Datus Proper

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About 185 words

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RAINBOW RISING

It's about time. All winter you have been tying flies for this hatch and now here it is and you are surrounded by feeding trout and you are going to catch them all, starting with the biggest.

Its silver flank rolls in the current. You cast a skittering sedge and give it a twitch. The trout rolls again but your fly is still on the water, rocking in the ripples of the rise. So forget the fast food. Try a partridge-hackle emerger.

Well, maybe not. Maybe that old rainbow was chasing a caddis pupa. Cast a bead-head imitation and let it sink and then lift it in front of the fish. And don't forget to breathe.

He missed! Or maybe that fussy rainbow ignored your fly and took one of the real insects.

Never mind: the caddisflies love you. Look at the pretty green egg sacs they have laid on your waders, and draw a deep breath.

Well, spit it out. You picked a bad time to hyperventilate. With ten thousand flies in the air, you've got to keep your mouth shut.

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About 1900 words

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SPRING FEVER

In the spring, some idiot wrote, a young man's fancy turns to love. The author was confusing humans with pandas, which have a mating season. We don't. If we did, however, we would postpone it till July. In the spring, young men (and some older ones) turn to trout brooks and brook trout.

One day last May, therefore, I was standing on the Blue Ridge, shading my eyes, and looking down at Dogwood Run. It was six miles distant and sixteen hundred feet lower in elevation, wedged between two mountains turning green. I was thinking how much I would enjoy fishing the stream, and how much I would not enjoy the hike back uphill. No sensible person would undertake such a march for a little fish.

(But spring fever is a kind of energy. It is released by the sun, then absorbed by maple sap, wild garlic, and me. The best place to cool off is a trout stream. Dogwood Run is as cool as they get.)

In a couple of hours I reached the water, pulled the hip-boots from my backpack, put them on, strung up my rod, and walked another mile downstream. I knew just where to go. Once I had lived near here, in our nation's capital, and Dogwood Run became my oasis in the Great American Desert -- spared from fishing pressure because it was hard to reach. It was moody, though, and sometimes it sent me puffing back up the trail without trout, which made me love them all the more.

(The Great American Desert is another of those topics on which there has been confusion. It used to be a large unpopulated area in the middle of our continent but in this century has drifted to the suburbs, where the desert is made up of shopping malls, roads between shopping malls, and cars driving to shopping malls with their air-conditioners on.)

At the good pool below a cliff, I dropped to my knees and sneaked within range. A side-arm cast hid my rod from any trout that might be watching. The little fly lit twenty feet upstream and floated back toward me, lazy, as I lifted the rod and kept most of the line off the water. A trout appeared under the fly, drifted with it for a second, and sucked it down just like that: one cast, one rise, one fish on the hook. Too good to be true.

This, however, seemed too big to be a brook trout. Maybe some criminal had polluted my stream with another species. I jumped to my feet and ran downstream to keep the angle of pull from changing. The trout rolled on the surface. It was the real

thing.

(Once, in West Africa, I had caught a 200-pound fish of less magnitude, but what would you expect? That was only a tarpon.)

Allow me to apologize for suggesting, a few miles back, that Dogwood Run has small trout. One of the special virtues of brook trout is that they get big faster than other fish. An eight-inch rainbow trout, for example, is dinky, but an eight-inch brook trout is a weighty matter. A two-hundred-pound tarpon looks big but has less gravity than the eleven-inch brook trout that splashed in my net on Dogwood Run.

I released the big trout. Do not assume, however, that I was making a statement. (Fly-fishermen are perfect in most other respects but fond of statements.) I would have savored this trophy for dinner, if my motel's restaurant had been willing to cook it, but I had inquired and found that the chef had never cooked anything unfrozen and was not about to start.

(He did not know what he was missing. Brook trout are more succulent than steak, more delicate than caviar, more supportive than mother's Thanksgiving turkey. Brook trout are prolific, too. You may eat them occasionally without guilt.)

This trout gave me the nourishment I needed anyhow. As I released it and climbed out of the stream, several trilliums burst through the soil, a dogwood tree rushed into blossom, and a pair of mallards flew from the pool above me. Dogwood Run is poor duck habitat so I supposed that they had flown in to admire the trout, like me.

(Brook trout are the most beautiful of fish. I expect no argument on that subject, but tell me: are they beautiful because they live in such places or are the places beautiful because they harbor such trout?)

The next pool upstream was spread more widely, but the water at its head curved around three scattered granite boulders and dug deep pockets in their lee. I fished the first two boulders carefully but found no fish around them. One, however, was located in such a way that I could cast my line over it and let the fly drop below the third boulder, just upstream. With no line dragging, the fly lit and eddied like a natural insect.

A trout rose, purposefully but without commotion, as brook trout do when they are big enough to have chased their competition from a pool. This one took the fly with confidence. It then fought with more dignity than me, seeking refuge under all three of the boulders without success. It was almost as big as my first, ten-inches-plus.

