



December 2008

Driftless Days . . .

Certainly one of the more perplexing and occasionally dramatic difficulties in fly fishing involves the hooking and landing of large trout. In the Midwest's Driftless Region, I think it would be safe to say that a "large" trout would be one of sixteen inches or more. It is often said that a sixteen inch trout is a very good fish to land anywhere in the world, particularly in the more common arena of smaller to mid-size trout waters. It is a wonderful sentiment and I think quite true. Who wouldn't be delighted to land such a trout in England, New Zealand, Germany or South America, just to name a handful of distant locales? The fact that we can with some frequency hook and land stream-born trout of such size in the Driftless Region is an incredible blessing, one that should not be taken for granted as we consider how best to preserve our Northeast Iowa waters for both ourselves and future generations of fishermen.

In my case, it took me a couple of seasons to even begin to figure out how to land a large trout, particularly on a dry fly. Earlier in my fly fishing experience, if something could go wrong after hooking a big fish (assuming I actually **did** hook it), it almost **always** did. Setting up too hard and pulling the fly from the trout's mouth, breaking off the fly in the fish when setting the hook, breaking off the fly after an all-too-short battle, losing the trout to stream structure of some sort, losing the trout when trying to land it at the end of the battle and the timeless classic LDR (Long-Distance Release) all were common and extremely exasperating dilemmas. At one point I despaired of ever getting a big trout in hand. And if truth be told, all of these problems still occur each and every season. There are times when large trout simply cannot be landed, and for good reasons. That's why our sport is called "fishing" rather than "catching." But as time goes on and the seasons progress, I find I have a slightly more than reasonable chance of landing a good fish, the "slightly more than reasonable" due in part to a great deal of practice and a multitude of opportunities. Dumb luck can be a factor, too. Building on occasional successes can eventually add up to a fair chance.

Over the past few seasons, I've noticed a subtle change in my fishing style and approach. It wasn't like I planned it or had any specific motives in mind. It was more like it just happened. Two or three seasons ago I remember talking to a friend and mentioning that I hadn't been getting into a lot of trout, or as many as I was used to, but I was getting into some interesting fish, a few of which were a bit on the larger side. He asked where I'd been fishing, and when I told him, he seemed a little surprised and said something like "Gee, those are difficult sections". I hadn't thought of it in that way; in fact, I really hadn't thought of it at all. As I said, the change was subtle.

One of the characteristics of some of the waters I'd been fishing was that I seldom ran into other fishermen. I like solitude perhaps a bit more than the average fly fisherman, which might be

saying a lot, as most fly fishermen like solitude. It's kind of part of the program. Not that I don't like fishing with my friends; actually I enjoy that very much and do a lot more of it than I used to. But most of the guys I fish with know how to split up, fish different sections of water and meet now and then for coffee and a fishing report. After all, we're not in a boat. If we were, we'd be different people and probably wouldn't be fly fishing for trout.

Although we might be, come to think of it.

Anyway, if you tend to fish water that no one else fishes much, it might be safe to conclude that most people don't catch many fish in those areas. It's not that the fish aren't there. It's that they're difficult to catch, or it's difficult to catch very **many** of them. A difficult stretch of water will often harbor larger fish for the simple reason that no one is bothering them. Or, perhaps more specifically, nothing **can easily** bother them because they are so quickly notified of a predator's presence and can run for cover. Trout are not as smart as we sometimes think; they can be maddeningly difficult to catch, but their brains are only about the size of a pea. They survive essentially on the instinct of flight, and if they know a predator is nearby, that's exactly what they'll do.

There are a few generalizations one can make about waters that are difficult to fish. Sometimes they are very much in the open and have no overhead cover. Shadows, movements and noises are then much easier for the trout to pick up on. Long, still pools are another area that can hold surprisingly large trout. Trout do not have to work so hard to feed in quiet water. The larger a trout is, the less effort it will want to expend feeding, and quiet pools can sometimes provide trout with considerably easier feeding opportunities than fast water. Big mayfly hatches such as April's Hendrickson hatch will definitely move bigger trout up into fast water, but generally speaking, the fisherman won't find them there when there is no substantial hatch. Shallow water is another commonly overlooked area. It absolutely amazes me how many large fish often hold in very shallow, open water. They sometimes need only a slight depression or a nice rock in the streambed to be comfortable, and a little bit of bankside cover to run to if necessary.



