

NATE AND SOPHIE'S MIRACLE

Somewhere along the Mekong River in western Laos, climate scientist Max Holmes was on a boat with 19 other river scientists from around the world when he got a curious text from his wife, Gabby. The words did not come through in the message, but a single photo could be seen on his phone. This was the photo.

Max wondered why he'd received the photo, becoming slightly obsessed. "It was killing me! What was the story? I was going crazy." He would have to wait a couple of days to finally have internet access and learn that 13 time zones away, while he was on the Mekong, his 10-year-old son Nate was on another river, Red Brook in Plymouth, Mass., catching a native sea-run brook trout on a unique hand-tied fly made by his sister, Sophie, age six. Weeks ago, with fly rods and waders, Max and Nate had begun their search for this rare fish, but they had been skunked. As the photo and its eventual backstory emerged, Max delighted in being out-fished by his own son.

It was an epic fish story, Hemingwayesque and full of drama in the telling. Nate, using a yellow Woolly Bugger he assumed would work, found that it just wasn't producing. At one point he saw a trout "explode" on his fly, "but of course it had to jump right over it, totally missing it," Nate explained, reliving the anguish.

Next he tried a Royal Coachman. Nothing. He changed flies repeatedly. Still nothing. As the sun was setting and the temperature dropping, Nate's mom, Gabby, said it was time to go home. At that point Sophie approached her brother and reminded him of some unfinished business. He had to keep his promise to her, which was one of the conditions for the afternoon fishing excursion.

The promise involved a fly later dubbed "Sophie's Pink Shrimp," and no amount of protest on Nate's part was going to get him out of using it. The alternative was leaving, and Gabby told

Nate that if he wanted to keep fishing, he knew what he needed to do.

Sophie has a nice assortment of flies she has tied in many different colors, but she made this particular specimen by recycling the pink plastic grass from an old Easter basket. Here it is, and what a beaut!

"I did not want to use a hook with pink on it," Nate explained, "because... you know... (eye roll, head drop)... but,

whatever!" So he gritted his teeth and tied it on. It was "a pretty bad knot, because I wasn't really trying." He knew it could never work. So he just cast it out there with a heavy sigh, let it sink, and looked at his mom as if to say, you made me do this, come on!

Immediately Nate felt a tug, imagining he'd hit a snag. But he quickly realized he had a fish on. He reeled it in and saw that it was perhaps nine to 10 inches long,



Nate Holmes cradles a Red Brook salter he caught on a fly tied by his sister, Sophie.

ON RED BROOK

BY LORI DAY

"probably more on the nine side." But size doesn't matter. What did matter was that he'd landed a prized trout—a native species historically caught by Daniel Webster and several U.S. presidents, among other famous anglers. Once thought to have disappeared from these waters, there it was on the end of Nate's line, thanks in part to his sister! After releasing the salter from the hook on Sophie's Pink Shrimp, Nate held it briefly for a picture before releasing it back into Red Brook, and Gabby texted the trophy photo to Max, along with a few words that didn't survive the long digital journey.

Gabby, a nurse with a PhD in biology/marine ecology, backfilled the story for me, and gave it the kind of context any parent can appreciate. "Nate was—how do I put this?—whining a bit about daddy traveling, saying he couldn't fish when his dad was away, and that it's terrible when he's gone." So she told Nate that if he had a good week and did what he was supposed to do, she'd pick him up from school early one day to go fishing. "It was a sweet little bribe that worked!" she joked.

At first Sophie wasn't sure she wanted to go along that day, but she decided she'd like to draw the scenery while Nate was fishing. However, not one to miss an opportunity to gain some advantage on her older brother, she said she would only go if Nate would fish with one of her flies. "Of course Nate agreed! He made every promise under the sun," Gabby laughed. When he caught the trout on his sister's fly, he was utterly shocked. "I think we have a video of that," Gabby said. "Of the utter shock."

Fishing is something these siblings can do without fighting and without involving electronics. Tying flies is a craft Sophie loves, and Nate enjoys it too. The packaged craft kits from toy stores are "for little kids," according to Nate. Gabby explained that he'd been so into arts & crafts when he was young, but now

that he's older, it is seen as uncool. Tying flies is an activity both Holmes children enjoy, together. The positive response they receive from more experienced anglers makes them feel proud and respected. That's a win.

"So it's a craft, and it let's them do something different than their peers, but it's something bigger as well," Gabby



Sophie's Pink Shrimp

mused. "It has sparked so much interest in Nate that he's now reading books about the history of fly tying and fly fishing." In fact, in Gabby's eyes, fishing is also like an art project, as well as a sport and a conservation experience. The kids often sketch fish and new ideas for flies. These hobbies unify their indoor and outdoor free time, and captivate their imaginations even when the weather keeps them inside.

"We like to think that we make a conscious effort to teach the kids about the environment, but I think much of our teaching comes from wanting to better understand things ourselves and sharing



that learning simultaneously with the kids," said Gabby. "It is amazing how these guys can come up with great questions that beg going out in nature and figuring out the answer together."

For Max, "the best part of the salter story is that I was on the other side of the world, so it wasn't me who was running the show this time. It was Gabby's initiative, which was so cool. I like that a lot!" As a side note, Max emphasized that for Nate, fly fishing is educational. Even if he's partially motivated to miss a little school, Nate makes a good point when he says that figuring out where

the fish might be and how to tie a fly to match what they are eating is a genuine educational experience.

Who can argue with that? Let's make reconnecting kids with the natural world a part of their education. It's the part that will best ensure the future protection of our environment and stream habitats, so that salters and other endangered fish are still there for Nate and Sophie's children. They can't imagine it any other way. 🐟

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