I give you these statistics in order to brag convincingly. Some people will tell you that the point of fishing is to escape from daily worries, so if the fish do not cooperate, who cares? (I care.) People say, too, that fishing is just an excuse to get out and admire nature. (But I don't want to be a spectator. I want to play the game.)

The passion for brook trout is not rational. If it made sense, it would not be passion, would it? It is, however, widespread. You can prove this to yourself by going into any

tackle shop and asking for directions to some good trout fishing in the area. The friendly fellow behind the counter will send you to a river with brown trout or rainbows. Ask him, then, if he could direct you to a good stream for brookies. Well, gee, no -- you've got him stumped there. By a remarkable coincidence, every sporting-goods store in America just happens to be located in a region that has no brook trout within range of the owner's recollection.

You might conclude that the species is scarce. On the contrary, it is widespread and abundant. Passion, however, is private. A fellow who would publicize a brook-trout stream would write his girlfriend's number on the wall of a phone booth.

(Listen carefully, now, and I'll tell you once how to find Dogwood Run. You start in Maine and drive half-way to Georgia. You park under a pine tree, leave a note in your car assuring your wife that you died happy, and walk as far as you can, plus another mile. You're there.)

Above the Three-Rock Pool was a long, shallow, sunny riffle -- the kind of place that produces food for trout -- and above the riffle was a pool that curved to the left under a deep bank. Where brush shaded the stream, a trout rose twice. I could see no insects on the water and guessed that beetles had fallen from the overhanging vegetation. They had been crawling across the trail, plump insects the color of bronze peacock herl, and I knew from the old days that trout fed on them every spring.

Catching this rising trout took no great skill but I

deserved it, having fished the Appalachians for many whole seasons without a trophy, which is to say a brook trout over ten inches in length. This one was fully eleven, as big as my first of the day. With three great fish in a row, I could reasonably conclude that my totem trout were welcoming me back.

(I am happy for friends who go to Alaska for vast fish of several kinds, sparing my hidden brook-trout waters. But there is a place in Canada where big brook trout still rise for mayflies, and maybe I'll find a way to get there. A fish of fourteen pounds, nine ounces would be a record, best of the last, bigger by an ounce than a brook trout caught in the Nipigon River in 1916. Trout and I would both become immortal.)

The sky went cloudy, in the afternoon, and I imagined myself slogging out of Dogwood Run in the rain. Gusts blew upstream, darkening the water, blowing the tops off miniature whitecaps. Wait: some of those splashes were made by fish working a hatch of big mayflies.

I changed to a Quill Gordon and let the wind dap it over the trout. One rose and missed the bouncing fly. I saw that the fish was of no great size and moved upstream. A better fish took with a splash, felt the hook, ran upstream into the shallows and jumped -- a low jump but a real one, arching over the water. Brook trout do that on a few streams. This fish was twelve inches long, my best from the Appalachians for twenty years.

Dogwood Run was the kind of place that ghosts like, intimate as the cabins that mountain people used to build on its banks.

Curves in the stream gave views only of woods and hills. I could believe, for a time, that the whole world was like this.

(Once I had lived in a Rip Van Winkle house that had an attic for playing and a hideaway under the stairs. These places were fun because they were secret. Dogwood Run had clear water too, and trout cozy between cities. It was the secret, maybe, that brought me all the way back here from Montana. Home is where the brook trout hide.)

The stream went to sleep, then, or at least its trout did, and in two hours I caught only three fingerlings. I was fishing hard, too, creeping on my knees to the best places, floating my fly like a desperate beetle. Then I switched to a nymph and fished it ticking along the bottom. Nothing took it. I squinted my eyes red and saw only a smallmouth bass, which worried me. Bass are not native here, and they might bother my brook trout.

(I deplore the disappearance of so many strains of native trout in the west, pushed to extinction by brook trout introduced from the east. I don't stop at deploring, either. I do my best to keep those brook trout under control, fishing for them through rain and cold and mosquitoes.)

I did not deserve any more trout from Dogwood Run, but I was not ready for the return to civilization so I hiked up to the Split-Rock pool, an old favorite just below the falls. The little fly floated lonely as an asteroid and a brookie appeared in the magical way of its kind, coming from nowhere, pulled by some celestial gravity. It orbited for a light-year, fins quivering.

When it took the fly, the movement was so quick that I saw only an aurora of light and color.

I was grateful to whomever let me watch this all by myself. Perhaps I would just keep on fishing forever.

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About 3660 words

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THE BROWN TROUT AND THE GREAT TRADITION

This is the fish that made us think.

There is in fly-fishing a great tradition, and it evolved around a peculiar quarry called the brown trout. Most of us, by now, owe our angling attitudes to that trout and tradition. We Americans are ambivalent about traditions; we may be unaware that the brown trout shaped us; we seldom make it a sentimental favorite like the native brook trout. But the brown informs us constantly.

