# Reading Trout Water and Fishing a Fly

Charles Stedman Hanks, 1906

Selected pages from Camp Kits and Camp Life.

Read pools and eddies, choose a place to cast, and see how an early fly angler matched tackle and flies to the water.

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## CHAPTER VII

### SOME TROUT THAT TAUGHT ME SOMETHING ABOUT ANGLING

CONTEMPLATIVE men who love quiet places generally go a-fishing, the favorite fish, as a rule, being the square-tail trout, otherwise known as speckled trout, brook trout, and red spotted trout. Excepting the salmon this fish has more gameness, taking everything into consideration, than any other fish. It has attracted many a man from the demoralizing environments of city life and has filled many a library with thoughts worked out on the bank of some stream while the angler has watched some lazy veteran listlessly waiting for bugs to drop from overhanging alders or to float by on the water—for after all the whole of fishing is not fishing. There is something, too, about this fish with his spangles of crimson, blue or orange, his all-round beauty and vigor, whether off the hook or on it, which so impresses the one who has hooked a



*Lake and Brook Trout*

good-sized specimen that it is never good judgment to question the length of the fish or its weight, or to have within reach a foot rule or any scales.

All trout belong to the salmon family. The square-tail species is not, however, the trout of the gentle Izaak, but belongs to that group of salmon known as Chars, a fish distinguished from the true trout in having the vomer (one of the bones of the skull) boat-shaped and no teeth in its shaft. Another subdivision of this salmon family includes the salmon trout, the Rocky Mountain trout and the Yellowstone trout; and another the Mackinaw or the great lake trout, the longe or the lake trout of Vermont, and the togue or the lake trout of Maine and New Brunswick.

Salvelinus Fortinalis (small salmon living in springs) is the naturalist's name for square-tail trout. They rarely exceed two or three pounds in weight, although in certain localities they sometimes weigh as high as thirteen pounds, some large specimens, according to Agassiz, having reached the age of two hundred years. Their weight depends not only upon having deep, cold water in which to live, but also a large area of water in which to swim and an abundance of food; another factor which has much to do with their weight being the amount of natural vigor which they inherit. As some are large for their age and some stunted, it is, consequently, difficult to tell the age of a trout from its weight, although the average weight is about one ounce the first year, eight to ten ounces in two years and one pound in three years.

In color they vary from all shades of olive, purple, crimson, and gold to the darkest of dark greens, those that live in streams that have gravelly or sandy bottoms having the brightest colors, and those living in streams with muddy bottoms having dull colors, the males during the spawning season having fiery flashes of the deepest crimson upon their shapely sides and lower fins, and the females brilliant silver marked with orange and purple spots, which are often dotted in the centre with crimson.

Few anglers sufficiently appreciate to what an extent the sense of sight is developed in most fishes. If you will take time to watch a trout you will notice that he is always on the lookout, generally with head up-stream, body motionless, and fins moving just enough to keep him from floating with the current. Let, however, your body or your uplifted rod, or even your line, cast a shadow across his pool, and in an instant he is speeding in alarm to his lair. Even the shadow of a butterfly or a low-skimming swallow will often make him scurry into deeper water or under a bank. His sense of taste is also largely developed. If the bait is a piece of meat it must be fresh and sweet, for he will touch no carrion food, and if an artificial fly is thrown to him he must be hooked before he tastes the gritty steel. It is for this reason that quick striking is necessary in rapid water, as then a trout at once closes his mouth on the bait. His sense of feeling, when it is a vibration which is the result of some concussion, is also acute. Approach the bank over his pool with a

heavy tread and the chances are that you will find no trout. If, however, you will pick your way carefully, and if necessary go on all fours on account of shadows, you will find him sleepily moving one fin and then the other without any thought of danger. Sit motionless in a boat and you can talk, whistle, or sing as the mood takes you, but drag something along the bottom of the boat and he will instantly take alarm. The concussion, however, which originates upon the bed of a stream and below the fish will not disturb him nearly as much as when the vibration comes from above. In wading a stream, however, walk carefully so that you will disturb few stones and loose boulders and your success will be greater.

