(Some parts used in chapter 6)

CHAPTER I

TWO KINDS OF TROUT FISHING

See Slough Creek before you die. Preferably a long time before, or your legs might not carry you up the hill. The mosquitoes could help if they would only decide which way to go with you.

Anna, being Irish, had never seen a mosquito. Her concern was snakes. I assured her that Yellowstone Park needed no St. Patrick to banish the serpents. Bears? Not to worry; any repellent strong enough for those mosquitoes would probably gag a grizzly.

I could not communicate the psychic compensations. Anna's psyche responds to different stimuli.

Mine responds to Slough Creek. It flowed through my subconscious strata before I saw it. Everyone deserves a foresight--or memory--of paradise. My vision does not exclude sweaty work and bug-swatting. I want to climb up a dark slope of lodgepole pines. It must be enough to discourage the eye-glazed tourists, muscles atrophied by their cars.

At the top of the slope is a glimpse of a new world ahead in a hidden valley. Sheer mountains are the boundaries, of course, and the valley ripples with sun-tanned grass. Down the middle winds a gentle stream. It is mysterious and glassy on the surface. When I get to the bank and look carefully into the water, I see glimpses of an

inverted world. I study it but never penetrate all the secrets. The light comes from golden gravel on the bottom. Nymphs graze in the riffles, and shadowy trout appear from undercut banks to feed on them. This is no paradise for nymphs.

Nothing original about my vision. What is really lucky is that I know where to find it. And I have told you. Not many will get there. There is the work, and the fact that no fish may be legally killed at the end of the hike. But there are hordes of trout: big, native Cutthroats to be caught and released.

The other lucky thing about Slough Creek is that it combines two of my favorite things: meadow fishing and mountain looking. There are other favorite things, which is why I was back-packing with Anna. But this book is about fishing.

Most of the meadows I fish are far from the mountains. Cattle keep the grass cropped. Because access is easy, there are many other anglers around. The fish are educated, which I like; and may be scarce, which I do not like.

Mountain streams normally require a little scrambling around the rocks. Most people see them from a distance, on calendars, and in advertisements for products that do not smell like a trout stream. Trout fishermen, children, artists, and lovers are the people who get the best of

mountain streams. Even some fishermen have been known to wish for bigger trout.

Despite its appearance, Slough Creek is not quite a classic meadow stream. There are few water plants and, I think, not many crustaceans. The headwaters could use a bit of limestone for fertility. The main problem is one only a fisherman could understand: the fish are too easy to catch--except maybe when they are on a selective rise.

Other streams around the world fall between the extreme mountain and meadow types. Slough Creek is one of many in the Rocky Mountains. Back east, Penn's Creek originates in limestone and flows through mountains covered with acid-loving rhododendrons. Some of the classic Poconos and Catskill streams are in-between types, and there are lots of them in Ireland and England. Since my job keeps me traveling around, readers are going to have to put up with far-flung examples.

At their extremes, the two types of stream require different kinds of fishing. The difference has been known for a long time. Charles Cotton described it well in 1676. In America, no author understood the meadow streams before Marinaro in 1950. Most fishermen are still not comfortable on both types of river. And writers still

argue about the need to "match the hatch," or imitate a specific insect. Hatch-matchers hint that the other kind of fishing is all very well for those who are strong of leg and weak of head. Fast-water anglers argue that presentation is the real craft of fishing, though hatch-matching is a harmless enough perversion, considering some of the other hobbies of the decadent set these days.

This book aims to let the trout settle debates. When it comes to hatch-matching, the trout promptly show that arguments are based on a fundamental misunderstanding. In one kind of stream--the fertile, limestone kind--the trout usually reject a floating fly that looks very different from the naturals on the water. Argument with trout is not profitable.

But on an infertile mountain stream, you could fish through the season without using an imitative fly. While occasionally one could come in handy, most good anglers never bother with them.

This book is also about designing trout flies, and about making them behave as they were designed to do. The design will depend, basically, on the type of stream fished. So it is useful to begin by looking at extreme examples.

