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The final rays of sun bled through thick pine trees.  
Stars began to twinkle in the darkening sky.

*Perfect, I thought.*

Around me, water babbled. I was in the middle  
of the AuSable River with my fly rod in hand.

Alone.

*Even better. No crowds, no one to disturb my  
fishing.*

My name is Craig Pierce, and I live in Grayling.  
Actually, we live out of town a bit. There are not  
many houses where we live . . . just forest. Lots of  
pine, oak, maple, quaking aspen, and cedar trees.  
In fact, the nearest house is almost a quarter of a  
mile away. It belongs to the Penrose family. They

live in Pontiac, which is about a four hour drive south. Heather Penrose is twelve, which is how old I am. In the summer, we fly fish together. She's pretty cool, and I wish she didn't live so far away, because I knew she would love to be trout fishing tonight.

You see, the night was *perfect*. It was warm, and I was catching quite a few fish. Nothing big, yet . . . but that was about to change.

If there's one single thing I love more than anything, it's fly fishing for trout. The AuSable River is a famous trout stream, with lots of brook trout and brown trout. My dad taught me how to fly fish when I was nine, and I've been hooked ever since.

(Except in the winter, of course. Grayling gets a lot of snow in the winter, and it gets really cold!)

But during the summer, on nights like tonight, I was right at home. I was wearing my rubber waders, which come up to my chest and allow me to walk in the water without getting wet. I also had on my vest, which carries my fly boxes,

leaders, a spare line, a small penlight, a net, and some insect repellent. That's another thing you need if you fly fish the AuSable: bug spray. Otherwise, the mosquitos and black flies will eat you alive.

But tonight, I would encounter something else that could quite possibly eat me alive.

Not a mosquito.

Not a black fly.

Not a snake or a lizard or anything else I could have possibly imagined.

In fact, if I would have known then what I know now, I probably wouldn't have set foot in the river.

A bat flitted past, spinning and squealing as it hunted for bugs. Water rippled, and I took a step downstream. Gravel crunched beneath my rubber-soled waders, and the sound was muted by the gurgling river. A choir of crickets and frogs sang from the shadowy river bank.

I cast my fly, laying out the line so that it skirted beneath the overhanging branches of a cedar tree.

Fly fishing is a lot different than most types of fishing, in that you don't cast like a normal fishing pole. Instead, you strip out line and use the rod to bring all of the line into the air at the same time, back and behind you. Then you cast the line forward, and drop the fly into the water. Once you get the hang of it, it's a lot of fun.

Dark shadows lurked like silent monsters along the banks of the river. Normally, it would be hard for most people to fly fish the AuSable after dark, but I knew the river like the back of my hand . . . even when it was late at night. I knew where the deep holes were, and where the sunken logs and rocks were. I knew where the trees hung out over the water, so I wouldn't get my fly caught on a limb. I knew where the big fish lurked, too.

And I love fishing the AuSable after dark, after most other fishermen have gone home. Nighttime on the AuSable River is when big brown trout

come out of the deep holes. They swim to shallower water, near the banks, in search of food. It's the best time to fish, but it's also the most challenging.

And, I make my own flies. The technique is called fly tying, and I make flies using a bare hook, thread, and animal fur and bird feathers. Oh, there are a lot of other things you can use, but mostly, flies are tied with natural fur and feathers.

Although it was too dark to see where my fly had landed, I heard the thin *plop!* as it hit the water. I knew it had landed right where I wanted it.

I let the current pull the line, and I gave the rod a few twitches. I was using a new fly pattern, one that I had made up on my own. I had never used this particular fly before, so I wasn't sure how well it would work. Some flies work better than others at different times.

Suddenly, the water exploded about thirty feet away, right where my fly was! It was so sudden and unexpected that I almost jumped out of my

waders! There was a sharp pull on my fly rod, and  
I held it tight, giving it a tug to set the hook.

The rod bent, and I knew I had a fish on.

Boy . . . was I in for a surprise!



