton: I give away flies all the time on the river.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah.

Steve Culton: If someone's struggling, I'll say, you know, "What are you fishing? Try this." I've gotten into... On rivers everywhere, I've gotten into so many pools [00:45:00] by watching people struggle and then offering help or flies, and then, then all of a sudden you're their buddy and you're in, so.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah. Yeah.

Steve Culton: It's not entirely altruistic, but the end result is good, right?

D. Roger Maves: Yeah. Yep. Yep. It pays to be friendly. Somebody told me long, many years ago said that their rule was if you can see what color the other guy's fly line is, you're probably too close. But- But I don't know. With some of these, uh, bright colored fly lines, that might not work. But yeah.

Steve Culton: And really sometimes the answer is no, there is no room for you or me or whatever.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah. Yeah.

Steve Culton: And, and you have to understand that too. My rule is if I have to change the way I'm fishing, then you're too close.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah. Yeah. I, I could-

Steve Culton: That's where I'm casting.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah. It only happened to me once that was really blatant.

I was on the San Juan River down in New Mexico, and I was fishing a small braided run [00:46:00] and, you know, it was a place where the water got deep and I could see fish in there, and a guy comes from the other side and starts casting in the same place that I'm fishing. And I said, "Really?" I said-

Steve Culton: Yeah ...

D. Roger Maves: "look up and down the river. There's all kinds of places to fish here." I mean, there was nobody else around. And he said, "Yeah, but I see fish here." And I said, "Yes, so do I. That's why I'm fishing here."

Steve Culton: Yeah.

D. Roger Maves: So, but yeah, that was the only really blatant, you know.

Steve Culton: I have a, I have a whole chapter on etiquette in the book, um-

D. Roger Maves: Oh, do you? Okay

Steve Culton: Where, where I just try to... We all just need to, we need to do our best. It's crowded, and sometimes you're gonna have to go somewhere else.

D. Roger Maves: Yep. Yep.

Steve Culton: But, you know, try and make it enjoyable for everyone.

D. Roger Maves: This is from Jason Stacy in Kentucky. He says, "What's the best time of year to fish the Farmington?" Now, I know what your answer's gonna be, but you gotta give us some kind, the best time of year for what kind of fishing. Maybe we can make that a bit more specific.

Steve Culton: Jason, my pithy, [00:47:00] humorous answer is yes.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah, that's what I knew you were gonna answer.

Steve Culton: Jason, I had this thing about 10 years ago where I would sometimes feel ambivalent about fishing. I would say to myself, "I think I wanna go fishing. Well, I'm not really sure I wanna go.

Yeah, maybe I'll go. Well, I'm not really sure I wanna go." So Jason, what I did was I sent my brain back to the factory and I had them rewire it, and now my default setting is go fishing. So the other joke answer is the best time to fish the Farmington is when you can. But I know what you're talking about.

D. Roger Maves: Smart ass.

Steve Culton: I, I can't, I can't give you a best time. I can give you my favorite time of year. We'll settle on that. My favorite time of year to fish the Farmington would be early June, because the water is warmed up to mid and lower 50s, which is trout wheelhouse, [00:48:00] and you've got so many great hatches going on, and the weather's generally nice.

So, you know, I really think that if you're gonna say summer starts June 21st, those three weeks before June 21, hard to beat those.

D. Roger Maves: Okay.

Steve Culton: Hard to beat those in terms of bug activity and willingness of fish to jump on.

D. Roger Maves: Okay. Fair enough answer.

Steve Culton: There you go.

D. Roger Maves: Let's talk about flies. If you had to identify the most important hatches that a first-time Farmington angler should know, which ones would make your list?

Again, I know that's, involves time of year, but...

Steve Culton: yeah. Um, what I did in the book was I purposefully... And there's a complete hatch chart of most everything of any importance on the Farmington River. There's, like, 30-something categories on it and when they hatch. I didn't want the book [00:49:00] to be a deep dive into bug study, right?

Entomology.

There are other books that do a much better job of that, but I wanted to give people some insight into the hatches and what was important. So like, for example, with mayflies, I chose seven mayflies or groups that I thought were the most significant. And so using that as an example.

I wrote about Blue-Wing Olives, hendricksons, vittatus and sulphurs, isonychia, nidami, which is a tiny chocolate brown mayfly.

