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Living in the Same School but Behaving Differently; One of the Keys towards Grayling Understanding

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Undoubtedly, the grayling is a fish that has the peculiarity to frequently behave in a way that is difficult to understand. One of the keys to improve our knowledge on this fish and, consequently, improve our flyfishing, is the direct observation of their behaviours within a school. Taking advantage of the fact that grayling are not as shy as trout, we may easily observe them when fishing: don't miss this opportunity!

The Grayling's typical refusal of, or apathetic reaction to, our dry flies, is one of the 'leif-motif' in their flyfishing, especially when we are faced with a grayling school (i.e., several individuals living together and sharing the same area of a river). We could expect that fish living in a same environment and under the same conditions/constraints should react in a similar way to the same imitation, especially if they are grouped and our dry fly has been shown to be successful with some of them. However, the fact that these fish live all together does not implicitly mean that they should show similar behaviours: it is quite common to deal well with some individuals whereas many others seem to ignore, or show different reactions to, similar presentations or the same fly. Fortunately, grayling are generally less suspicious and shy than trout, giving us an important advantage: their reactions and, more generally, their behaviours during the

presentation of our flies may be observed from quite close and, consequently, may generate crucial information during fishing.

Firstly, school location has a strong effect on fish behaviour. We are not generally astonished when, while fishing for trout, two individuals can show very different behaviours and reactions to our fly, even if they are separated by a few dozens meters. We all know that the huge variations in the conditions characterising two different places in a river, even if these are close each other, may greatly modify the needs of a fish and, thus, its behavioural response to external stimuli (as our flies). The features of the streams, depth of water, type of vegetation (cover) and/or the shape of the bottom may alter fish behaviour so strongly that two neighbouring trout living in two distinct portions of water may show very different reactions. Consequently, they may react differently to our fly types and presentations. If it may be acceptable to consider the different graylings of a school as a more homogeneous group of individuals than several lone, neighbouring trout located on different parts of a river, we cannot forget that also a single location (as the one occupied by a school) may show important differences in its structure. The entrance, the main part, the end and the edges of the river emplacement occupied by a school may be characterised by very different situations of food flow, speed and directions of streams, which all together may determine an important level of heterogeneity among the different individuals. Additionally, schools may be distributed on quite a large portion of the river, which increases the possibility that the different individuals could be under quite different environmental conditions and pressures.

Therefore, the solution to grayling refusals is not always in our fly box: dry flyfishing is not frequently a matter of trial and error. Differences in the school placement may source one of the most typical and controversial situations in dry fly fishing for grayling: the fly that allows the catching of one or several fish within the same school does not work at all with the other individuals of the group. It is a quite common situation to start catching grayling on a given fly and, without any apparent reason, exactly when we think to have found this 'secret fly of the day' with which we can continue fishing successfully, the other grayling of this same river position seem to be completely apathetic to our imitation. That is, the fly might not be the unique factor to which focus our attention. A given fly may have simply allowed you to catch those grayling that were the most prone to take a floating insect, the others just being in a different mood. A correct interpretation of such a situation would have indicate you that it would have been totally useless to change many different flies, because the real difficulty does not reside in finding the correct fly: these grayling in this specific moment were not catchable with a dry fly simply because they were behaving in a different way from individuals hunting in the surface (the ones that have taken your fly).

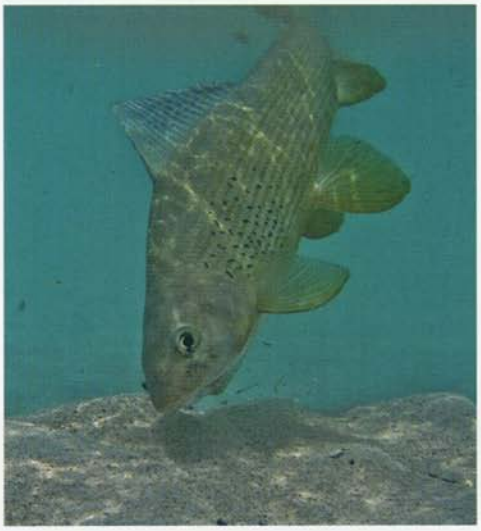

Figure 1. A real fishing scenario, allowing us to understand the importance to observe and, consequently, correctly interpret fish behaviours when fishing graylings with a dry fly.