To fish successfully for a trout his habits must be known. Remember, however, that his habits in one locality will be very different from the habits of those in a neighboring stream or pond; that in one place he will only take a fly on the surface and in another will only take a sunken fly. Clear, swift-running streams, whether large or small, which are filled with boulders or have gravelly bottoms, are the places that they love, the banks of these streams being their special hiding places, the larger trout living under tree roots projecting from the shore, under hollows in the banks, in deep holes made by some obstruction in the current or where the froth of the stream gathers; the smaller trout living in the ripples, and the fry in the little feeders emptying into larger bodies of water. In the spring and early sum-

mer look for them among the rapids, or in the eddies along the banks, and during the hot weather of summer where the water is cold and deep. About September they seek the pools along the banks, and at the beginning of cold weather frequent the clear, shallow waters near the heads of the smaller streams. When the spawning season approaches in September, October, or November, which varies according to the temperature of the water, look for them in clear, cool spring water brooks flowing over gravelly bottoms. Here the female deposits her eggs in a slight depression which she makes in the sand by fanning away the smaller gravel with her tail and carrying away the larger pieces in her mouth, the male then covering the eggs with his milt. After this the male and female cover the eggs with gravel and then the female makes another depression in which to deposit other eggs, while the male watches her from his hiding place along the shore. This spawning season lasts from three to six months, and after the eggs are deposited neither fish gives any thought to the ova, which hatch in about eighty days, the young taking care of themselves as best they can, as the food bag sustains life for the first thirty or forty days.

The food of the trout consists of beetles, grasshoppers, worms, flies, grubs, moths, mosquitoes, caterpillars, the various larvæ found in decaying wood and the water bugs which live under the rocks. No fish is a more persistent forager for food, and when he is hungry he will eat whatever he can get, even his own spawn offspring. Nothing, whether great or

small, comes amiss, whether chipmunks, mice, frogs, or minnows, the only puzzling thing being why they never attempt to seize skippers, water sprites, and whirligigs, which skip about over eddies and pools, apparently without any fear of trout or any other fish. For bait, therefore, anything is good. If you cannot get an insect cut up some fresh meat or use a trout's eye, a piece of his throat, his belly fin, or even a bit of red flannel.

A good time to cast for brook trout is just before dark, as insect life is then the most active, especially black flies, moths, millers, and mosquitoes, and the dampness of the evening as it settles down forces many of these into the water. At this time, too, as there are no shadows, his feeling of security increases. During the daytime, in a trout's energetic search for food, you will often see him chasing frightened minnows over shallows or leaping into the air for black flies and mosquitoes. At other times you will find him lazily swimming where the water is purest, or in a quiet pool overhung with alders where insects are constantly falling. It is here that the slow striker is successful, for the trout now comes leisurely to the surface, and after lazily taking the fly in his mouth slowly returns to his lair in deeper water. At other times you will find him at the mouth of some rivulet waiting for food to be brought down from the forest trees, or breasting some rapids for insects caught in the current, at other times getting a supply of oxygen in white-capped water. In such places the eye must be watching for a swirl

on the water and the wrist ready to move when there is the faintest strike at the fly.

Remember that the secret of trout fishing is knowing where to find your fish and getting near him without alarming him; that he is more apt to be found in that part of the stream where the current carries surface food, and that in lakes and ponds he selects those spots where cold water is supplied by bottom springs, or where a cold running brook empties into it.

Remember that trout have their social sets, and that in the social swim there is always some big trout who appropriates the best hole under the banks, and keeps the smaller fish up-stream in shallow water.

Remember that it makes all the difference whether your end of the raft is over the ledge or off it; whether you drop your line in a clear, cold spring hole or make your cast over mud bottoms and weedy flats.

Remember that although trout will be found in the daytime in rapids because of their activity in searching for food, they are seldom found there at night.

Remember that until the snow water is out of the streams trout can seldom be caught; that for some unexplained reason they bite better between the new moon and the first quarter; that they are not apt to bite on still days when the sky is cloudless; that after a storm they will seldom rise to a fly, as plenty of food is then washed into the water; that on cold, blustering days they are sluggish, and that a change of weather often brings good luck.

Remember that the best months for stream fly fishing are May and June, as the streams are then at a good height for wading, and trout are then on the rise for insects and flies which are then moving about; for lake fly fishing the best months are June and September.

If you have ever waded a stream for trout you will never forget the exhilaration which comes with the rush of waters around your legs and the expectation of hooking a good-sized specimen with every cast you make. You will recall the flash of flying spray when a trout darted out from under a bank; the rushes which he made when he took the hook; the hum of the reel; the line cutting through the water; the struggle which followed, the fish going first to the bottom of the stream and then coming to the surface, all the time losing no opportunity of tangling the line about stones, weeds, and fallen trees; the landing net almost under him and then another savage rush for liberty; then a sulky fit; and when he bolted, the care you had to take not to tear the hook from his mouth, and when the line was slack how quickly you had to reel it in to prevent him shaking off the hook. You who have tried the sport with a four-ounce rod in your hand know that a fingerling will make your heart beat faster than the largest salt-water fish that ever swam.

*The Rod*

Fresh-water anglers divide into three classes: the salmon fisherman with his expensive outfit, the fisher-

man of lakes and ponds whose outfit is of minor consideration, and the brook trout angler with his light rod and delicate tackle. But as all boating is not yachting and all painting not art, so all fishing is not angling, and if one does not have the proper rod, reel, line, leader, flies, and hooks when fishing for trout it is little better than fishing for tin frogs in a tub of water.