I have these all grouped into one. Summer Stenos, attenuata, and Light Cahills, and then trichos. Those are the most important, most consistent mayfly hatches on the river. So I think the book does a really good job of identifying what are those important hatches. I think you should know also that we have stoneflies on the Farmington River, [00:50:00] and stoneflies are, whether they're hatching or not, they're on the river bottom.

Some stoneflies take years to go from soup to nuts, as it were. So they're always a food source that's available to trout. They don't need to be hatching. I think midges get a lot more juice out west, and that's probably earned. We, of course, have midges on the Farmington, and there are a bazillion of them.

No one, I don't think, really talks about them because we have such a diversity of other bugs, but midges are important, too, especially in the wintertime. And I saved this group of bugs for last 'cause this, I love my mayflies, and I love my mayfly hatches. But as I wrote in the book, mayflies are the rock stars- And caddisflies are the roadies.

Without the caddisflies, there really is no show. I think caddisflies are incredibly [00:51:00] important on the Farmington River, and I, we have so many different species. In fact, there's so many different species of caddis on the Farmington that I didn't even attempt to try and divvy them up. I have stuff like tan body caddis, and olive body caddis, and green micro caddis, and then I've got October caddis, giant October caddis.

Other than that, it, there's just... I also have winter summer caddis, which is a unique fly to the Farmington River. They are so important to trout as a food, and again, this goes to me being a wet fly angler. I love fishing caddis subsurface. Uh, if you're a nymph angler, caddisfly patterns are exceptionally important on the Farmington River, and the month of May is sort of a mayfly kind of null period.

Caddis is the main game in May. Definitely get to know your caddisfly species and how to best [00:52:00] use them when you're trying to fish for trout.

D. Roger Maves: One thing I don't... Well, we did get a question here on the internet, John in Northford, Connecticut.

Steve Culton: Yeah.

D. Roger Maves: It says, "If you love dry fly fishing, what is your favorite hatch? Fished the Hendricksons this year, so sporadic, spotty rises."

Steve Culton: Yeah. The Hendrickson hatch can really be hit or miss depending on the day. I mean, we've had days where it was nice and sunny, and the hatch was ramping up, and then a cold front came through, and cloud cover came in, and it just stopped the hatch dead in its tracks.

Everyone talks about the Hendrickson hatch in dry fly. When you think hatch, you don't necessarily think spinner fall. The spinner fall of the Hendricksons is extremely important on the Farmington River. If you have a really windy day, that spinner fall sometimes doesn't happen until, yeah, everyone's left the river for the day.

Sometimes it happens the next morning. So I feel your pain [00:53:00] there in Norfolk, Connecticut. The question was, what's my favorite fly for a dry fly hatch?

D. Roger Maves: No, no, he was just kind of making it, uh, what is your favorite hatch? Uh-

Steve Culton: My favorite hatch.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah. Yeah.

Steve Culton: I would say the sulfurs. The sulfurs. We have two kinds.

We have the imbaria, which are the bigger, about a 16 to 18. Sometimes I think some of them think they're 14s. And then we have the dorothea, which are definitely smaller, 18 to 20. I say sulfurs because, again, it's... Sometimes in Connecticut in May, you go outside and you think, "Well, it's gonna be April any day now."

You can't believe how cold it is. But by the time you're in June, it's warmer, it's nicer, and I love the sulfur hatch just because I think the trout really dig those mayflies too, and they're just, they snap 'em up And I get to, uh, fish. I do both [00:54:00] the Hendrickson and the Sulphurs. I'm a very dedicated fishing under the hatch with wet flies kinda angler, and then switching over to dry flies at the appropriate time.

But there's something that's really cool about, about fishing the Sulphur hatch into dark, knowing you're still gonna catch fish after you can't see your fly anymore. I find that terribly romantic and inspiring, so...

D. Roger Maves: Hmm. Do you carry, do you have different boxes for the different seasons and hatches? I mean...

Steve Culton: I do, and I'm an odd... One thing I have learned in writing the book is that there are two kinds of anglers in terms of carrying fly boxes, completists and minimalists.

D. Roger Maves: Mm-hmm.

Steve Culton: I am a minimalist. And I thought, "What's wrong with me?" So like, uh, there's a guy named, uh, Joey Takeman, who's one of the best anglers on the river, and I was out shooting Joey [00:55:00] fishing, and that's Joey's fly box you see on the cover of the book.

