





**B**y 6 a.m. I've shucked into my waders, poured a steaming mug of coffee, and slipped out to the narrow wooden porch nearly overhanging the Cumberland River. I had flown in to Nashville the day before, loaded my gear in a rented SUV, made the two-and-a-half-hour drive to Russell Springs, Kentucky, and then headed south to the miniscule ghost town of Creelsboro nestled on the banks of the Cumberland.

Guided by my notes, scribbled a few days earlier while on the phone with Cumberland Drifters fly-fishing guide Brandon Wade, I wend down through the blackness into the river valley on hairpin-turn lanes as the fresh-mown hay smell of hillside farms yields to the limestone-sharp scent of the river.

"There'll be a house on the left just before the road dead-ends in the river," Wade had noted, after telling me the landlady's name. "Knock on the door, and she'll show you to the cabin."

When the landlady eyes me warily through the door, I introduce myself in a way common to country folk: "I'm Kevin Watkins' cousin," I say, and her stern visage relaxes into a smile.

"A friend of my husband's," she says. "He was such a nice young man."

Pretty much everyone around Russell Springs (population 2,496) knows everyone else. And even if they didn't, they probably knew Kevin, with his outgoing personality and love of the outdoors.

I take a deep pull on my coffee and sigh. Kevin. Maybe you had one, too, while growing up: a younger sibling or cousin or friend who stuck to you like flypaper. Twelve years my junior, and from the time he was 6 or so, no matter how hard I tried to dodge him during summers at my mamaw and papaw's central Kentucky farm, he'd latch on like a tick, especially when I had my fishing rod in hand. Once caught, I just couldn't say no, even once when he spied me trying to slip out by way of the cellar stairs.

*Miss Susan, where're you going? You goin' fishing? Can I come, too?*

And off we'd go.

Once young Kevin grew into adulthood, we discovered that we two, among the cousins, most deeply inherited our papaw's

*The author with a brilliantly colored brown trout from Kentucky's Cumberland River.*

# "MISS SUSAN, YOU WANNA COME FISH WITH ME?"

love of hunting and fishing. So instead of trying to ditch him as I had in our youth—and I'll admit I tried and sometimes succeeded—I would invite him to duck hunt with me on the Texas coast in the winters, and come spring, he'd return the favor by inviting me to hunt Kentucky's big Eastern turkeys.

As we hunted, he'd rhapsodize about his favorite angling spot, the Cumberland tailrace fishery below Wolf Creek Dam: state record rainbow trout (14 pounds, 1972), brown trout (21 pounds, 2000), brookie (3.65 pounds, 2015), and postcard-scenic float trips on crystalline waters flowing between imposing limestone bluffs. Arguably the best trout stream east of the Mississippi, he'd insist, and vastly underutilized and underappreciated.

*Miss Susan, when're you coming? You wanna come fish with me?*

We vowed to go in the fall of 2005, but our plans hit a snag when the Army Corps of Engineers announced that Wolf Creek Dam was in imminent danger of failing, imperiling communities down to and including Nashville and necessitating a complete rehabilitation of the dam.





No dam, no tailrace; no tailrace, no tailrace fishery. Beginning in 2005 Lake Cumberland was drawn down to a forlorn 40 feet below normal for the next six years during the dam's restoration, then allowed to rise by 25 feet in 2013 while engineers evaluated the integrity of the new structure by the hour, 24 hours a day. Only since the summer of 2014 has Lake Cumberland been allowed to return to normal pool stage.

That's why I'm sitting here in the predawn today, on a crisp late September morning. When a crunch of gravel announces Wade's arrival, I gulp my coffee, grab my gear, and walk down to the launch to greet him.

"No husband or boyfriend with you?" he asks, and I indicate I'm alone. "Well, this is a first. I've never had a lady book a trip just for herself."

I do have a "significant other" with me, though: A handsome, nearly new 4-weight fly rod given to me yesterday.

Wade backs his truck down to the river's edge and slips his handcrafted wooden McKenzie driftboat off the trailer as the sunrise begins to define the steep, tree-lined riverbanks. He built the boat

himself from a kit, and the painstaking craftsmanship and love that's gone into it elevates it to a work of art, one befitting the ethereal mist framing it as it rests on the shoals. The Cumberland lays under a blanket of ground fog as dense as if a down comforter has been unfurled over it.

Wade paces back and forth down the rocky shoreline, staring intently at his cell phone.

"Searching for a signal," he says. "The dam(n) release schedule wasn't posted last night."

He explains that the Tennessee Valley Authority usually posts the schedule the evening before, but in this case had not, so he's using the TVA iPhone app to check the release times.