I recently landed a twenty-one inch brown trout that was holding in about a foot of water in the middle of a stream, without so much as a good-sized bush within three hundred yards of its location. It was 2:00 PM in the afternoon, and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. So much for cloud cover! But **getting within casting range** of that particular fish with a dry fly was the great challenge. It's what many call the "approach and presentation" aspect of fly fishing, which is of utmost importance. A further interesting note on this particular fish is that I did **not** know it was there, though I fished the area as though it were a possibility; that too can make a difference.

Very clear water is to my mind yet another good ingredient for larger fish, again because I think trout feel comparatively safer when their field of vision and perception is largest. Of course we've all caught our share of larger fish in murky, off-colored water, but I think most of us feel rather sorry for the trout in those cases, as the fish didn't have much of a fighting chance. Clear

water forces the fisherman to use every skill he has in the approach and presentation of the fly, and this concentrated attitude will sometimes bring the fisherman to that larger trout.

Sometimes those long, difficult walks to remote sections of a stream will bring the fisherman to good trout. A few seasons ago I was fishing a stretch of water about a mile upstream from a remote bridge. It was during the height of summer, and the walk upstream was a bit grueling in the heat to say the least. The meadow grasses were waving above my head and there was no pathway to follow. Just as the sun was setting directly behind me that evening, I noticed two large trout feeding along a deep cutbank. The water was about four feet deep along the bank and moved with an almost imperceptibly gentle current flow. The two trout were tucked well within the stream foliage along the upstream right hand bank, and would come out a foot or so from the bank to take whatever it was they were feeding on before drifting back to their hidden location in the weeds. I watched them for quite some time. The situation was further complicated by the



fact that they were rising directly beneath a wire fence strung across the stream. I would have to drive a long right hand hook cast beneath the fence, which was four or five feet off the water, to get a good drift down to either of the trout. And I knew I was only going to get one shot at it. So I made the best cast I could (which turned out to be good enough) and got one of the trout to strike, only to lose it immediately as it jumped and threw the hook. That was enough to blow the pool and put the fish down for the night.

I thought about those two trout all day long the next day. And that afternoon after work, I decided to go back to the stream and give them another look. I knew I'd have to wait until the sun was low enough behind me to approach the pool without casting a shadow upon it, which would have ruined my chances, so I wasn't in a big hurry. And I had no idea whether or not the two trout would still be there, or whether they'd be rising. As I neared the pool at long last, I realized I'd have to sit and wait still longer until the sun went further down, as I was throwing a long shadow across the water ahead of me. The trout were indeed rising just as they'd been the night before, and I had to wait nearly a half hour before I could make that one cast, so I had a good opportunity to watch them for awhile and become completely unnerved. But when the time came, I managed once again to get off a good cast and this time when one of the fish struck I managed to get the hook set. A few intense minutes later I was lucky enough to land a beautiful nineteen inch brown trout in fall spawning colors. I didn't even try for the second fish.

Later it occurred to me that I'd driven thirty miles after work and walked a mile upstream from where I parked to get into the proper position to make one cast to one fish, which I'd missed the night before. After I caught the fish I reeled in, walked back down to my vehicle and went home. And that was the night my fly fishing life began to change direction, although I didn't realize it at the time.

Of course, there are times when you can throw all of this out the window and land a big honker right under the old bridge! That happens, too. You just can't necessarily count on it.