I was sure I had hooked into a big brown trout. He was a real fighter, too, sweeping back and forth across the river, diving into a deep hole, and then heading downstream. Once, he leapt all the way out of the water. I caught only a glimpse of him in the darkness . . . but it was enough to tell me that something wasn't right. I couldn't put my finger on it, but I was sure of it: something wasn't quite right with this brown trout.

I battled for nearly ten minutes before the fish grew tired. In the darkness, I still couldn't see the fish. I pulled him closer and closer, holding my fly

rod high with my right hand. My penlight was clipped to my vest, and I turned it on with my left hand. Then I readied the net.

*Just a little bit closer . . . .*

The fish splashed at the surface, then dove down again. I tried to scoop him up into my net, but I missed.

Carefully, I brought him close again. The fish was really fighting! I extended the net out a bit farther, waiting for him to get nearer so I wouldn't miss. After all, I didn't want to get him so close . . . only to have him break the line.

In the beam of my small penlight, I saw the fish. I seized the opportunity and plunged the net into the water.

*Got him!*

Although I couldn't see him, I could tell by the weight in the net that he wasn't going to get away. The fish was securely in the net.

I pulled the net from the water, held it beneath the glowing light . . . and gasped at what I was holding.



The thing in my net wasn't a brown trout.

It wasn't a brook trout.

It was the biggest rainbow trout I had ever seen in the AuSable! Now, I know that might not seem like a big deal to *you*, but, where I live, there aren't many rainbow trout. I only catch a couple of them a year, and I've never caught any big ones.

But this fish was beautiful! He was almost twenty inches long. He was covered with colorful spots. A bright pink and orange band ran along his side.

"Wow," I said out loud, marveling at my catch.

The fish made a sudden thrash in the net, splashing water all over.

“Hold on, buddy,” I said, and I tucked my fly rod under my right arm to give me a free hand. Then I dunked my hand into the water to get it wet. Before you handle a fish, it’s a good idea to get your hand wet, so that your dry skin doesn’t injure him.

I reached into the net and picked up the trout. He struggled and squirmed, but I was able to pull him out of the net without a problem.

I held the fish beneath my light, and again marveled at his size and color.

And on my new fly, too! One that I had created!

Cool beans.

Carefully, I unhooked the fly from the trout’s mouth. It took a moment, because the fish kept struggling to get away. Once, my rod almost fell from under my arm.

After the trout was unhooked, I took one more long look at him. He sure was a beautiful fish, and I was really proud of myself.

Gently, I lowered him into the rustling river. As soon as his belly touched the surface, he gave a powerful thrash with his tail and vanished into the dark water, to live another day and perhaps be caught by another fisherman.

It was then that I noticed something.

The night had become deathly silent. The crickets had stopped chirping, and the frogs were no longer croaking. The only thing I could hear was the rippling river as it rushed around my waders in the waist-deep waters.

Strange.

I looked up into the night sky. The dark silhouettes of trees rose up like tribal lances, obscuring many of the stars. The trail of the milky way curled across the heavens.

But there were no sounds.

Except . . . .

An odd sound from downstream caught my attention. It was a repetitive, whooshing sound, and it was very faint.

But it quickly became louder.

Louder.

Louder, still . . . .

And it sounded like—

Like *wings*.

My tiny penlight was useless, because the beam only shone a few feet in front of me.

The sound grew louder still.

But when I saw what was making the sound, I knew that it was already too late to get away.



The thing coming at me was huge! I caught a glimpse of giant wings, just above the water. It was terrible.

There was nothing else I could do but duck down into the water. I knew I would get soaked and water would fill my waders, but it would be a lot better than being carried away by that awful flying beast!

I bent over and fell into the water . . . just as the giant wings flapped over my head. The creature let out a terrible screech, and I knew that I probably scared it more than it had scared me.

In the next instant, the creature had passed. I was still in the water, and I turned to look upstream. I could see its dark shadow, and it was then that I realized what it was: a great blue heron, a very large bird that is pretty common on the AuSable, and a lot of other rivers and lakes in Michigan and surrounding states. In fact, if you live near water in Michigan, there's a good chance you've seen a blue heron . . . so you know just how big they are.

