



# Rachel Finn

Reading the river with a world-class angler

BY LUKE CYPHERS

Finn, a fly-fishing guide at Wilmington's Hungry Trout Fly Shop and "sport ambassador" for Patagonia, fishes a tributary of the Ausable River.

**W**hen Rachel Finn talks, you can't help but listen. Partly because of the surroundings. She's a fly-fishing guide at Wilmington's Hungry Trout Fly Shop, which means her stage is often the middle of a quietly babbling brook, her auditorium a cathedral of towering pines, hemlocks and maples. "I love it when the sun is out," Finn says, "because it filters through the leaves and it's beautiful."

Apparently, the fish don't mind. "I don't think talking scares them," she says. Maybe the hardy trout of the Ausable River watershed just like her material.

It's hard not to. Finn is funny as hell, with an intellectual yet earthy vocabulary. She tells an interviewer to tie wading-boot laces "tight, but not concubine tight." When she lights up a cigar—the smoke helps keep bugs at bay—she offers: "I hope it doesn't offend you. But if it does, tough shit. Stand upwind."

Finn can talk about seemingly anything, and does so in a variety of theatrical voices, fitting because she's a passionate Broadway fan. "I'm the Elaine Stritch of fly-fishing," she says. She's also an athlete who grew up playing street hockey and soccer against boys in suburban Boston, and who later became a ski instructor at Whiteface. She's a world-class angler, with sponsorships from Scott Fly Rods, Nautilus Fly Reels and Patagonia, for which she serves as a company "sport ambassador." And she's an artist with an MFA from Yale, a past life in a Brooklyn loft, and the mental scars to prove it. "I tried the New York art scene," she says. "Nasty people."

For two decades she's been working out of her studio next to her Wilmington home, not only painting but creating collages and other tactile visual works, frequently inspired by the natural world, often with materials used for fly-fishing. "I'll use the patterning of stone fly wings as a jumping-off point," she says. "The patterns on their wings are as beautiful as the tracteries at Chartres."

Finn is less eager to discuss her origin story. "I'm tired of the same old," and here she puts on a husky, dumb-guy voice, "How did you learn to fly-fish? Where are you from?"

Today, on a warm summer morning, en route to a tributary of the Ausable River in the eastern High Peaks, Finn wants to talk about climate change: how it's affecting not just the planet, but the way she makes her living, and the thing she's addicted to. "If there were a Betty

Rachel Finn photograph by Jamie West McGivver

Ford Clinic for fly-fishing, I've said before I'd be the Elizabeth Taylor, but now I think I'm the Liza Minnelli."

She's never seen anything like the weather patterns of recent years. "Outrageous temperature spikes," she says. "And winter's the same way. Everything is extreme now. There's no middle."

When she first moved to the Adirondacks 28 years ago, nobody needed an air conditioner. "A hot day," and here she breaks into a loud North Country accent, "Whoa, that was a hawwwwt one"—was like 85. It never used to hit 90. And I saw in the news yesterday we've had 14 days of 90 degrees so far. That's crazy."

More disturbing were the river readings this summer. "We had lethal temperatures," she says, voice rising.

Trout are cold-water creatures, requiring temps in the low 60s or below to thrive. Finn won't fish for trout in water warmer than 70 degrees, because the stress of getting caught will kill them.

In June and July, the Ausable and its tributaries ran low, and the sun baked the exposed stones in the stream beds. "We had water temps above 80 degrees in the Ausable," she says. "The only reason we didn't have a massive fish kill was because we had some fast water left"—which meant there were enough places for the brook and brown trout to get enough oxygen to survive.

On this day, Finn is fishing a high-elevation stream that shall remain nameless. She's a guide, after all, and doesn't want to reveal trade secrets. Also, she's on private land. "Trespassing is part of fishing," she says, grinning. "I mean, I have permission. I got it 20 years ago. I'm sure they'll remember."

She dips a thermometer in the stream and finds a nice 63-degree temperature. Earlier in the summer, this usually reliable spot produced almost no fish, and she's worried. So she's doing some reconnaissance.

Fishing and art require observation, she says. "And I'm a good observer." She explains the rudiments of fishing "pocket water," finding the confluences of currents where fish can find food and cover from predators. "They don't want to work that hard," Finn says. "They're

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lazy.”

Finn is not. She enjoys wading upstream, against the current, finding a spot, and moving on, preferring the middle of the brook to the shore. She likes the feel of the water. It's a workout, but a calming one, with frequent stops to take it all in. “The best part of all of this is looking around,” she says. “If you're not doing that, why are you out here?”

The conversation isn't all jokes and happy talk. Finn has faced plenty of hardship in recent years. In the past decade, she's had a knee replaced, then had to have it re-replaced because of a faulty part. “The pain was unrelenting,” she says. She survived a rare form of cancer and a grueling chemotherapy regimen that required frequent trips to Boston. And last October, her partner of 37 years, Jeff Kirschman, died at the age of 65 after a five-month battle with cancer. He was the man who helped her fall in love with the outdoors, the man who taught her to fly-fish, the man she settled down with in the Adirondacks.