There are two kinds of rods—one practical for fishing and the other useful in decorating the walls of a dining room, library or camp—one being too good to waste on walls, the other too frail and too shoddy to use anywhere else. When purchasing a rod make up your mind first whether you intend to use it for bait or fly fishing. If it is to be used for fly fishing get one light enough to feel that electric quickness in the fish which sends a magnetic vibration not only through the line and rod but through your body —an intensity of excitement one does not get with any other kind of fishing. Remember that the best rods are the cheapest, and that the best ones are made of split bamboo, greenheart, bathabara and lancewood, some being made in joints of two, three, four, or five pieces, and some being telescopic. Never get a cheap bamboo rod. When you buy one, make the man who sells it to you guarantee it, because a cheap bamboo rod is worse than the cheapest rod of any other kind. After you have cast it a few times it loses its spring and sooner or later is bent like a barrel hoop. For fly fishing your rod should not be over ten feet long and should weigh from four to six

ounces. When fishing from a canoe or on still water you want a springy rod. On a swift-running stream the rod should be stiffer, as the fly is carried along rapidly and a trout dashes out at it like a flash. If you are a skilful angler a medium light rod will do for all kinds of trout fishing, and if you want to use the same rod for black bass get one weighing about six ounces, for with such a rod you can master a ten-pound bass.

If a joint of your rod binds when putting the rod together, rub the joint against the side of your nose or the back of your ear or rub it with tallow. If the joints will not come apart loosen them with a lighted match.

*The Reel*

See that your reel is of the right weight to balance your rod. When fly fishing the reel should be below the handle and on the under side of the rod, so that it will require no strain of the muscles to hold the rod from turning in your hand, as this would be its natural tendency if the weight of the reel were on the top or the side of the rod. When bait fishing, however, as it is not necessary to have the rod balanced, the reel is attached to the upper side of the rod above the handle. For this kind of fishing and for trolling a multiplying reel should be used or one with a double set of cogs, so that you will get two revolutions of the spool with each revolution of the handle.

*The Line*

The line should be made of silk and be waterproof. These lines are of different sizes and numbered from A, the largest size, to J, the smallest size. The G thread-like size with from twenty to thirty-five yards on your reel is the best size to use when stream fishing. For lake fishing or when fishing in rapid water, the E size, with from thirty-five to fifty yards on your reel, is the best size to have.

Remember, however, that a light line on a heavy rod is as bad as a heavy line on a light rod. Remember, too, that nearly every angler is inclined to use too light a line, which is not only difficult to cast in a strong wind, but will not lay out as accurately as a heavier one.

Remember when you have finished fishing to dry your line thoroughly before putting it away.

*The Leader*

The leader, or the casting line, as the English call it, is attached to the end of the reel line and is the most important part of a fly caster's outfit. It is made of gut and should be from three to six feet long, according to the place you are fishing. It is generally dyed a light blue or mist color. Many anglers, however, believe that undyed leaders are the best, as they are stronger and as soon as they lose their lustre get a satisfactory stain from the water.

Carry your leaders in a metal case between two layers of damp felt and never use one when it is dry.

*Snells*

Before using it soak it in water until it becomes pliable, or it is liable to break if a strain comes on it.

*The Flies*

The flies which are attached to the leader should be about two feet apart. When two or more flies are used it is called a whip of flies, the end fly being known as the drag fly, the tail fly, or the stretcher, and the others as droppers or bobbers. The small piece of gut by which the fly is attached to the leader is known as the snood or snell, the best snells being made of silk-worm gut, which is light, strong, and nearly invisible. To prevent the flies whipping around the leader the bobbers are often attached to the leader without using the snell. This is easily done by slipping the loop of the fly through a loop in the leader and then pulling the loop out of the leader.

For artificial flies there are thousands of different combinations of colors and dozens of different sizes. There are, however, only four distinct types. One type has the wings attached to the end of the shaft of the hook, so that when the hook draws through the water the wings close as the wings of an ordinary fly would. The second type, known as the fluttering fly, has the wings attached the whole length of the shaft, so that when the hook draws through the water the wings spread out and flutter instead of closing on the hook. The third type, known as hackles, have no wings and are made to represent caterpillars and other larvæ; and the fourth type, or hackle flies, so called, are hackles with wings and sometimes with

tails. Most of these artificial flies are made from the feathers of birds and the fur of animals. Others are made of gold, silver and bronze tin-foil and of gold, silver and brass wire.

In picking out your flies a good rule to follow is to use those which resemble as nearly as possible the kind of insects the fish live on at the season of the year you are fishing. For this reason study the insects along the shore and make up your cast with this in mind.