And I said-

D. Roger Maves: Oh ...

Steve Culton: "Can I see your fly box?" And he says, "Well, which one?" This guy's carrying five or six boxes that hold several hundred flies, and I'm like, "Holy cow." Right. "I don't think I've tied that many flies in my life," which is an exaggeration, but you know, I thought, "What's wrong with me?" And, uh, uh, Derek Kirkpatrick was also out with us on that day, and Derek had a bazillion boxes, and there are a few other anglers I know that just have tons and tons of flies.

Out your way, Pat Dorsey, who's a friend of mine.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah.

Steve Culton: Pat Dorsey and Chris Steinbeck over at Blue Quill, they... I, I see their fly boxes and I'm like, "Holy cow." I was really, really pleased to read... Someone sent me Ed Mann Putt's book on fly fishing. I was really, really pleased to hear him say that he carries very few flies, and that he estimates that over half the trout that he's caught in his life came on some form of Adams. [00:56:00] So I was like-

D. Roger Maves: Yeah, yeah ...

Steve Culton: "Oh, I am, I'm not weird and I'm not strange. Hooray." Yeah. So to answer, you know, your question, I have a... That I take on the river, I have a nymph box, I have a wet fly box, I have a dry fly box, and I have a streamer box. But you see-

D. Roger Maves: That's a lot of boxes.

Steve Culton: But, well, but they're not big. Some of them... I tend to take with me days worth boxes, which change throughout the seasons, right?

D. Roger Maves: That's what I was getting after. Yeah.

Steve Culton: Yeah,

D. Roger Maves: That's what I was... Yeah.

Steve Culton: I have, like, a big stor- I have big compartmentalized clear fly boxes that I can just drop flies into, and then I have... I actually have the fly box Velcroed to the top of my pack.

So I know and, you know, if it's, um, that time of year, like I said, June sulfur time, I'm gonna have in that, I'm gonna have creamy mayflies, I'm gonna have some caddisflies in there, I'm gonna have some isonychia in there, I might have some terrestrials in there [00:57:00] I don't wanna suffer from analysis paralysis, right?

D. Roger Maves: Yeah.

Steve Culton: I kinda know what I wanna fish, and I wanna have it ready to go and easy. I mean, I'm, I'm the kinda guy, I do a lot of things wrong too, as an angler, wrong in air quotes. Like, I rig my wet fly team up the night before I go to the river. You're supposed to go to the river and sit and observe and-

D. Roger Maves: Right

Steve Culton: Kinda meditate on, on what you think they might be eating. I don't have time for that. I wanna go fishing, man, you know?

D. Roger Maves: See.

Steve Culton: And of course, I make adjustments if necessary, but I, I've got-

D. Roger Maves: Yeah ...

Steve Culton: A pretty good idea of what's hatching and when on the river.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah. Yeah, I've mentioned this before on my show, but I was on the North Fork of the Platte River one day and talking to a guy in the parking lot, and at that time I had this big vest on, you know, I mean-

Steve Culton: Yeah

D. Roger Maves: Chock-full of boxes, right? And every- and got to talking to him, and he didn't have a vest on Or [00:58:00] anything, and I don't know how he c- came to it, but the conversation about flies and he goes, "Oh, well, here's what I have." And he, out of his shirt pocket, he had, it was like an Altoids box, okay?

Steve Culton: Yeah.

D. Roger Maves: You know, for mints.

He opened it up and he goes, "This is all the flies I ever use." He says, "I've been fishing this many flies for 30 years, and I always catch fish." And that day, I went home and I started going the minimalistic route, right? And, you know, and I ended up with a little chest pack. And it's amazing, in a little pack, you know, not even a pack, just a box, right?

That how many flies you can get in there, and you'll never fish all those flies in one day, you know? So that's, yeah, my approach now is, well, what's hatching? Why am I carrying caddis when the mayflies are hatching, right?

Steve Culton: Yeah.

D. Roger Maves: Unless there's some kinda overlap. Yeah.

Steve Culton: I have a story.

D. Roger Maves: Anyway.

Steve Culton: I have a story.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah, go ahead.

Steve Culton: I have a story about that guy in the book.