In January, she traveled to Argentina by herself. “It was a good place to go and deal with my grief,” she says. “People don't know how to deal with it. I got tired of people running the other way because they didn't know what to say. And I don't blame them. We don't deal with grief well as a culture.”

The trip helped. The fishing was good, the people better.

Finn likes big fish. But on the small tributaries of the Ausable, the wild brook trout that average four inches in length are more fun to catch than a stocked lunger on the main river. The pleasure comes in reading the water.

“See where all that water comes together?” she says, pointing to a small dark pool. “In a textbook, a fish should be there.” She casts, and immediately, a little brookie hits it. Some fish she hooks, some she doesn't. No matter.

She keeps wading, finding new pockets, casting, and getting hit after hit. Before gently releasing one fish, she fawns over the gorgeous geometry and coloring that make brook trout so beautiful out of the water and so invisible to predators in it. “Perfection,” she says.

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Finn moves upstream to the final stop, a deep pool at the base of a snow-white waterfall tumbling 30 feet down a mossy, rounded rock face. She changes tactics, replacing the grasshopper dry fly with a woolly bugger nymph that floats beneath the surface. Within minutes, she's getting hits from much bigger fish, but not hooking them. "I'm not fishing very well today," she sighs.

No sooner does she say that than—BAM!—a fish strikes, bending her pole. Finn reels it in carefully, as it flaps and fights, and she can't contain her excitement. "Monster!" she says, bringing in a brookie that's easily a foot long.

"Fishing is about faith," she says. "Ya gotta believe!"

Finn calls it a day.

Back at her studio, she displays the wares of her other career, including her rendering of a fish that wound up on a Patagonia hat. She shows the fly boxes she decorates with duck feathers and epoxy, or with chenille that's used to tie flies—"They're like small paintings to me," she says. She's made several for Patagonia founder Yvon Chouinard.

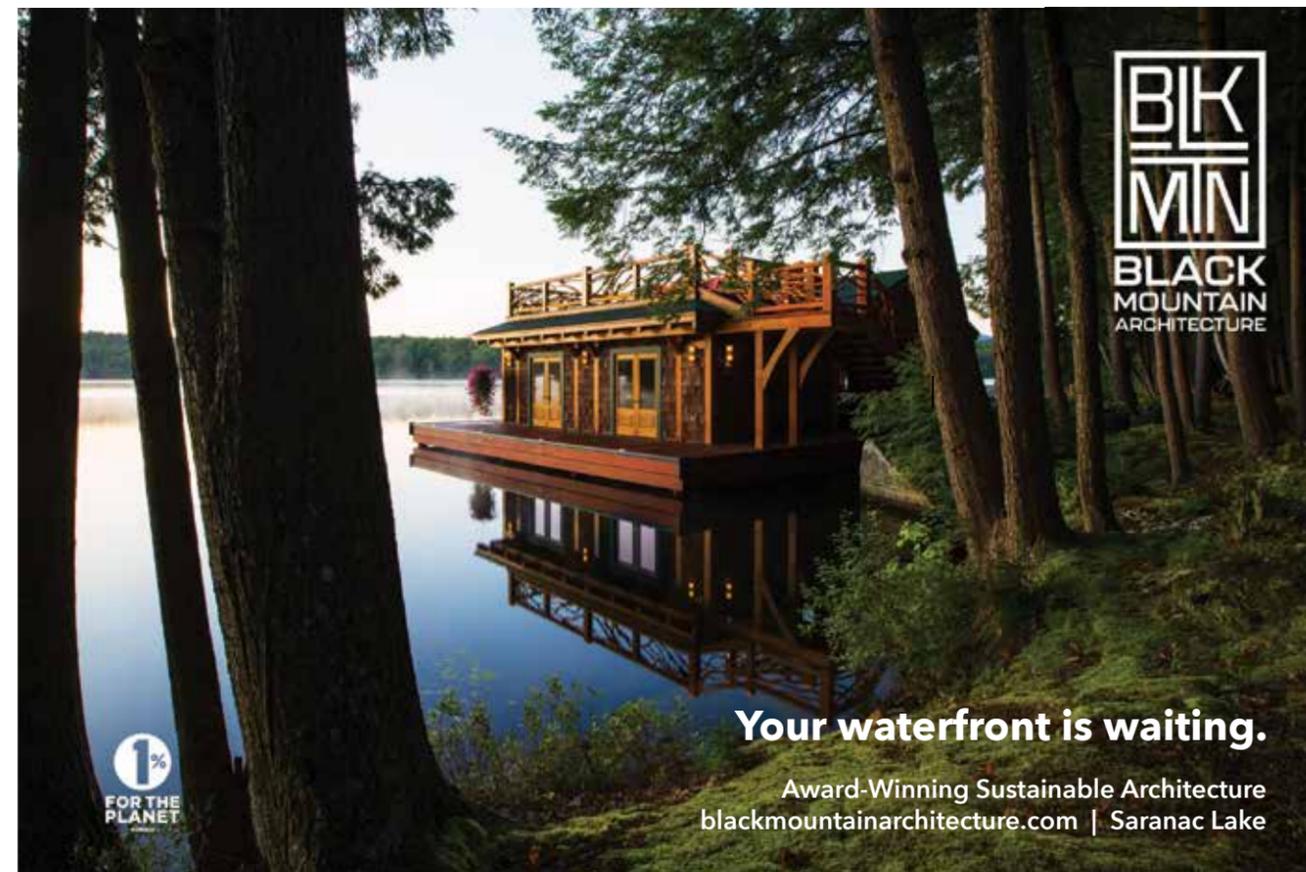
She opens the door to the house and out come a pack of gleeful English and Llewellyn setters, the ones Jeff used to hunt birds with. "That's Riff, short for riffle, which is part of a river, and this is Nikki, and this is Mister," she says. "They've got a lot of energy."