Fertile Streams

Source of the fertility is alkalinity, often from limestone springs but sometimes from rain-water flowing over limestone land. The bed is of silt or sand, with few large rocks. Gentle currents allow growth of lush weeds, but the rocks are not usually coated with slippery algae. (Waders with plain rubber soles will do.)

Maybe a stream can get too alkaline, but it would be difficult. Along the San Juan River in New Mexico, alkali salts glisten white on the banks, and soap will not lather in the water. The trout are marvelously fat. They have so many snails in them that you can shake the fish and hear them rattle.

Trout in such streams can hide under high banks and weeds, but when feeding in the open, they may have little shelter. In streams with pale bottoms, a careful angler often sees the fish and stalksthem from a distance. The trout in turn may acutally see the angler without fleeing--but with redoubled caution. They are so well fed that they can afford to be careful about what they eat.

Many crutstaceans are usually present. There are always many insects (unless the stream is polluted), but they may represent only a few different species. Hatches are likely to be heavy. Trout are thus fat and fast-growing. Typically, they continue

to feed on insects until they reach a good weight--perhaps two or more pounds. There may be a few big old trout ("cannibals"), but they are not of much interest to most fishermen who can catch good-sized fish on small flies.

This kind of stream produces "selective" rises, in which a fish temporarily specializes in a single insect that is easily available. Oddly enough, despite presumably superior intelligence, fishermen are often much more reluctant than trout to recognize important insects. Ed Zern is welcome to this observation for his next article on how to tell trout from trout-fishermen.

Four years in Ireland, where most of the rising fish are selective, made me almost embarrassed to take visitors fishing. Like any other host, I felt honor-bound to gillie a guest into a nice trout or two. Almost every visitor accepted my sample flies gratefully, listened politely to my little sermon on what should be hatching and what should match it, then went about fishing in any way he found pleasant. My first half-dozen visitor-days failed to produce one fish. Nowadays I sneak up on visitors more carefully than trout, finding out if they have had "limestone experience" before making a move. Of the Americans, only the Pennsylvania limestoners consistently get the idea. (Many others, of course,

are good fishermen under different conditions.) Even the limestoners often try to fish "blind"--by casting the fly in likely-looking spots--when there is no hatch. But "blind" fishing seldom works on the best Irish streams. You must not only use the right fly but present it to a fish that has been exactly located. In Ireland, that means spotting a rise. In Hampshire, Pennsylvania, or Montana, the streams may have a pale bottom, so that you may see the trout directly.

In Hampshire, they call them chalkstreams and dry-fly fishing was born on them. In Pennsylvania they call them limestone springs. In Montana they call them spring cricks--except for the Henry's Fork, which is far too big to be a crick.

Fast-Water Streams

Perhaps the best name is "freestoners," but they only use it in Pennsylvania--to distinguish fast rain-fed streams from rich limestone water. Three centuries ago, Charles Cotton wrote of "black water" streams that "spring from the mosses." This description is even more exact.

When I was growing up in the Rockies, we just called them cricks--or rivers, if they were too big to be coveniently waded across. Either way, they provided protein in quantities I am ashamed to confess. I had

two parents, four brothers and sisters, two grandparents, one genuine Aunt Mary, and assorted guests who liked eating trout. No one else caught many of them. The role had its dignity, since most other food cost more and tasted less. One summer, my parents had the aberrant notion of planting potatoes, which I was expected to hoe, but the rabbits ate most of the crop, and what was left was both less weighty and less tasty than the trout I "could have caught." The folks must have tired either of soggy potatoes or of amateur economics. They let me go back to the fishing.

We had fertile streams too: the spring creeks and the Firehole River, for example. They were farther away, fascinating, hard to fish. Most of the protein came from within hiking or bicycling range.

Your early streams were probably similar.