All this being said, I don't feel even remotely like a "headhunter". Most serious headhunters I've known or spoken with fish with bait, or perhaps with streamers and a fly rod. I haven't

visited with many fly fishermen in the Driftless Region who headhunt with dry flies. But at times I do like to mentally size up the water I happen to be fishing, with the idea of maybe working that unusual area where a few above-average trout for the stream or river **may** be holding. And I'm not at all disappointed if they don't happen to be there. Streams will hold larger trout in certain areas in some seasons and not others. Things change, but it's the hunt that's challenging and enjoyable.

* * * * *

One of the best books I've read concerning landing large trout is Lee Wulff's *Trout On A Fly*. Lee Wulff caught a lot of big fish in his lifetime, both in fresh and saltwater, garnering a number of world fishing records in the process. I think most of us think of him primarily as a salt water fisherman, and some of his more dramatic exploits certainly occurred on the high seas. But *Trout On A Fly* showed me how consummate and expert a fly fisherman he truly was. There's a certain humility in the writing which I appreciated as well. It's a very good book.



One of the subjects Wulff tackles in the book is the landing of large brown trout, which is generally our best opportunity in the Driftless Region, at least for wild fish. The section I most remember on a regular basis (I read the book some years ago) is the one in which he discusses how to **confuse** a large brown trout. I'll leave the book for you to read in its entirety if you wish, but paraphrasing a few of his thoughts on big browns is of interest. I've used a few of his simple ideas many, many times and often enough they do indeed work.

Wulff says that once the large brown is hooked, it's important to check him as soon as possible. The idea is to attempt to stop the trout from running too far. Generally this can be done by raising the rod tip and applying as much leverage as possible without breaking the tippet either at a knot or at the fly. It takes a bit of practice and experience to know how much pressure one can apply before the breaking point is reached, and of course this will vary depending on the tippet diameter, but again, the idea is to stop the fish from running. Once the trout is checked, Wulff suggests giving the fish a bit of slack line, letting him run a short distance and then checking him again. By allowing the trout to run again and then checking him a third time, the fish becomes confused and perplexed and can generally be led to hand quite quickly. I try to get the trout's head up as quickly as possible after the third check and lead him in with the head up and out of the water.

This is a very good approach after hooking a sizable brown trout on a dry fly, and once I got the program down, I found I was landing bigger browns much more handily. The difficult thing to learn is to let the fish take line after checking him; at first it seems that this is the exact opposite

of what one should do, but after the second check, one can sense the confusion in the fish and things do indeed become easier after that. After checking the trout, I only let him run a foot or two if possible before checking him again. What confuses the trout is the “starting and stopping” action.

In my experience, this technique does not work for rainbow trout. They’re too crazy. With a larger rainbow, I just hang on, hope nothing breaks and wait for the fish to tire himself out, which happens rather quickly with rainbows. Not so with brown trout, however; they have a much slower and stronger fight over a longer period of time. Another advantage of Wulff’s method with brown trout is the fact that the fish has virtually all of his fighting strength left **after** its been landed, which makes its odds of survival after release considerably better.

It’s almost the end of September, and I got lucky today. I landed two sixteen-inch browns, a seventeen inch brown and an eighteen inch brown with a cricket pattern on a great Northeast Iowa unstocked stream. It’s been quite some time since I’ve caught four trout over sixteen inches on one day with a dry fly. I won’t say where I went, but the two bulls didn’t bother me all that much. My friend Chris Wasta met up with me late in the afternoon, and he caught his largest trout of the season on a dry fly, a slightly-over- eighteen inch brown. Autumn is a wonderful time to be out on the water. The trout are feeding heavily and sense the shortening of the days. A couple of years ago I met a gentleman in the Roanoke College Bookshop in Virginia who originally hailed from La Crosse, Wisconsin. He said that although he has fished extensively on the east coast and elsewhere, day in and day out there’s nothing like the Midwest’s Driftless Region for big trout.

And he’s right.

*“His sunlit scales upon my hands,
I wrapped his flesh in leaves of elm
And homeward, singing, carried him.”*

Joseph Langland, from “Sacrifice Of A Rainbow Trout” @ [Selected Poems](#)

Be Vigilant!

“Red” Canoe

*Trout Unlimited
Iowa Driftless Chapter*

