“Wild and Wonderful” is a saying often used to describe West Virginia and for good reason; this state has some of the most stunning natural beauty I’ve ever seen. Often the beauties of the Appalachian wilderness, like the rock structures of Seneca Rocks jutting out of the ground or the cranberry bogs and red spruce forests of Dolly Sods, are simply overlooked. Not enough people take the time to slow down, look up from their phones to stop texting, and enjoy the crisp air and beautiful views that the Mountain State has to offer. One of these areas of relatively untouched and preserved wilderness is the Seneca Creek Backcountry. This unique stretch of land spans from US Rt.33 to the top of Spruce Knob, the highest point in the state. Various animals roam the marshy forest floor, scurrying to avoid human contact. Shiners, minnows, and rainbow trout call the cold limestone waters of Seneca Creek home; however, I visit Seneca Creek in hopes of catching the state fish, the brook trout. These small native fish stand as a symbol of hope and conservation for one of the wildest places this state has to offer. However, to reach these fish, you’ll have to travel away from the modern world; no cell phone service, no nearby towns, just the best of the “Wild and Wonderful.”

The gravel road poses a threat to the safety of vehicles if the driver isn’t cautious, so I need to take my time to avoid any accidents. The steering wheel quickly rotates left and right as I swerve around the concavities that may bust a tire. Along this road are some of the most beautiful wildflowers that my eyes have ever laid witness to: vibrant lemon yellows and bright blood reds contrast well against the grass colored stems and aqua blues of the other flowers. Foliage of sycamores, American oaks, and white ash scatter across the ground that species like black bears, white-tailed deer, and raccoons call home. Only a few miles down the road, after driving for ten or fifteen minutes, a parking lot will appear. This parking lot is nothing special, only leading to a simple gravel trail. Though that path may not seem like much to many, to me, that path stands for hope, hope that we may keep these natural areas protected for years to come.

Getting out of the car, I can already feel the crisp air against my freckled skin. For only a few hours out of the year, I can spend my time in the Seneca Creek wilderness, just myself, and reconnect with nature. I’ve brought a fly rod with me in hopes of catching a native brook trout, the only trout species native to this state, in a stream that’s no wider than a two lane road at most. A lot of people would rather be out on a large river like the Ohio or Kanawha in hopes of catching fish, some of which being fifty plus pounds, pulling them onto the red clay banks while the debris from the latest rainfall floats down the muddy river. However, that side just doesn’t appeal to me quite as much; I’d rather be with myself in the serenity of the backcountry, jumping from rock tip to rock tip, catching these little six to nine inch long “gems” that live under the shade of the foliage above, their stunning oranges and reds on their bellies, dots, and fins contrasting the dark yellow and olive speckling on their backs. As I walk down the trail, I make sure to stay stealthy by any spot where the stream is close to the trail. Even the smallest shadow cast against the water is enough to spook these wary fish. The fly of choice today? A big bushy dry fly, a Stimulator, it’s a great choice for aggressive fish looking up towards the surface of the water, looking for the juiciest bug to float downstream. After plenty of searching, plenty of meticulous choosing, I’ve found it: the perfect riffle.

Now it’s time to make sure it counts, because the first cast of my fly is by far the most crucial one. Too far toward, the fish will see my fly line and dart under a rock. Too far back, the fish won’t see my fly and lifting it off of the water may cause the fish to spook. I grab the fly by the bend of the hook and bunch the line into my hand in order to perform a bow-and-arrow cast, perfect for casting under overhanging branches. I cast, I watch the fish rise and take the fly, and I set the hook. Only ten seconds between the trout taking my fly and landing in my net. As I watch the fish turn broadside, exposing its fire colored belly and red spots surrounded by blue halos, I’m overcome with a feeling of euphoria. The culmination of hours of driving, hard work, and planning finally produced in the most beautiful way possible. As I release the fish, letting it back to its own home, I rediscover an appreciation of my home; my home here, in the mountains. I want to make sure that these fragile natural places in our state remain for the generations to come, so that in my lifetime, I’ll get to see my own kids make memories here, catching their first native brook trout and enjoying their time in the wilderness. I’ll get to watch their eyes light up as the fish reveals its true colors, reigniting the child-like spark in my heart. There will be no texting and no distractions from the outside world, because no matter how old I may get whenever I come back here, I’ll still just be a kid with a fishing rod, looking to enjoy his time outdoors.