

# The Kennebago River in Maine

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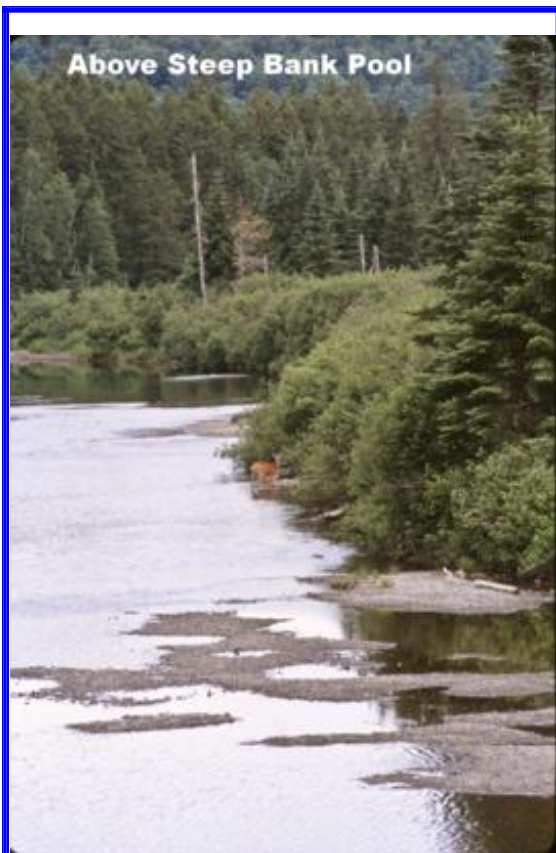
**Location:** The Kennebago River flows from the Quebec border to Mooselookmeguntic Lake in western Maine, interrupted only by a few small ponds and a dam at the lower end of Big Kennebago Lake. The surrounding mountains are granite and the source of the river bottom gravel that helps maintain the wild fish populations

### Maine's Kennebago River

by Bob Rifchin

The Kennebago River is a unique place among Maine Rivers, for along its flow it changes character many times. It begins at Big Island Pond (apx WGS84 - N45.24250, W70.78247) not far from the Quebec border, in a long stretch of what has been private (gated) water for many years. It is small here as it follows the Kennebago River Road, and is typical of quality brook trout water in the region. It stays that way without much interference from man for many miles until it crosses under the Lincoln Pond Road where it meets the Tim Pond Road at the lower end of Little Kennebago Lake. These roads are all dirt and very passable though more easily found on topographical maps than road maps or electronic mapping programs. I access the area by following Route 16 between Errol, New Hampshire and Rangely, Maine with all the access in the left as you progress north. It was here that I first fished the river under the tutelage of the late Jack Wallens who had a camp on a beautiful deep pool on the upper river where brown trout spawned in October.

The overall river ends at Mooselookmeguntic Lake. (N44.98129 W70.78542 Little Kennebago Lake/Kennebago River



(N45.14076 W70.76912) marks the normal upper movement of Landlocked Salmon (same as Atlantic Salmon, but cut off from access to the sea by natural forces) that travel that part of the river, and under the right conditions and time of year the water below the lake is a happy mix of traveling salmon and resident brookies. Salmon don't stay in this part of the river but use it as a thoroughfare in late May and early June following the smelt which access the river to spawn. (It is the abundance of food that brings them to the river, and not their own reproduction which takes place in lakes and river outlets in late October and November. They average 16 to 18 inches, though three pounders are not uncommon.) At that time in late spring and early summer I've had perfect days working the pools and overhanging alders, mostly with dry flies fished downstream, from the Lincoln Pond Road (road which follows the river is gated, so you must park and walk) almost to the Logans which is the marshy area where the river changes character. There the road that parallels the river traverses a causeway along which one can fish Big Kennebago Lake, (N45.11124, W70.75882) home to countless small brook trout, bigger brookies if you can find them, a few salmon, and the occasional (rare) large brown trout. Here the river meets the power dam, where it becomes bigger and faster. The Kennebago is the primary salmon nursing and spawning tributary to Mooselookmeguntic Lake which is 1300 acres in size, contributing about 15000 parr to the lake per year. These are all wild fish which migrate to the

lake for the most part, after spending a year or more in the more protected river mouths and in the rivers themselves. In 1996 fairly restrictive regulations (still in effect(Nov 2012)) were imposed on the lake and river reducing limits from two to one fish and catch-and-release after August 15. In four years' time this increased the average size and age of salmon and brook trout, and the rate of release of legal fish has become so high that it has begun to affect the growth rate of salmon in Mooselook Lake. For the 2000 season Maine allowed only one fish greater than 18 inches to encourage taking of some smaller fish. Time will tell if that has worked (and it has so far).