Brown. One knows, right away, that such a name comes from long ago and far away. If we were doing it now, we would want a designer label -- something with glitter, pugnacity, syllables. Golden, perhaps, or cutthroat, or rainbow. But the brown is the original trout, and it does not need to prove anything. Describing it as a fish is like calling wheat a grass -- true, but not much of the story. Our ancestors discovered both grain and trout upon leaving the Garden of Eden, give or take a few centuries, and each discovery started something of consequence. I propose to look at what the brown trout did to us: its influence, not its fishness.

Three of the brown's oddities help to explain its effect on us, the anglers.

- First, the rise: the trout feeds near the surface of the water, with me watching, and draws me in with the fly.
- Second, selectivity: the brown trout keeps on taking natural flies but rejects my imitations of them, making the choice with a logic that I think I can understand.
- Third, time: Trout and I have been doing this for a lot of centuries, recording what we have learned in genes and books.

Getting A Rise Out of Him

What we humans call the surface of the water is, for a fish, the surface of the air. Either way, it is the boundary between worlds, important to the residents of both and difficult to cross for either. Insects coming from both directions get stuck. Many fish have learned to feed on the insects, especially in America. In the old-world streams where trout and man met each other, however, the brown trout (in my experience) rises more frequently than other fish of equal size -- members of the carp family, mostly, with salmon, grayling and pike in some streams. The brown is also more prized as food than any other river fish except the salmon. This trout has therefore evolved under the dual handicaps of desirability and visibility. In order to survive, it had to be clever, which in the oldest sense means (according to my dictionary) "expert to seize, dexterous."

As to what the trout eats, you may be aware by now (if you read the literature) that nymphs make up 80 percent of the diet. Or maybe it's 90 percent. Anyhow, most of what a trout eats is nymphs and you ought to be using one.

As bromides go, this one is instructive for three reasons.

First, it has been repeated not only by purveyors of nymphs but also by writers from whom readers expect independent, accurate information.

Second, the figures are implausible at first glance. A trout getting 80 percent of its diet from nymphs would have to pass up other food that is widely available in streams -- including adult aquatic insects of all kinds, terrestrial insects, scuds, snails, sow bugs, crayfish, minnows, the larvae and pupae of caddisflies and midges, and so on.

Third, this bit of fishy wisdom can be traced to its source without much effort. (Small errors can be hard to run down, in a sport as old as fly-fishing, but a real whopper is likely to have invented only once.)

In this case, the author was Edward R. Hewitt, who did everything on a larger-than-life scale. In two books (the first in 1934), he cited a finding that "over 80 percent of the trout food consisted of nymphs." Fortunately, he gave his source of information -- unlike some of his successors. The research on which he drew was done at Cornell University by Paul R. Needham, who surveyed brook, brown, and rainbow trout in New York streams.

I went back to Needham's research and found that mayfly

nymphs made up about 33 percent of the food items of the trout surveyed. Stonefly nymphs made up another 1 percent.

In the winter 1991 issue of Trout Magazine, Robert J. Behnke also compared Hewitt's statement to the original Needham research. "A case could be made from Needham's data," Behnke said, "that dry-fly fishing should be more effective than nymph fishing." Behnke further mentioned research by Needham -- this time in California -- on a trout population that got 10 percent of its food from nymphs.

On the stream, we are not helped much by generalities anyhow. We play a real-life detective game: finding out where a trout is feeding, and on what, and then trying to offer a fly with the right behavior, size, shape, and color. Like the games in mystery books, this one can be a matter of life and death for one of the actors.

There is some hard information. A study of Spruce Creek brown trout by Robert A. Bachman found that some 7 to 13% of "feeding events" took place on the bottom of the stream. The rest of the events were divided about equally between surface and mid-water. Many nymphs and pupae were present on the bottom, but they were hard to see and many were hidden in spaces between rocks. Food items in "the drift," on the other hand were silhouetted against the sky, making them easier to see.

This research does not necessarily apply to other waters or species. It does describe a kind of brown-trout behavior that fly-fishermen were, according to Aelian, already exploiting in

the third century.

For the most part, fly-fishing evolved around the rise. The books seem clear on this point, once you learn to read them. You have to avoid getting side-tracked by a fascinating old debate on the origins of dry-fly fishing. Jack Heddon in England and Paul Schullery here have helped to clear up the confusion, which is not to say that either would agree with me. My conclusion is that the Dry Fly originated in 1886, precisely. In that year a gentleman named Frederic M. Halford wrote a book providing the necessary mythology. There was no dry-fly fishing before Halford. There was no Greece before Homer. There were, of course, Greek-speaking people before Homer, and some of them were probably fishing for brown trout with floating flies, but back then nobody knew what he was doing.