D. Roger Maves: Oh, yeah.

Steve Culton: That I'm talking [00:59:00] about. Yeah. The, I don't know who originated this story, I'm just repeating it. It's not a Steve Culton original, but it's a good one, and it's a bunch of guys are in a fly shop discussing the latest hatches, and their difficulty in, in representing them and presenting them and catching the fish, and they're using all sorts of Latin, you know, name for the, a cemerella, et cetera.

D. Roger Maves: Right.

Steve Culton: A drella, blah, blah, blah, blah. And this, uh, nondescript angler walks into the store, just fresh in from the river, and they, they greet him and ask him how he did, and when he tells them how many fish he caught, they're astonished, and they ask him, "Well, we gotta ask, what did you get them on?" And he pulls the fly off his hat and says, "This little gray bastard."

D. Roger Maves: Yeah. Probably in atoms. Yeah.

Steve Culton: And then I go on to write, "I have nothing but the highest admiration for people who study these bugs and know them." I mean, when I was [01:00:00] researching this book, I relied heavily on others just to kinda, you know- ... vet all, everything I wrote about these hatches. Is this accurate? Is this true? 'Cause you know more than I do. So I do deeply admire that.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah.

Steve Culton: And having that, there's something about this little gray bastard that just resonates with me.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah. Yeah.

Steve Culton: If you're having fun, you're doing something right.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah. Of course. Gary Kaufman, North Carolina, he says, "I've heard numerous statements on what are the most important features of a fly with presentation, size, and shape seeming the most important. What have you found to be the most important features of a fly?"

Steve Culton: Wow. I don't think I've ever gotten that question before.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah?

Steve Culton: Well, well, I would start not worded this way. I would start, Gary, by saying I don't, I don't think presentation is necessarily a feature of a fly. If you wanna ask me of all those things what I think is most [01:01:00] important, I tell another story in the book.

There's a guy, I wouldn't say he was a mentor, but I looked up to him as an angler, an excellent, excellent dry fly angler, by the name of Don Butler. He passed away this summer, sadly. But Don was the former record holder on the Farmington River. Don caught a trout on a dry fly on the Farmington River for 83 consecutive months, okay?

Let that, do the math in your head right there, okay? His nephew, Drew, caught a trout on the Farmington River on a dry fly for over 220 consecutive months. Work that one out. But Don, Don liked to tell me this story, and I love this story. Don would tell the story of, you know, he'd be dry fly fishing, and he'd be bailing fish, and later someone [01:02:00] would say to him, "I, I gotta ask you, what are, what are you getting all those fish on?" And Don would say, "Presentation."

D. Roger Maves: Yep.

Steve Culton: And that's where Steve Culton lives. That's, uh... I tell people I'm not right, but I'll die on that hill. I think presentation is the single most important factor. I'm a huge believer in the wrong fly presented correctly is better than the right fly presented incorrectly.

D. Roger Maves: Right. I agree. Yeah.

Steve Culton: I've got a great video that I do in one of my wet fly talks that I call The Power of the Wet Fly, and it's trout in barely any current doing what the English call smudding, smudding trout. They're eating really, really tiny insects. In this case, it was size 24, 26 blue-winged olives, and they're just dainty little rise rings.

And I didn't have... I was actually streamer fishing that day, so I had a six weight rod with, like, an eight weight front-loaded bass taper floating line, a 1X leader, probably, [01:03:00] like a, I think 3X might've been my smallest tippet size, and all I had, a size 10 white fly soft hackle. And I had my GoPro with me, and I roll tape, and on my first cast I banged up one of those fish.

You know, it was the wrong fly, but I presented it correctly.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah. Yeah.

Steve Culton: So, so that's what I would say there, Gary. Having said that, a little sidebar, would be on the Farmington River, I've noticed that, we'll use sulphurs as an example. Let's say I've captured a sulphur, and I'm holding it in my hands, and I know it is dead-on perfect size 16.

It is a size 16, and I'm throwing size 16s out there, and I'm making good presentations, and they're not having it. Sometimes you go down a size or two and that's the ticket. I, I, I don't understand why that happens, but it's happened for me enough to always [01:04:00] try that.

D. Roger Maves: Hmm. Okay.

Steve Culton: Go down a size. It's almost never a bad idea to go down a size.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, I've heard that before. But, but- Yeah ...

Steve Culton: I thank him for asking that. That's a wonderful question.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah. Yeah. Or throw something out there that's totally different. I mean, not even in the hatch.