The lower river is the place that I always look to as a source for larger fish, and it's heavier flow of water

has seldom failed me if I pay attention to conditions. There must be enough water over a long period (5 to 7 days) to bring fish out of the lake. Access here is difficult unless you wish to walk and one is best served by arranging accommodations at Grant's Kennebago Camps (1-800-633-4815, [grantscamps.com](http://grantscamps.com), [grantscamps@gmail.com](mailto:grantscamps@gmail.com)), or Kennebago River Kamps (207-864-2402, [rhammond42@mtfairpoint.net](mailto:rhammond42@mtfairpoint.net)). At times, particularly in the early season when the water is still very cold, the fish are reachable by walking in to Indian Rock or Steep Bank Pool which are below the gated access road, where you can also use a bike to pedal further upstream. Otherwise it's a nine mile walk in to the lower end of Camps, and more to fish the pools beyond. One pool in close proximity to Grant's, called Lunch Pool as I recall, is etched in memory. We hiked there from Jack's cabin on the upper river, eating trail mix for breakfast as the sun rose. Jack showed me a spot to cross the river above the pool, and we worked downstream to a bar on the far side. I chose a stonefly nymph that day just because the water looked right for it (still a great choice), and caught 23 salmon in that one spot. It had rained for a week before our June arrival and had settled for a few days besides. The river was full of fish. Fishing was never as good in later years in some measure because I never hit the conditions as well, though the occasional good brook trout or salmon did come to net. When Jack died I stopped going.



Many years later Ken Hastings, noted New Hampshire Guide and I planned to revisit the river on sort of a guides holiday, instead of the usual time on the Connecticut or Androscoggin. Though early July was not the time I would normally pick to go salmon fishing in the Kennebago, Ken thought we could find some fish even though the water was low. As we drove from his Columbia, NH home I recounted my history on the river and pointed out the Lincoln Pond Road access as we passed by on route 16 headed toward the Rangeley, Maine area. Finally we turned left into Boy Scout Road (there really is a road sign) which took us to Steep Bank Pool, which is the only pool accessible by car unless you hike to get behind the gate or travel downstream from the Lincoln Pond Road access. We walked down to the pool quietly and found our only company was a doe and fawn, just upstream of rising fish. We watched until they disappeared into the woods on the far side of the river. Then grabbing our gear and draping our waders over our shoulders, we set out along the tote road heading upriver. It's a long walk in and I'd advise carrying food and water for the day.

Finally, we came to the far gate on the access road to Grant's camps, and had to decide strategy. If



we went upstream we could fish some of the pools on the big river, but it meant lots more hiking. We would be



better served to do that another day when we brought mountain bikes. For now we wanted to fish, and a short distance to our left the river flowed under a wooden road bridge.

The Kennebago was rocky and fairly slow near the bridge, but as we rested from our hike in we managed a few respectable brook trout. The numbers of small salmon we found still in the river, of at least two or three year classes, was astounding. The rises we saw were certainly in the hundreds. Pool after run after pool, the fish were there, and as we neared the half way point in our journey we found deeper, colder bigger pools to fish. Bigger salmon were there feeding on a caddis hatch which is common on this river. They didn't want dries, but

violently struck a Fran Betters "Usual" stripped quickly in the surface film. That became the fly to fish for the rest of the day. We didn't expect salmon at that time of year, but were not too far from the lake so they were there for the cool water and food.

Each of these pools produced salmon that jumped as only wild fish do, and we enjoyed the show to the fullest. Then, we hiked on toward our starting point pausing only to let a moose cross the river in front of us. It was a day for wildlife along with the fishing as our paths were crossed by osprey, other deer, great blue herons, a great gray owl and a grouse or two. Finally we came to the last tiny deep pool, against a rock face looking down river toward Steep Bank. The first cast brought a booming strike, and my fly was gone in a heartbeat. We just stood and looked, then headed to our steep bank where other anglers were now casting. They were just killing time, they said, as it was the wrong time of year to catch salmon here. We just said "yup" and headed for the truck.

### **Size of fishery:**

The entire fishery spans about 30 miles from Big Island Pond to Cupsuptic Lake (an arm of Mooselookmeguntic Lake) with some areas difficult to access. (If you fish with a Registered Maine Guide, they can get you to the water more easily, but I enjoy the effort of getting myself there.) Little Kennebago Lake GPS 45 07 55.79N 70 46 10.45W, Big Kennebago Lake GPS 45 04 06.11N 70 40 36.46W, Mooselookmeguntic Lake Gps 44 54 57.49N 70 48 26.28W

### **Weather:**

Northwestern Maine can deliver almost anything, from cool mornings to hot days, with rain always a possibility. Spring is generally chilly. Be prepared!

**Seasons:** The Kennebago River is closed to fishing from September 30<sup>th</sup> to April 1<sup>st</sup>. If you are visiting the area later in the year, Big Kennebago Lake and nearby Upper Dam are open until October 31<sup>st</sup>. The salmon are in the river from May into July, depending on water conditions. The brook trout are permanent residents.

**Preferred Tackle:** This is fly fishing water, and my favorite rod for this fishery is a nine foot five

weight, generally fished with a floating line (a sink tip only is necessary when the water is very high). My personal favorite for this fishery is an early TFO Lefty Kreh model which handles all my needs. The river is open to other forms of tackle but I cannot ever remember seeing anyone fishing there with other stuff. It might as well be fly fishing only!

**Species At This Location:**

Salmon Atlantic

Trout Brook