Now that we all know what we're doing, it is difficult to pose questions that would have made sense to our ignorant ancestors. If, however, you had asked a good early angler something simple -- such as whether his flies ever floated -- he would have said that, yes, of course they did: what else would a fly do before it soaked up water? He might have added that floating flies were good for fooling a difficult trout. After a few casts, however, the flies would sink, but the rate of sinking would be slow, and by control of the line, the angler could keep them near enough to the surface that he could see trout rising for them. The flies typically imitated surface insects (as North-Country wet flies still do).

If you were able to pursue this conversation, you might conclude that our early trout fisherman did not see much difference between "wet" and "dry." He would, however, have seen a difference between fly-fishing (near the surface) and something else: bait, for example, or what Hewett Wheatley, in 1849, described as "artificial Grub-fishing." We would now call it fishing with a weighted nymph. Wheatley even used a strike indicator, which he called it a float. He was a good fisherman but his euphemisms needed work.

By the late nineteenth century, anglers had means of keeping flies afloat without resorting to dapping, cross-lines, cork bodies, and so on. The improved equipment included stiffer split-bamboo rods, greased silk lines, new fly designs, and fly flotants, more or less in that order. New gear made it possible for Halford to bestow the myth. A few decades later we had thin synthetic leaders, sinking lines, and graphite rods, which made it easier to fish deep. There were curmudgeons who said that this wasn't fly-fishing, but it caught trout and humans. Fly-fishermen must have decided that the psychic rewards were, at least, greater than those of spinning with metal lures.

We have made good use of our technology. There is a boom in dry-fly fishing, and deep fishing, though still short of myth, is also catching plenty of trout.

The odd thing is that few of us are still competent with the old mid-water flies, which have the best myths in the sport. We could use lessons from an angler like the Portuguese friend who

visited me last summer. Adriano does not know enough English to read the glories of angling literature, but he is a product of the great tradition nevertheless. He fished a cast of small wet flies in the old-world way: upstream, near the surface, and with just enough drag to keep track of them.

The trout rose as they have for centuries.

The Fish That Chooses

Half the fun of fishing for rising trout is seeing the object of your lust right there, playing catch-me-if-you-can. The other half is discovering that you can't. When you begin to think that you have the hang of it, you find a more desirable trout. There is always a fish somewhere upstream that you are not good enough to fool. It is likely to be a brown.

I surmise that we taught trout to cope by exaggerating a natural characteristic, in much the same way that we taught the pointing dog to exaggerate the wolf's pause before pouncing. Even wilderness trout are wary at the top of a stream; they know that they are vulnerable, up there, to natural predators. The air/water interface is no more user-friendly for trout than for insects. We added a complication when we made fake flies that look like real ones. Some trout have become good at telling the difference. Today we call them selective.

All of the insect-eating trouts seem to have a genetic potential for selectivity. It happens that the most selective fish I found in one recent season were cutthroats rising for

something very small in the Yellowstone River. Day in and day out, however, most of us find that brown trout are the best at eating real insects while rejecting fakes. It is not likely to be a coincidence that the trout which has known us longest is the most careful of the food he eats.

We call this habit selectivity, and I have elsewhere called it "the best thing about trout." It has certainly been the best thing for people who write books about trout. Perhaps not even browns are quite as discriminating as we anglers like to think, but they reject our flies often enough to have appealed to writers from Aelian to Zern.

The Great Tradition

Even a fish as unusual as the brown trout could not, of itself, create a tradition; traditions are always human. This one took shape in Britain, flowed to the early colonies with the English language, and has since colonized most of the trout-fishing world. Today American, Argentine, Australian, Danish, Dutch, and South African fly-fishermen are more remarkable for the assumptions they share than for the few on which they differ.

About now, however, we need to pause for a cool-down. A woolly old natural philosopher named Izaak Walton portrayed anglers as gentle and uncontentious. This shows how little he knew about fly-fishermen. We are a volatile tribe, quick to boil with indignation, or at least simmer with giggles, and in either

case I may already have rattled someone's cage by writing about rising trout and selectivity.

Tradition is even more dangerous. We normally call on it only to create atmosphere, or to sanctify what we mean to do anyhow. We adore tradition at a fairy-tale level, like royalty, but do not invite it to go fishing. Unlike royalty, tradition comes along uninvited.

I may get in less trouble if I make clear that I am not trying to be a Historian. Historians are obliged to record things that mattered once, whether or not there were consequences. Like fly-fishermen, too, historians must take an interest in small things, and some take refuge in them. The writers mentioned here have broader visions; look to them for your history.

My subject is the way we fish today, and why: origins, not history. Why do Hisatsugu Haneda, Preben Torp Jacobsen, and (probably) you share an attitude toward fly-fishing -- an attitude that did not originate in any of our countries? It must have taken a powerful idea to convert the world.

The indisputably great thing about the great tradition is the number of books it has produced. I would not care to argue that the sport (as opposed to the literature) of trout fishing is greater than, for example, the sport of pheasant hunting. If you get through many catalogs of old sporting books, however, you will note that fly-fishing titles are the most abundant and often the most expensive. Why?