The TVA establishes water releases from Wolf Creek Dam on a daily basis, as dictated by power demands and weather changes—and in the minds of some guides with impatient clients, on a whim. As a dam release can send the Cumberland's usually languid flow of about 20 CFS up to 12,000 CFS or more and raise the tailwater elevation by as much as ten feet, a poorly timed launch would send our driftboat plunging downriver lickety-split, turning our planned

all-day float into a boulder-dodging Nantucket sleigh ride.

"We're good," he pronounces. "The next release isn't until 4 p.m., and by the time the surge makes it downstream, we'll be off the river."

I step into the C-shaped wooden brace of the bow's casting platform as Wade ties a tippet with a two-fly rig to my leader, affixing a Red Copper John above and a zebra midge below. He takes his seat between the oars and nudges us into the gentle current. Wade works the oars as the sun melts the morning fog, revealing that the river below us is as clear as the sky above.

Part of the reason for the pristine water clarity—even where we launch, right below the outflow from the Wolf Creek National Fish Hatchery at the base of Wolf Creek Dam—is the result of an innovative project undertaken by Kentucky Fish and Wildlife during the drawdown of Lake Cumberland. Aware that the ancient culvert that carried trout fingerlings from the hatchery to the river also deposited tons of silt from its badly eroding banks into the river and smothered its aquatic life, they determined to address this issue during the drawdown. Their efforts have resulted in the manmade Hatchery Creek, which mimics a natural stream,

replete with pools, riffles, and boulders.

Devout anglers themselves, agency biologists studied prime trout habitat in western U.S. rivers and applied the best features to calculate the optimum depth of the pools, the type of hardwoods to line the stream, and the adjacent wetlands to design a mile-long trout-feeder stream to the Cumberland, with angler access along its banks. Perhaps best of all, they were able to accomplish this at no cost to the state of Kentucky or to its sportsmen and women.

Kentucky Fish and Wildlife Assistant Fisheries Director Mike Hardin told me how that works.

"The Kentucky Department of Fish & Wildlife is undertaking and funding the stream and wetland habitat restoration project on the hatchery outflow near below Wolf Creek Dam," he explains. "Funding for the project is coming from the Kentucky Wetland and Stream Mitigation Fees-In-Lieu of Program (FILO), which accepts fees from U.S. Army Corps of Engineers permit applicants to compensate for the loss of streams and wetlands. The mitigation program operates under the regulatory oversight of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. No monies from the state general fund or hunting/fishing license sales

are being used to fund the project, which opened to the public last May."

The water clarity is already such that we seem to be floating on glass, enabling me to sight-cast to fat rainbows hovering near rocky overhangs six feet below and watch a sizeable brown trout pounce on my fly.

"I only fish the first sixteen miles below the dam," says Wade as he dips the oars, "but it's prime trout habitat for a full seventy-five miles downstream."

*Why go anywhere else*, I wonder, as I release yet another rainbow. I've promised myself to keep track of my catch count—at least for bragging rights when I call my husband—and have done so diligently for the first two dozen trout. But that's before we float into the aptly named Rainbow Run. There, I'm hooking, playing, and releasing trout in such rapid succession that my head's swimming just as fast as the sleek, jewel-toned creatures I gently net, admire, and release. I'm uncharacteristically *en fuego* today—my rod as trusty as Arthur's Excalibur, finding its quarry on nearly each cast. And the casts themselves—dare I modestly confess—unfurl in such long, U-shaped loops that you might think Lefty Kreh himself is somehow guiding my casting arm.

But it's not Lefty's hand guiding me, I know. It's Kevin's. I feel his hand on mine; sometimes as the soft young hand of a toddler, others as the bear-paw grasp of a burly man in his prime. His energy flows down my arm like a current.

My eyes come to rest on the graceful rod in my hand, the rod Kevin's widow, Susanne, had presented to me the evening before. Kevin—still in his 40s—had been struck down by a massive heart attack earlier that year.

"After he died, I put it out at a garage sale with some of his other gear," Susanne said, "but not many folks around here fly fish. I know he would want you to have it."

I cast again. Braided into the sounds of the mighty Cumberland as it chortles over rocks and reverberates off the limestone bluffs, I hear the bass notes of Kevin's booming baritone:

*Miss Susan, you wanna come fish with me?*

I grasp the rod a bit tighter, blink back my tears, and turn my face upwards to the sun. *Yes.* ■

**Note:** See the video on the making of Hatchery Creek at <https://www.youtube.com/watch>.



"I'll have a Ginger Quill, and make it extra dry please."