Steve Culton: Yeah. Right? Yep.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah. Yeah. Now, I know we've been talking about the Farmington as a trout river, but we did get a question from Bart Lombardo in New Jersey about smallmouth.

Do you wanna look at that question?

Steve Culton: Yeah. Well, Bart-

D. Roger Maves: Okay ... or talk about the smallmouth as a fishery on the Farmington?

Steve Culton: Yeah. Well, I see the question. Do you wanna read it?

D. Roger Maves: Yeah. Uh, can you describe the rod and line setup you use for river smallmouth and explain why you m- you made this choice?

Steve Culton: So Bart, for those of you who don't know, Bart is an exceptionally talented fly tyer. His specialty is panfish and smallmouth bass. I know Bart from the fly fishing shows.

Interestingly enough, I don't [01:05:00] do a lot of smallmouth fishing on the Farmington, and I had it on my to-do list this summer to rectify that, and I failed miserably. The place for smallmouth, the place for emphasis, is the Tarifville Gorge area, which surprisingly isn't...

It's where they do a lot of whitewater kayaking when there's enough flows. But the water there is warm enough. It's nearer at the point where the Farmington runs into the Connecticut River. And then you've got some of the meadows below, uh, excuse me, actually above in the flow, above the Tariffville Gorge.

You would need a watercraft to get into those areas. But if, if I was going to fish for smallmouth on the Farmington, I would probably bring I would probably bring, I have a custom built 10 and a half foot six weight that I really like, [01:06:00] and I would, uh, I have that mated with a, a nine weight, weight forward bass bug taper, which may seem like a lot, but the beauty of that line is I can go seamlessly from throwing a weighted crayfish, okay, nymphing it, jigging it, to a very small bluegill popper, almost like a dry fly, to throwing a large deer hair bug like, um, Tommy Lynch's Mini D&D I love as a smallmouth fly.

And with that rod and line, I can throw all of those things without having to change a rod or a line. So I'm big on simplicity, and I'm big on convenience, and I'm lazy, so I like anything that makes my life easier. I'd rather spend time fishing than re-stringing up a rod, right?

D. Roger Maves: Yeah. Yeah.

Steve Culton: So that's why I would do that, Bart.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah. And we did, uh, we had Bart on my show. It's been quite a while back, but talking about, uh, fly fishing for panfish. So if [01:07:00] people wanna look up that show, they can find Bart Lombardo on our site. So yeah, cool. Well, if you're listening, Bart, hey, thanks for being here tonight. When... Okay, I've got room for a couple more questions here.

I think these are pretty good questions. So nymphing is extremely popular on the Farmington. What makes nymphing so, uh... No, I'm sorry, that's not the one I wanted to ask. Farmington has a reputation for sophisticated, heavily pressured trout. When you're fishing dry flies to selective fish, what presentation mistakes do you see anglers make most often?

Steve Culton: Wow. Wow. That's, there's a lot to unpack there. I'll start here. So I don't... You used the word sophisticated. I don't know if that's your question or... I don't believe there's such a thing as a sophisticated fish or an educated fish. They're dumb as rocks. They're not the most intellectually gifted of God's creatures.[01:08:00]

They can't think, they can't reason. So we have that in our favor to start. That's just my opinion. Heavily pressured, oh, yeah, and then some. Yes. This river sees an extraordinary amount of pressure. I also wanna talk about the word you used, the adjective selective there, selective fish. Fish, I do believe that fish are selective, but it's not, again, going back to my fish are dumb as rocks, it's not a conscious decision they're making, okay?

Gary LaFontaine in, in his book, Caddisflies, summed it up brilliantly, and he basically said, "Fish will eat the largest food item in the greatest abundance that's easiest for them to get," and that is what makes them selective. That's, it's not, they're not thinking, okay, "Oh, I have caddisflies and I have Hendrickson's. Which should I eat today?" It's which one is coming off [01:09:00] the most that's easiest them, for them to eat.

So I do believe in selectivity, and that goes to... So the first mistake I would think is that people aren't sure exactly what the fish are eating, okay? So fishing dry flies to selected fish, make sure you know what they're eating, and you can do that by either looking at what's in the air, okay?

Or I use the Henriksons and caddis as, as an example. On the Farmington River, Henriksons and caddis overlap, okay? And I have fished under the hatch, this is a wet fly now, I fish under the hatch with Henrikson flies and caddis flies on the same team and had the trout completely ignore one species and glom onto the other.