The sport has claimed two dimensions: art and science. Art

is the human side. It includes skill and esthetics and tackle. These can get complicated if we wish, as we usually do. Rods, reels, and (especially) flies are such appealing crafts that they are collected even by non-anglers. The art of fly-fishing accounts for many of its books. Other sports, however, have similar books and as much gear. Hunting has dogs and guns. Baseball fans collect even more useless facts than anglers.

The science of angling is different in that it aims at trout, not humans. Science is another word for the ancient detective game played out between man and nature. The most the unusual thing about fly-fishing is the depth of these inquiries. People involved in other sports have inquiring minds too (being often the same people), but they rarely have as much to inquire about. New angling entomologies -- books describing the insects that trout eat and ways to imitate them on a hook -- are being published every year. Compare this to the scarcity of writing on the pheasant, which came to America at the same time as the brown trout and became, perhaps, equally popular. I love them both but could not write a book on the food of the pheasant.

The difference is science. Pheasant hunting takes art but not much science. With trout, when you have found your quarry you must still persuade it to eat. At worst, or best, it may be selective, in which case you have to see what kind of insect it is taking and imitate nature on a hook. Some anglers catch real flies in nets and then tie imitations, but I don't suppose that most of us do this often. We may let others do the science for

us, or we may learn from experience that a size-16 Adams looks like something hatching in this particular creek on a cloudy-warm day in May. Science does not have to be more than a careful way of seeing nature.

Science accounts for much writing about fishing, but it is never pure science; not always good science, either. John Gierach notes that our knowledge "draws heavily on science, especially the easygoing, slightly bemused, English-style naturalism of the last century, but it periodically leaves the bare facts behind to take long voyages into anthropomorphism and sheer poetry."

Time has a way of sorting out the books. Check the prices of early editions by Aldam, Davy, Edmonds & Lee, Flick, Halford, Harding, Harris, Jennings, Mackintosh, Marinaro, Mottram, Pritt, Pulman, Ronalds, Sawyer, Scotcher, Shipley, Skues, Theakston, Wade, and Woolley. This is a very short list of authors who are safely deceased but still modern. They have the art, some of them, but they also come close to a dictionary definition of science: "The observation, identification, description, experimental investigation, and theoretical explanation of natural phenomena." There is not as much of this in other sports, and I am not sure that there is anywhere else in literature such a mixture of art and science. Usually the artists look down on the scientists, who are not even aware of the artists. Both of them find fishing literature odd.

Next I have to use a dirty word. Elitism. Sorry. The E-word used to be naughty but nice, and nowadays it's not even nice,

which means that we yearn for it more than ever. Once we could at least recognize the devil's work when we saw it. Then (in the 'sixties, if memory serves) the elites went under cover. All people and all things became equally good. A professor of biology was no longer to be considered a higher product of evolution than, for example, a mite living on his skin. Each was equally adapted to its niche and, indeed, while the mite might start an itch in the niche, no mite had ever started a war.

If you are too young to recall what happened next, here is a multiple-choice quiz. With anglers free to do their own thing, which fish did they do it to?

a) Catfish, using trot lines baited with green chicken gizzards.

b) Bluegills, using hooks baited with red flannel from old long-johns.

c) The most discriminating of trout, using artificial flies that represent insects with Latin names.

Do you wonder what American fishermen were like in those old, upside-down times when they wanted to be elitist but had no brown trout? Well, their yearnings become clear in 202 letters that they sent to Mary Orvis Marbury in the 1880s. These have been reprinted in a beautiful book: Favorite Flies And Their Histories. To flip its pages is to travel to a better place -- a country of fragrant streams and big brook trout. I have just traveled through my reprint with a pencil.

Mary Orvis Marbury was a good editor and few of her

contributors, especially from Pennsylvania, seem to have been skilled fishermen. Most sound as if they would not catch much a century later. They rarely describe their method of stream-fishing, perhaps assuming that there was only one: across and down with a team of big, fancy wet flies. Of course, those were primitive times. Or were they? The trout and the streams were clearly more innocent, but the letters inclined to the highfalutin.

These American anglers were Victorian. They debated trivia like the killing color for a fly but, on difficult topics, invoked the founding fathers -- all British. I started to count the patterns of American origin but was unable, in many cases, to decide where the dividing line should be drawn. Two "hackles" of deer hair seemed original. Most of the other patterns were copies of copies of old-world originals, changing only colors. The originals had not been based on American nature and the derivatives became even more stiff, stylized, gorgeous -- as close to decadence as to innocence. Charles Dudley Warner (one of the contributors) wrote that "The trout fly is a 'conventionalized' creation, as we say of ornamentation. The theory is that, fly-fishing being a high art, the fly must not be a tame imitation of nature, but an artistic suggestion of it."