Remember that during March and April the dark and dull-colored flies are generally the most effective; that during the latter part of May when the days begin to get warm and through June the brightest-colored patterns are generally the best; that in July the light-colored flies should be used, and in August and September flies with sombre hues.

Remember that small flies and plain colors should be used when the day is bright and the water clear, and the brighter and larger patterns when the day is dark and the water deep and dull.

Remember that as twilight approaches a white miller or a bright-colored fly is generally effective; and when you are fishing on a waterfall or in churning waters, that a black fly on the white surface will often draw a trout from under a bank where he has been lying in wait for a grasshopper or cricket.

Remember that on small streams small flies should be used, and the larger flies on ponds, lakes, and in rough water.

To preserve artificial flies from moths keep them

in a tin case with plenty of ground black pepper or camphor, or wrap them in a newspaper.

*The Hooks*

Many anglers will only fish with a hook with a flattened curve. Others want the point of the hook on the same line with the shaft of the hook; and others want the point bent to one side. Others want the shaft straight and others want it curved. Others insist that the barb of the hook must have an outward projection; and others that it have an inward projection. Some will only use steely blue hooks, others brown enamelled hooks, and others black or japanned hooks.

Many anglers, too, have their special theories about the size of the hook to use. These are numbered from 12°, the largest size, down to 1° and then from 1 down to 18, the smallest size. For salmon fishing use number 12° down to number 1°; for black bass and pickerel number 1 down to number 6; for togue, longe, and lake trout number 4 down to number 6, and for trout number 6 down to number 14, according to the size of the trout you expect to get.

*Casting a Fly*

If possible, face the sun when trout fishing, so that your shadow will not fall upon the water. When wading a brook or fishing in rapid, foamy water walk down stream, and be careful not to stir up more sand, mud, or gravel than necessary. When fishing



*A Good Place for Trout*

on a broad, silent river it makes no difference whether you go up or down the stream.

When casting use all the line the width of the stream will allow and keep out of sight where it is possible. Never neglect the sides or the middle of the stream, and cast in every part of each pool, even the shallow places, for trout, especially in the spring, often go into shallow water to sun themselves.

In making a cast do not work your arm as though you were signalling an electric car. Remember that the wrist does it all. Send the flies out and not down, making your cast with the idea that the end fly is to strike some imaginary object which you have marked in the water.

When casting be sure that the line has time to stretch out to its full length behind you before you bring it forward. This is the one secret of being able to make a long cast.

Remember when casting that you must not only make your flies drop on the water naturally, but must keep the line and leader taut. You are then ready to strike if you get a rise the moment the flies touch the water. Do not drag the flies through the water, but trail them to the right and left by slight jerking movements, doing it gently, so that they will seem alive, and not bunches of feathers. In clear, smooth water let them sink a little, then move them along quickly.

Remember that striking is simply a quick turning of the wrist in order to move the fly a few inches along the surface, and that this is not in any sense a

jerk, the slightest movement of the hook being sufficient to fasten it in the mouth of the fish, as his resistance helps hook him.

*Playing a Trout*

When you get a rise wait till you feel your fish. If you are a beginner your enthusiasm will, probably, make you forget how delicate your outfit is. If you strike hard you will very likely break your rod, and if the fish is a small one you will probably send him into the next county.

If you have a rise and fail to hook your fish wait a minute before making another cast and then cast again in the same place.

Don't let your eye wander away from the stream. If a trout rises to the surface mark the spot, but do not be in too much haste in getting there. Remember that a master angler is seldom in a hurry. Make your cast a little short of where the rise was, so that the trout will have a better chance of seeing the flies when they strike the water.

Remember that casting a minnow is very different from casting a fly; that if you are to make a long cast with a minnow it must be made to the left or to the right. When casting with a minnow do not use the reel, but pull out enough line for the cast, and let the slack go with the cast.

As soon as you get a strike take the rod in your left hand in order to have the right hand to reel in with and later to land your fish with. If it is a large trout turn the rod over so that the line will be on

the under side of the rod, as in this position the line only pulls through the rings and does not press against the rod when it bends.

If you have fastened your fish and he pulls hard give him line, but make him earn every inch of it. When he gets tired reel him in, but look out for his last break, for nearly every trout, no matter how




*A Day's Record*

tired he may be, will make a final, vicious rush for liberty, and his capers in his last struggle will often end in his escape.

*Landing a Trout*

Head your fish away from boulders and tree roots. Keep the line taut and do not nervously hurry the play. If you have hooked a good-sized trout in quick water work toward him, reeling in as you move along. Then, after leading him back of some rock where the

water is not swift, reel in all but six or eight feet of your line and reach the landing net under him, holding your thumb on the reel in case he makes a rush.

Never let a trout die in your creel. Before you take the hook out of his mouth kill him by striking him a sharp blow on the head.