D. Roger Maves: Mm-hmm.

Steve Culton: I had one Henrikson outing a couple years ago, it was, it was a really lousy [01:10:00] hatch, but they were coming off, and no one was catching anything. I happened to be lucky because I was fishing under the hatch with wet flies, and I had a Henrikson on top, a Henrikson on the bottom, and a caddis in the middle.

I caught three fish, all of them ate the caddis, and that wasn't an accident. So but if the question is about presentation, that took a very long time to get here, the, the answer is simple. The single biggest mistake is that people are using a leader that is too short, okay? My default minimum dry fly leader on the Farmington River is 13 feet.

That's minimum. So if I'm fishing the sulfur hatch, say, I'm gonna start with a nine-foot, 5X tapered leader. And to that, I'm gonna add a minimum, a minimum of four feet of 6X, maybe five or six feet, 'cause I'm gonna start burning through that as I'm changing patterns, cutting off flies. The [01:11:00] longer your leader is, the truer your dry fly drift is gonna be, the easier it's gonna be for you to mend, okay?

The only drag about it is that if it's a windy or, or, or breezy day, or if you're trying to do in-close precision casting, a leader that long can make that a difficult proposition. But in terms of presentation, I think a lot of answers can be found in simply make your leader longer. It turns everyone's presentation into something that's, uh, a lot more natural looking.

D. Roger Maves: Okay. Two more questions. I'm gonna run over time here, but I think these are good questions, and I know-

Steve Culton: Good ...

D. Roger Maves: This is in your wheelhouse. So you're well known for fishing wet flies and soft hackles. When are wet flies particularly effective on the Farmington, and how do you fish a team of wets during a hatch?

Steve Culton: I love this question because I love wet flies and soft hackle.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah.

Steve Culton: So, so [01:12:00] there are three scenarios that I'll use wet flies on the Farmington River. Let me start here. I assume we're talking about swinging wet flies. I don't swing wet flies year

round, okay? Starting around a month from now or so, or November, through March at least, I will almost always... and just because I don't do nymphing too much any other time of year, I do a lot of nymphing in the winter, I will almost always have a wet fly on my nymph rig, okay? So everyone listening out there, whatever river you're fishing, it doesn't have to be the Farmington, if you're not, if you're fishing a multi-fly nymph rig, okay, and you don't have a soft hackle emergery pattern on there, you're missing fish.

So try it. You can thank me later.

D. Roger Maves: Are you fishing that as the upper or the lower fly?

Steve Culton: As the upper dry, right? It's an emerger. It's where it's most likely to be.

D. Roger Maves: Okay.

Steve Culton: I mean, in the wintertime, something really small, like I'll tie a size 20 or 22 Starling and Hurl, [01:13:00] little midge-y thing, soft hackle, and have it as the top dropper.

D. Roger Maves: Okay.

Steve Culton: But this is, this is about a team of wets. So

D. Roger Maves: Yeah.

Steve Culton: There are three scenarios that I use wet flies on the Farmington, and one is when there's absolutely nothing going on, and I'm searching. There's nothing going on. I see no evidence of fish. There's no hatches, no rises. So wet, a team of three wets is a wonderful searching pattern.

I don't like standing in one place. I like to move around when I'm fishing. I'm active. It's a great way to cover water and finding fish. You're looking for aggressive fish, okay? The next scenario is pre-hatch, okay, which I'll use Hendrickson's as an example. So I said on the Farmington, you know, a good window for bugs actually coming off the water for Hendrickson's on the Farmington, let's just say it's 2:30, okay?

I'm on the water at noon swinging wets [01:14:00] because even though there's nothing in the air, creatures are stirring below, okay? Those bugs are starting to get into the drift, and this is why it's important, you know. Know your hatches, know your hatch characteristic, and what are the bugs doing? What are the nymphs doing?

How are they preparing? Sulfur is another hatch that is a must fish for wet flies. Sulfur nymphs are in the drift for a very long time, and consequently, the trout get a good long look at them. I don't have stats to back this up, but I'll bet you nine times out of 10 during the next sulfur hatch you see, okay, I'll bet you nine times out of 10 they're taking a fly just beneath the surface, not something on the surface.