The ornaments burned brightly and quickly. None of them seem widely used, now, in the original wet-fly form. (The Royal Coachman has prospered by turning into a dry fly.) But I do not mean to suggest that the century-old flies were worse, in some

absolute way, than modern ones. You have to decide whether flies should be designed to please trout or people. If people, then the old flies were as good as the new -- better, by Charles Dudley Warner's standard of artistic ornamentation. The 1880s flies would have taken more skill to tie than most on the market today. They were prettier too, and they meant as much to their users.

To the extent that fishing has to do with catching clever trout, however, we tie better flies today. Fly-fishing returned to its natural sources when the fishing got tough. We humans might have continued to prefer Charles Dudley Warner's "high art," but the brown trout would not have it. And when we Americans learned how to fish for the new species, original books started to blossom: La Branche's, Hewitt's, Jennings's. An imported fish continues to encourage American originality, which may not be as strange as it sounds. The brown trout has now evolved in this country for at least twice as many generations as any angling writer.

The big change in our fishing coincided with the naturalization of the brown trout, but it would be wrong to credit, or blame, just the fish. The nation got older, richer, more populous, more interested in recreation. The streams deteriorated. The native trout retreated, adapted, or both. Statistically, they are still easier to catch, but individually they can be just as tough. In time the natives might have forced us to pay more attention to nature's doings. The time was not granted.

In a few decades after Mary Orvis Marbury's book, we learned how to catch a different trout. It gave us the mystery we needed for good detective stories. It taught us to design flies for fish, not people. It immersed us in the quizzical relationship with nature that makes this sport different from others.

Perhaps no fish can be said to think. The brown trout, at least, made us think.

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About 875 words

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SCORING

Catch-&-release fishing

does not let you off the hook.

Lee Wulff was ahead of his time when he wrote, in 1939, that "a game fish is too valuable to be caught only once." Most anglers in those days killed every trout they could catch, then called on the government to stock more. The fishing got worse despite the hatcheries' best efforts. Research has since shown that tame fish can stress wild, stream-bred trout, doing more harm than good to a fishery.

Today, most anglers release much of their catch, and wild populations are thriving. What's more, high-quality fishing in my part of the trout belt has made the new economy more prosperous than the old, with guides, shops, realtors, and builders working overtime. Elsewhere in the nation, meanwhile, the rust belt is rusting, inner cities are in trouble, and even the malls are losing customers. The shop-till-you-drop crowd has discovered fly-fishing.

You will have noticed that Lee Wulff sold catch-&-release management with the word "valuable," and my language has also come from the marketplace, to this point. No apology. The market can be -- must be -- an ally of nature. The value of the trout's pretty spotted skin has already helped us humans to save its streams.

If each fish and each angler is part of an economic resource, however, each is also an individual, and the individuals have gone through something that I had not foreseen. Two events on the same day opened my eyes.

The first jolt came when I landed a feeble rainbow with fungus on its sides and fresh scars on its mouth. Later on, I saw another discolored fish and one that was half-blind. My last trout of the day had a section of loose gill. Those fish were, to be sure, a minority in a healthy population. Their habitat was a popular spring creek -- the kind where every rise is likely to be covered by a dry fly or nymph.

The second eye-opener came that evening, as we fisherfolk pulled off our waders. One young man reported that he had averaged four trout per hour -- a good score, he thought, but not fabulous. He would have to do twice as well to achieve a "hundred-trout day." He would release all his fish, of course. He had already released himself. His sport was immaculately conceived, free from guilt.

Mine was not. An older friend named Vincent Marinaro had put

the remorse back in my fishing a decade earlier, when I was returning a trout to the stream despite a red stain left by my hook. I remember what Vince said, blunt and final: "Fishing is a blood sport."

It has been a blood sport forever. Some few million years ago, one of our ancestors -- yours and mine -- stuck a spear in the meatiest prey around. The fishhook took longer to perfect but, in the fifteenth century, a treatise on angling was spliced onto a hunting book, as if an afterthought.

Hunting and fishing are still the same sport at core, and letting your prey go is always an alternative. Perhaps, for example, you have rested cross-hairs on a buck's brisket and decided not to pull the trigger. That deer got off lightly, by comparison to a hooked trout.

A biologist tells me that an angler who releases many fish "may be doing a lot more damage than the guy who catches his two trout and goes home." The mortality ranges from negligible, at low temperatures, up to ten percent when the water warms. Economically speaking, most fish populations can sustain such a harvest. Ethically speaking, however, there is no such thing as no-kill fishing.

My focus, remember, has shifted from populations to individuals. Individual humans have always hunted individual prey -- deer and fish and woolly mammoths -- but until recently served them for dinner. This is the first century in which some of us (in the supermarket nations, at least) can afford to wash our

hands of bloody old nature.

We still live on other life, though. Always have, always will. If you prefer, take Genesis as the authority for your diet, instead of evolution. Or read the great myths, which provide clear and compelling guidance.