So does Finn, though she insists she doesn't. She points to the garden that she says needs tending, to the fence she says needs fixing. "My husband was amazing," she says. "He was always doing projects, and I was always trying to get out of it so I could go fishing. So now I have to do everything, but I'm still, like," and here her voice gets low, "probably out fishing."

She laughs her big laugh, with no shame. Why would there be? Fishing is about faith.

Life doesn't always go as planned. The fish aren't always where they should be. The weather and our bodies betray us. Rachel Finn knows these things too well, but she has an answer for them.

She walks upstream. That's where the hope is. ▲

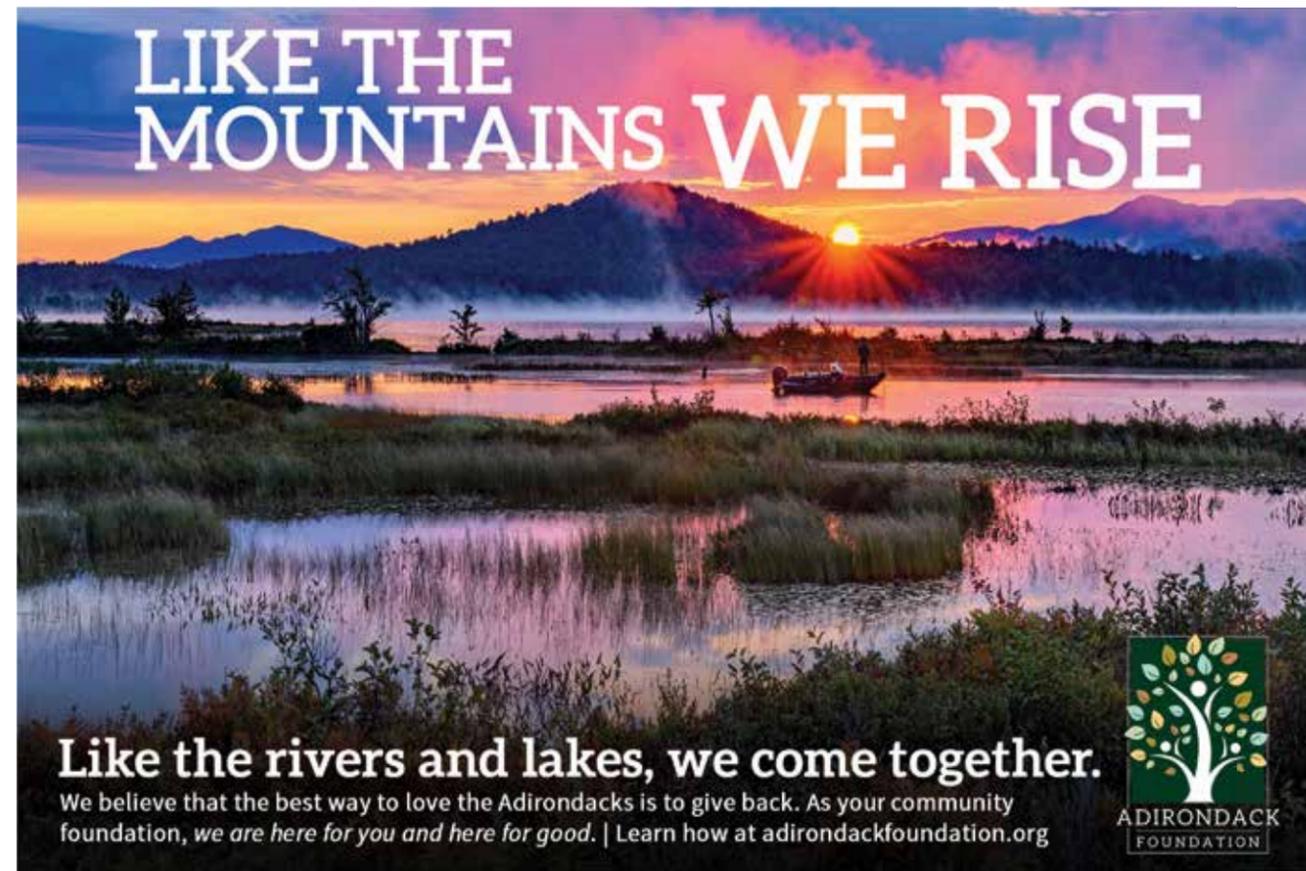


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