Watch for that. Sulfurs are tailor-made to fish with wet flies. So, so there, there's that, that scenario. And the third is during an active hatch. I mean, if there's actually fish rising and stuff coming off, and

they're not eating the duns, [01:15:00] right? Bob Linquist, who's a Delaware River guy, taught me, "No white, no bubble, no dry."

Unless the fish... unless you see the white of its mouth, and unless the fish breaks the film, which leaves a bubble on the surface, he's eating something just below the surface. So that's another great time to be swinging wets. How do you fish a team of wets during a hatch is another wonderful question. So I like to approach it as if I were dry fly fishing.

I'm looking for active, playing fish, right? I'm looking for someone who's coming up regularly and rhythmically. If a fish comes up once and then disappears for 10 minutes, I'm not interested in that fish. In my experience, he's gonna be a tough customer. I'm looking for the one that snap, he eats, and then a few seconds go by, and then snap, he eats again.

And I want to put my cast, I want to put my team of wets over that fish without a long drift. So it's, you know, in the abstract, I want to land [01:16:00] my flies about six feet above that fish's position. I want those flies to hit the water and be in his face. And if he doesn't eat, I'm gonna try and do it again.

So I, I'm definitely targeting active feeders. And in the case of the Henriksons, there will come a time where all of a sudden... You know, I, I, I clean up on wet flies during the Henrikson hatch, during the early stages, and all the dry fly guys are staring at me like, "What, what, what is this guy doing?" And then all of a sudden, I'm staring at them 'cause they're catching all the fish and I'm not.

So it happens, it's like you could set your watch to it. It's about 2:45 or 3:00 PM, and all of a sudden I gotta rip off all those wet flies and put on a dry fly 'cause they're taking the duns on the water. It's a really cool phenomenon, so, uh-

D. Roger Maves: Yeah. Yeah. Well, good. Hey, that, a lot of good information in that answer, I'll tell you. A lot of tips. Yeah.

Steve Culton: Well, we need to do a wet fly podcast at some point.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah. I th- sounds like it. Yeah. [01:17:00] Well, we've run out of time, Steve. We've run over time, so I gotta wrap things up here, but stick with me here. We're gonna do some giveaways and a membership to the Fly Fishers International, a one-year membership to Trout Unlimited, and of course, a copy of, uh, of your book, Fly Fishing Guide to the Farmington River, so courtesy of Stackpole Books. So hang tight. We'll be right back, and we'll do those giveaways, and we'll call it a night.

The Bonefish and Tarpon Trust works very hard to safeguard the future of our beloved flats fisheries, from protecting spawning sites threatened by unsustainable fishing pressure to securing historic funding to restore Florida's Everglades and estuaries.

Thanks to their members, they've expanded their conservation to the Bahamas, Belize, and Mexico. There's still much more work to be done, and they need your help. With your support, they can ensure that the flats fishery is healthy and sustainable now and for generations to come. Visit btt.org and become a member of the Bonefish and Tarpon Trust today. Again, that's [01:18:00] btt.org.

Just a quick reminder to everyone, before you leave the website tonight, please take a minute and give us your feedback about the show. You can find a link on our homepage in the section under tonight's show that says, "What did you think of the show?" Just click on that link, leave your comments. We'd really appreciate it.

Now it's time to give away our prizes. The winners for our drawings are randomly selected from the show's registration database. And if you didn't register for tonight's show, it's too late now, but make sure you do so for our next show so you don't miss out on a chance to win some of these great prizes. If you are one of the lucky winners, we'll contact you after the show to collect your information so that we can deliver your prize to you.

So first, we'll be giving away a one-year membership to Fly Fishers International, and to learn more about FFI, go to flyfishersinternational.org. Always a great organization to support.

And let's see our winner for that is Anne Kai. Anne Kai in New York. Anne Kai. So congratulations, Anne. I know you'll enjoy your membership.

And now we'll give away another one-year [01:19:00] membership to Trout Unlimited, and our winner for that is Ethan Ram. Ethan Ram in Connecticut. So we got a Connecticut listener out there tonight. Great.

Steve Culton: Yay.

D. Roger Maves: So yeah, congratulations, Ethan, and you'll be a proud member of Trout Unlimited as well.

And now we'll give away a copy of Steve's book, Fly Fishing Guide to the Farmington River, courtesy of Stackpole Books. Again, there's a link on our homepage if you wanna use that to purchase it, or Steve's site or Amazon. It's available everywhere, so...