The "basic hunting myth is a kind of covenant between the animal world and the human world," says Joseph Campbell in The Power of Myth. Hunter consumes hunted, but the relation is "one of reverence, of respect." You address your prey not as "it" -- a score -- but as "thou," an individual close to you. When you learn to do this, Campbell writes, "you can feel a change in your own psychology."

For me, each fish remains a "thou" if I catch only as many as my family would like for dinner. Sometimes they are tasty little trout from a stream that can spare them, in which case they are served with asparagus and white wine and stories -- if anyone will listen. More often I release the trout and keep their stories.

Mind you, restraint comes easy for a fellow who fishes often. If your appetite is greater, may you catch all you need -- as long as your prey remain creatures of flesh and blood. If they turn into scores, something has gone wrong.

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About 1940 words

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MONSTERS

A stately, good, and very subtle fish.

Bighorn Lake is the angler's world turned upside-down, dark as outer space beneath your boat but bright at the surface and clear, so clear that a monster cruising out there is back-lit by a kind of halo. If you did not know that the monster was a carp, and that carp cannot swim in air, you might wonder where lake ends and sky begins. There is no shore to keep you level, only red rock rising sheer. Springs in the canyon walls support isolated stands of aspens, but these pockets are not connected to the real world up above. If your boat were to sink, you would find no way out, no refuge but a cave. You wonder what bones might lie inside.

Curt Collins told me about the canyon last September. At the time, we were fishing the Bighorn River in its silty flatlands below the lake, where he does most of his guiding. The flow was steady, featureless, and fertile. We caught trout on deep nymphs, which is an efficient way to do it, and floated between banks lined with the world's best fly-fishermen. Most of them won't try carp, Curt said -- not even carp that take dry flies.

Within an hour we had left the low-church trout behind and launched into a different reality. Technically, Bighorn Lake is seventy-one miles of the Bighorn River, impounded at the mouth of the canyon. Only carp, however, have adapted to surface feeding in the profound transparent water above the dam. It is all backwards.

On my first visit to that sublime geology, Curt's human company was as welcome as his angling knowledge. We crept along the border between sun and shadow, rowing where nature never intended us to go, one of us at the oars while the other cast a line in long flickering loops, aiming a dry fly at fossil monsters in the cliff and real ones in the water.

Far above us on the prairies, a herd of bison kicked up a flutter of grasshoppers which, in their rattle-brained way, flew over the precipice and down, down, down, splat. Curt and I watched one of the drowning hoppers twitching. A carp swam closer to it, and my right hand clenched the grip of my fly rod.

The rise, when it came, was nothing like that of a trout. A

tubular mouth opened, moved along the surface half-submerged, and enveloped the insect in slow motion. Where the grasshopper had been there was no spreading ring -- not even a dimple on the surface.

"The carp ... is a stately, a good, and a very subtle fish," wrote Izaak Walton.

"That's a fifty-cent carp," said Curt Collins 340 years later. Local custom, he explained, is to pass up any fish with a mouth less nickel-sized. A tube the diameter of a quarter is worth a cast, and a silver-dollar fish on the line calls for whoops echoing off the cliffs. This is something like measuring the distance between a fish's eyes, Texas-style, but Curt Collins' scale is understated. That rising carp looked to me as if it could have swallowed full-sized dill pickles. (You need conversation like this, in a place that is at once so light and so dark, to remind yourself which side you are on.)

Curt rowed me closer, softly. Motors spook the fish, he said, and the water was 520 feet too deep for a pole.

I cast at medium range, trying to avoid line-splash. My hopper lit too far ahead of the fish -- better than too close, because I got to try again. On my next try, the carp spotted my fly from ten feet away. Someone is going to remind me that no fish can see that far in the surface film, the window of vision being what it is, but I am reporting what happened, never mind the laws of optics. The rest was unnerving, though the carp did not zip in for the fly like a trout. ("Stately" is what Father

Izaak said, if you recall. "Subtle." Not zippy.)

"Good fish," whispered Curt, making me twitch like a grasshopper. Curt may have feared that my soul would suffer if I hooked the very first carp I cast for. Or maybe he just enjoyed psychological warfare.

When the fish's mouth opened, I looked into a tube the diameter of a mountain bike's tires. The imitation grasshopper was slowly surrounded, engulfed, all but ingested, whereupon I struck and the hopper came back over my head with a whir. Never touched the fish.

"You tubed 'er," Curt said.

The problem, I explained, was that the carp had been swimming toward me, giving the hook no chance to find a purchase.

"The problem," Curt said, "is that you jerked it out of her mouth."

The next carp cruised in the shade of a cliff, making it harder to see, and therefore easier on my nerves.

"Lips," Curt said, and lips were exactly what we saw, rising from the black water to feed. Lips are what a carp's tube looks like from the side. My fly lit close to them and interested their owner. I lowered my rod tip, leaving slack in the line. The lips enfolded the fly and I may have twitched, but the loose line did not transmit my blunder. The lips disappeared slowly under the surface. I said "God bless America" to myself, as slowly as I could but perhaps blurring the syllables, and then struck.