The current is fast, complicating life for stream-bed insects. There are many little rapids and water-falls, and the surface is rarely flat except in big pools. Floods may keep the bed scoured down to large rocks, which help to shelter the trout. Though there are few weeds, the rocks are slippery from algae and moss. (Waders with felt soles are therefore helpful for anglers who do not wish to experiment with heavier-than-air

flight.) The water is soft, or slightly acid, and not very fertile. There may be many insect species in the water, but there are few heavy hatches of any single large species. Insects that fall in by mistake--"terrestrials"--may be very important in summer. Small fish are often an important food source for trout too, though the minnows eat more food than they produce. Crustacea, such as fresh-water "shrimp," are not important.

The angler can fish "blind"--without seeing his quarry or its rise. He may have the option of fishing upstream, downstream, or sidestream with wet flies. (For this kind of wet-fly fishing, I like a team of two or three flies.) Dry-fly fishing is usually upstream with a single fly. Casts are short and so are floats. Trout must make quick decisions to survive in competition with their brothers. They will usually take a fly quickly if they take it at all. They will be wary of the angler, however, and vanish if his presence is detected. Most fish will not be big, but there may be a few old browns that have learned to feed on other fish. Since the trout must eat many kinds of insect in a normal day, they are likely to accept any artificial fly that is plausible and behaves well.

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Stream ecology is not the only factor that causes selective rises, though it may be the most important. When trout are freshly stocked in degraded streams, there is no kind of fly-fishing which is very relevant. In many American streams, stocked trout simply do not survive long enough in the wild to learn how to feed on insects, let along representations of insects. Responses are little like those of wild trout. Yet I have a friend who insists on getting the body color of his Hendricksons exactly right before putting them over fresh-stocked brook trout--which would not know a Hendrickson from a worm, and would much prefer the worm.

There is a widespread self-delusion on the subject of stocked trout. They are producing a generation which has forgotten what real fishing was like. A few years ago, the fishing editor of a major American sporting magazine received a letter from an Indiana angler who had been fly-fishing for years and had not yet caught his first trout. The editor gave some advice on fly patterns. It might have been better to note that the writer came from an area where quality trout fishing is as common as mermaids. The letter-writer probably had only two real options: to give the fresh-stocked trout some food they could recognize or to move to another area where the trout recognize insects.

At the other extreme, wilderness waters are less likely to produce selective trout than streams which are heavily fished. An innocent wilderness trout can suddenly become demanding, but he is less likely to do so. A trout that has never seen an artificial fly is not inclined to be suspicious of the first funny-looking insect that floats by. There is still some of this fishing in the United States and Canada. Under primitive conditions, big gaudy flies still work, sometimes better than civilized imitations. And there is a thrill in catching fish on period pieces like Henry Wells' old Parmacheene Bell.

European anglers have less chance of wilderness fishing, but they have more privately owned water that is not heavily fished. I have in mind a little limestone stream near Dublin. Most of it is open to the public, but one farmer tries to exclude fishermen. Ireland being as it is, he is not entirely successful, but the trout above and below his boundary are still two different creatures. Where they are protected, they will often accept any reasonable fly pattern, even on moderately heavy leaders, so long as no gross errors are made. Above the fence, there are also plenty

of trout, but they are very cautious indeed after the early season.

The species of the trout also seems to affect selectively. No other species is quite as demanding as the brown trout. But this is a matter of personal experience and may be controversial; I shall not argue too strongly. Brook trout take surface food readily and can, on occasions, be quite particular. So can rainbows and cutthroats.

Fishing with imitative flies is perhaps the most demanding of all, in the sense that more rules must be followed. Still, the rules are logical and helpful to the angler. In my personal view, there is not much pleasure in taking these rules and applying them to a completely different kind of fly-fishing, where they become mere conventions. But many fishermen do derive pleasure from artificial purism. Best of luck to them: their enjoyment does no harm to the rest of us.

I am no purist in philosophy, but I enjoy the kind of fishing that <u>forces</u> me to be careful--which is something very different. It is nice to be able to believe that a certain fish could only have been caught with a good stalk, a good presentation, a good float, a fine leader, and a good imitation of the natural tied on a small hook.

Once a year, I want to hike into Slough Creek. But I could get tired of paradise. Come to think of it, Anna has hinted that she prefers to spend some summer evenings in places without mosquitoes.