Now, the question is, a couple times during the show, Steve mentioned a water, a river that can affect dramatically the fishing on the Farmington. What's the name of that river?

Now we gotta wait a... There's a little delay before they even hear it, and then we gotta wait for them to type and, you know, they gotta get their hands off the fly tying vice and so.

Steve Culton: I got you.

D. Roger Maves: So let's, uh, you know, let's, uh, give it a second here [01:20:00] and, well, uh, maybe what I'll do is, I just thought of a new twist after 20 years of doing this show, uh, maybe this is the time to ask you another question.

But we won't do that tonight 'cause we're running over. But it's a- it's kind of a dead space that I have to fill the time with. All right, come on. Somebody's gotta ha- been paying attention. I know it was, you mentioned it at least a couple times.

Steve Culton: It's, uh, it's a really good book and you're really gonna enjoy reading it. Even if you don't ever fish the Farmington River, I mean, the fly patterns alone within its pages will be worth, you know, you trying on your home waters.

D. Roger Maves: Okay. The first one here is Housatonic. I don't think that's it, right?

Steve Culton: Not it.

D. Roger Maves: Steve, that's not it. Another guess.

Steve Culton: That's not it. Sorry.

D. Roger Maves: Sorry. Steven Sykes, uh, sorry about that. That's not it.

Anybody else? It's like, make that too hard? Goodness. [01:21:00]

Ah, I think we got it. The Still River.

Steve Culton: The Still River is correct.

D. Roger Maves: All right. It was Rick Parrish in Mocksville, North Carolina got that one right. So Rick, you are now the, gonna be the proud owner of Steve's book, Fly Fishing Guide to the Farmington River.

So Rick, put in your shipping a- you can use the same form you just filled out the answer in. Put in your shipping address there. I've got your name, I've got your email address, and with that, then I'll have Stackpole send out a book to you directly. So send that over to me, and we'll get that done for you. And congratulations. Thanks for paying attention.

Well, Steve, appreciate you being on the show. A wealth of information. Didn't get to a lot of the questions I wanted to ask you, but, uh, there's always another time. Like you said, maybe it's been a while since I did the wet fly show, and maybe we'll, we'll set that up.

So, um, if you're willing to come back, we can do that.

Steve Culton: Absolutely. I love talking about fishing so much. [01:22:00] Sometimes I run a little long, but I had a blast.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah.

Steve Culton: I hope your, your, uh, listeners found it useful, and, um, had a really good time.

D. Roger Maves: Yeah. Well, thanks, and thanks for being here tonight. I appreciate it. You did a great job.

Well, hopefully you've all found the podcast archive on our website. If you haven't, just look for the link on the top line menu. In the archive, you'll find all of our past shows, over 440 some shows, I believe now. You can search by keyword or keyword phrase like trout, tarpon, and soon Farmington, and find a show you'll like.

Our next broadcast will be on October 7th, uh, 7:00 PM Mountain, 9:00 PM Eastern Time. On that show, I'll interview Coleman Savage, and our show will be From Angler to Outfitter: Building a Life as a Fly Fishing Guide. What does it take to turn a passion for fly fishing into a profession? Montana guide and outfitter Coleman Savage shares his journey from fly shop jobs to guiding, and how guiding for the future helped accelerate his growth.

[01:23:00] Discover why becoming a great guide requires far more than catching fish, and how knowledge of river ecology, conservation, water rights, stewardship, client relationships, and professionalism can transform a guide's career and their connection to the waters they depend on. Join us to learn about his journey.

Be sure to add this upcoming show to your calendar. Just click on add to calendar button below Coleman's photo on our homepage and you'll be all set. And by the way, um, that description refers to Guiding For the Future, and that's a program that guides go through for training in all the aspects that I just mentioned. So it'll be fun, fun to learn about his journey, so join us for that.

Want to thank Fly Fishers International, Trout Unlimited, Bonefish and Tarpon Trust, the Olympic Peninsula Skagit Tactics, Ugly Bug Fly Shop for sponsoring our show tonight. And, uh, don't forget to visit our website, askaboutflyfishing.com.

Make sure you're signed up to receive our announcements so you don't miss out on any of our future live broadcasts. And thanks for listening to Ask About Fly Fishing Internet Radio. [01:24:00] We hope you enjoyed the show. That's it. Good night everyone, and good fishing.