"How much backing have you got?" Curt asked.

"Must be a hundred yards," I guessed, because by then more than fifty were out. Between carp and me was an elegant, three-dimensional geometry that I had no time to enjoy -- pale line meandering deep and dark, rod arched, fish out of touch. My tippet was seven-thousandths of an inch in diameter, which seemed flimsy, but there was no cover to tangle it. In time the back end of the fly line reappeared. From then on the carp fought at close quarters, but that first run was as powerful as anything in fresh water.

The runner was handsome in the net, too -- clean and shapely in golden-olive-brown scales, a big, clean fish from big, clean water.

The word "carp" probably derives from the Greek Kupris, an alternative name for Aphrodite. No American would have named my fish after the goddess of love but an English painter would have cherished it, or a Chinese. Beauty, as it turns out, is culture-bound.

I opined that the tubular mouth of my conquest would fit around a big, old-fashioned silver dollar, if I had one handy. Curt conceded a Susan B. Anthony, and Curt is generous, for a fisherman. We both reckoned the fish at just over six pounds.

If we had brought a scale, we could have weighed that carp with no damage. We remembered catching other carp on worms, as boys, and letting them flop around as boys used to do, and finding them wiggling on the grass an hour later, tenacious of life. We put this one back as gently as if it were a trout, but I

wish now that I had taken it home and cooked it by Izaak Walton's recipe, making so curious a dish of meat as should be worth all my labor and patience.

Curt picked up his rod, next, and spotted a ring of cruising carp -- daisy chain, he called it -- while I practiced the art of rowing and conducting psychological operations at the same time. Look at those lips, I said. Stroke. She could eat our mustard jar without a pucker. Stroke. Good cast. She's coming! Give 'er time!

Funny thing happened then. The carp nudged the fly but did not suck it in. Curt twitched but did not strike. The fish swam away, slowly.

Within the next twenty minutes, two more carp in the chain rejected the same fly. Or maybe the same carp looked at the fly three times. Curt showed remarkable self-control, in any case, and I thought it best to stop the running commentary.

Curt reeled in his fly, picked up my rod, and cast the fly which had caught the first carp of the day. The next fish he covered took promptly -- for a carp. I never did get a chance to tell Curt that he had tubed a fish.

Curt and I were both using size 8 grasshopper imitations picked from the same bin at a fly shop in Fort Smith. Mine, by pure good luck, floated low. Curt's fly was dressed a little more heavily, so he modified it -- breaking up the stiff turkey wing, clipping the tail, and pulling off the legs of knotted turkey fibers. The fly then floated like a real grasshopper, and the carp were convinced. Fussy fish.

The September sun remained warm, encouraging the grasshoppers' suicide flights. The breeze was enough to carry them over the water, but not enough to make waves. Curt and I took turns at the oars and stalked another dozen monsters, of which we caught about half, which we reckoned good.

The trick was to make a presentation as cautious as that to any trout -- but without getting so close that the carp saw the boat. The hull did not frighten them, but it made them curious. They would swim along at a distance, inspecting the vessel but showing no interest in our flies. Odd behavior. You don't think of fish as being inquisitive.

It turned out that Curt had designed a series of dry flies for these demanding carp. The season begins in June, he said, when cottonwood trees release their seeds to the wind. Many land on the water, where the bits of fluff float high. Midges climb onto a tuft of the cotton, thinking it a safe refuge, and fish eat protein and vegetable in one slurp. Curt has a "cotton fly" to match the hatch.

As the season wears on, carp take other insects opportunistically, like trout -- with one difference, according to Curt. Trout feed on aquatic flies at all stages of their development, but carp prefer adult mayflies (spinners) when they are spent and dying on the water. Seems that the carp is not equipped to catch active prey.

I knew that, come to think of it. Here and there around the world, carp have fed on floating flies -- spent spinners in the

Potomac River, for example, and moths drawn to a lighted pond in Brazil -- and the rising fish have taken my imitations. In Georgetown, they used to feed on mulberries dropping from trees along the old canal. The mulberry fly was easy to tie, but using it took patience and fly-fishers are not good at patience. Not this fly-fisher, anyhow.

In Bighorn Canyon, we forgot to drink the iced tea in our cooler. Who needed a stimulant? What you wanted was nerve-breaks, turns at rowing while the other guy was pulling his fly away from a carp.

Made you dizzy, that gorge -- ancient ocean-bed, world turned on end, scaly things circling in the rifts. Casting to a shoreline is always good, even when fish are not rising, and casting to a rise is good even on open water. With ponderous fish rising next to vertical geology, the problem was sensory overload.

Have you tried to dream about trout? They are too fast, pure quicksilver, and you cannot hold them in the torpor of sleep. For dreams you need monsters, a slow drift along the cliffs at the end of the world, bright sunlight and deepest shadow.

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