I shook my head and laughed, struggling to stand up. Cold water had gushed into my waders, making them heavy and awkward.

*"Great, Craig," I whispered. "It'll be a cold walk home."*

Water dripped from my hat, my vest, my fly rod, and my arms. I was completely soaked. When I got home, I would have to take everything out of my vest so it could dry.

But it could have been worse. If the blue heron had hit me, we both could have been in big

trouble. I could have been seriously hurt, along with the bird.

However, now I had something else to worry about.

The bird had come upon me so suddenly that I had dropped my fly into the water. The current had carried it downstream, where it was dangling in the middle of the river at the end of my leader.

A leader is a thin strand of monofilament that is tied to the fly line. It's usually between six and twelve feet long. Because the actual line is thick, a thin, nearly invisible leader is used so that the fish won't see it attached to the fly. Trout have good eyes, and you have to work hard to fool them.

But that's not what the problem was.

The problem came when I began to reel in the line.

That's when the water exploded, and my fly rod was nearly yanked out of my hand. I gave it a tug—more out of surprise than anything—and felt the hook take hold.

My rod bent so far that I thought it was going to break.

Up until that point, I had planned on going home. I was cold and wet, and it was getting late.

Now, however, I was going to battle yet another fish.

At least, that's what I *thought*. I had no reason to suspect that what had struck my fly wasn't a fish. I was sure it was a big brown trout or, maybe, another rainbow.

I had no idea that what was on the other end of the line wasn't even a fish . . . nor did I realize the danger that was only moments away.



I quickly forgot about how cold and wet I was. I forgot about the great blue heron that had scared me.

The only thing I could think about was landing the fish at the end of my line.

But there was something strange about the way the fish was fighting. It didn't feel like it was big—probably not as big as the rainbow trout I had caught—but the fish was very sluggish. Usually, a trout will dart and dive all over the place, trying to break the line and get away.

This fish, however, didn't do that. It was slow in its movements, and it had yet to come to the surface. The fish seemed to want to dive into a deep hole and lay there like a log.

I struggled to bring him closer. I succeeded a few times . . . but every time I drew him near, he took off again. I had to let line out so that the fish wouldn't break it.

*Wow, I thought. Two big fish in one night! Wait until I tell Mom and Dad!*

Gradually, I was able to bring the fish closer. He had yet to surface, so I had no idea what kind he was . . . but I was sure he was a big ol' brown. He fought sluggishly, but I had no reason to think that what I was fighting would be anything but a fish.

Until I caught a glimpse of him in my penlight.

It was only a flash, for a quick moment.

But what I saw didn't look like the colors of a brown trout.

Or a rainbow trout.

It was too big to be a brook trout.

And was I mistaken . . . or did the fish look like it had . . . *scales*? Trout have scales, but they are so small that it can be hard to see them. The scales that this fish had were big and noticeable.

It took another dive into deeper water, and I let out more line. But already, I could sense the fish getting tired. It wouldn't be long before I had him in my net.

Soon, the fish was almost within reach. I held the net in one hand and my fly rod in the other, slowly working the fish closer. He was still hidden in the dark, churning water, and I knew that, as soon as he surfaced, I would have to be quick with the net.

Gently, I raised my fly rod higher, bringing the fish closer to the surface. My other hand was ready with the net.

Suddenly, the creature appeared.

Immediately, I was gripped by shock and fear. Panic instantly set in as I gazed at what was on the line.

Dark, beady eyes glared at me. Razor-sharp teeth shined in the beam of my penlight. Dark, ruddy brown scales glistened.

I knew that what I was seeing couldn't be real.

It couldn't be true.

But it was.

Right here, in the AuSable River, at the end of my line with a fly hooked in its mouth, was an alligator! He wasn't very big—maybe about the size of the rainbow trout I'd caught earlier—but that didn't mean the creature wasn't dangerous.

I wanted to throw down my net, toss my rod into the water and run. I had to get away, out of the water. I had to get home. Mom and Dad would know what to do.

But before I could even react, the alligator opened its jaws even wider. It hissed loudly . . . and with a powerful swish of its tail, the beast lunged right at me!

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