

# The End of the Rainbow

## Who would steal tame trout from a farm pond?

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

**W**e were standing at his pond, and the professor was upset. His voice was cold as spring water, and there was something unfriendly in his eyes today. They were very intent, very intense, seeming to enlarge, seeming to be almost popping wide open, the way a batter watches for the baseball at home plate.

"A better way to put it," Steady Eddy adds, "is that's the exact way a shooter's eyes look when he has something in his open sights and is about to squeeze off the shot."

"Somebody poached the pond," the professor said. "They took a lot of trout out of here."

The pond is located on the professor's farm up in the coulee country, and he stocks it with rainbow trout. His wife cascades trout pellets into the shallows, and the trout come streaking in to feed, and the water boils and gurgles like a kettle on the stove.

She loves to see trout dancing like that on the surface, free as birds and growing like weeds. She doesn't fish for the trout herself, but she doesn't mind that her family and friends fish them and catch them. She will eat the trout with relish, especially since the prof fillets them and dips them in Fryin' Magic the way his friend Roger does in Boscobel. Steady says he never ever heard of anybody filleting trout, but Roger fixed some that way, and that meal brightened a dark, rainy day like a sun ray breaking through the gloom.

The professor said the poachers must have come when no one was at the farm. His wife noticed that only seven or eight of the biggest rainbows came to feed on the pellets, and she knew something was wrong.

The professor walked around the pond and came upon places where the tall grasses were beaten down from someone standing, fishing. He found broken monofilament and broken-off bobbers wedged into the weeds offshore. "They just cleaned out the trout," he said. "All of the little ones and most of the big ones."

He said this was the first time something like this had happened to the pond in over 20 years. You could feel for him. It was as if someone had just broken into your house, invading your home when you were gone and stealing something, anything, from you.

The professor said he didn't know if the poachers were kids or adults or what. Steady Eddy thought that whatever they were, they weren't "too professional" considering all the broken-off terminal tackle they left behind.

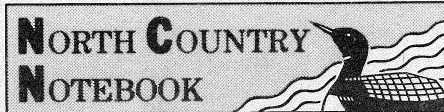
"The deadliest thing," Steady mused, "would have been an old pro with that deadliest of weapons, a fly rod and the right fly or the right nymph.

"Only an old pro with a fly rod is more likely to put all the fish back. As a matter of fact, an old pro with a fly rod would never have crossed your closed gate in the first place." The professor smiled, and that was reassuring be-

cause you knew that he knew in the overall scheme of things, this poaching of his pond was not the end of the world.

**S**peaking of "professionals," he said, reminded him of a farm in the general neighborhood, also owned by someone who lived in the city. The pride and joy of this hobby farm and weekend retreat was a large, deep pond just teeming with large, deep rainbow trout.

Never had any trouble with poachers, the professor said. The trout grew fat and sassy and dimpled the pond, and it was a Garden of Eden under the skies of Heaven and the hatches of Hex. The



professor shook his head at the memory.

"Then one winter," he continued, "when the pond was frozen, somebody walked right out there, drilled some holes and set nets under the ice. Those poachers took out every single rainbow trout except *one!* They left *one!*"

"No point in being greedy," Steady Eddy says.

There is something about poaching fish, the professor concedes, that has a glamorous, romantic aura about it. The fishing literature out of England, Scotland and Ireland is chock-full of wily, underclass poachers, in the dark of night, sneaking into the trout streams and salmon waters owned outright by the upper-class lords and lairds who owned everything else in the realm, too.

To paraphrase Mel Brooks: Hey, more power to them. They were Robin Hood, Men in Tight Lines. All poor people can understand why stealing from the rich upsets only the rich. Some years ago in Madison, a few young men were caught poaching trout in the raceways of the Nevin Hatchery on Fish Hatchery Road. The young men told the authorities that they thought they were fishing on a regular Wisconsin trout stream and that they didn't realize they were doing anything wrong.

The young men were all hockey players for the University of Wisconsin Badgers, and some were from Canada. The Canadians said this "trout stream" reminded them of home, and they got homesick for fishing and hungry for trout.

The authorities let them off easy and didn't revoke their licenses, one reason being, as Steady Eddy notes: They didn't have licenses.

Were they poachers?

Naw, Steady says. They were hockey players. After all, it's not like they were out in the Arboretum jacklighting deer and shooting them dead because they got homesick. They were only fishing at night in a fish hatchery, and it's not like they were catching wild trout or desecrating a wilderness. They were only catching tame trout, raised on pellets, for godssake. These trout were about as wild as doughnuts and just as dumb. Dumber. Dumber than doughnuts!

The professor watched the fish in the shallows and talked of planting more rainbows this fall. But we all knew something lovely was gone from this pond, and it wasn't just the trout. ■