The above scenario is illustrated in the Figure 1, which displays a real situation of a grayling school emplacement, similar to many others we may have been faced with. This situation is quite typical for grayling: we are faced with a school located in a quite large and well structured river position, which shows several elements of interest because its homogeneity is interrupted by an obstacle in the middle of the stream. In this case the element that breaks the continuity of the dynamic features (e.g., speed and number of main and secondary streams) of the river is the column of an old bridge at the beginning of this grayling emplacement.

We should start by focusing our attention on four main elements that may help us to correctly 'read' the river and consequently select the best strategy when fishing: (1) at the beginning of the emplacement (the head of the "swim", close to the old bridge) there is an increase in the speed of the stream, due to an abrupt increase of the depth; (2) both the streams produced by the bridge column show a different speed, the highest speed being in the middle of the stream and the lowest in proximity of the banks; (3) immediately below the column there is a small portion of still water where the food flow, stops and concentrates; and (4) the end of the emplacement is characterised by a reduction in both speed and depth of the river. By such a simple analysis of the main features of this portion of the river, we can appreciate how this section is varied and, as a consequence, grayling of the same school are distributed in a highly heterogeneous environment. As an end result, such different conditions have the potential to determine different behaviours among the individuals of the school.

Let us now consider the distribution, position and behaviours of six grayling of the school. Grayling 1, close to the left bank and behind the vegetation, is quite motionless on the bottom, close to the river bed. Some small sideways movements could indicate activity in the deepest level of the water column, probably directed at some nymphs sporadically flowing around it. At this point, this grayling is not interested at all in surface food and,

consequently, quite impossible to catch with a dry fly. Grayling 2 and 3 are currently the most active; they are both close to one of the priority channels of food access (one of the two main streams) and close to the surface. They are rising frequently and should represent our target fish. Grayling 4 is undoubtedly one of the most difficult to catch. It is placed on an opposite direction to the other vgraylings, the head towards the end of the emplacement: because the bridge breaks the flow of the river, it does not need to take advantage from hydrodynamics. When this happens, the fish is not in a rush: the food that enters the still area of water stops there for a while and the grayling rises are rare. This is a very difficult situation because the fly is only one of the elements of the success of our action. The main problems here are (a) to coordinate the presentation of our fly with its slow rising rhythms and (b) to avoid dragging. Actually, as soon as our fly reaches this post the line start to quickly flow away because of the higher speed of the surrounding waters. Lastly, grayling 5 and 6 are in a situation apparently similar to grayling 2 and 3, but their behaviour is more similar to grayling 1. Actually, they are on the bottom and seem uninterested in food flowing on the surface.

If we are faced with this scenario under a 'blind' condition, i.e. without the possibility to directly observe the exact location and behaviour of individuals, we could have run the risk of making wrong suppositions and coming to wrong conclusions. One of the most typical reactions could have been to try several different dry flies after catching grayling 2 and 3. However, as they were the only fish of the school really catchable at that moment, we would not have had any result. Possible solutions with the potential to produce more catches would have been to either drastically change our fishing strategy (e.g., to shift from dry flies to sinking nymphs), wait for a modification in the school mood or definitely change the place. Evidently, this is just one of the possible scenarios that we have to deal with when fishing for grayling with a dry fly and, overall, this example does not expect to be the 'universal' answer to the reaction of graylings to dry flies. In many cases, other factors (e.g., wrong fly choice and/or presentation, dragging) may be responsible for our failure to catch grayling. Nevertheless, and most important, such an example reflects the crucial importance of both the individuality of fish and the need to observe them when fishing. In addition, our experience as fisherman will be based on real data and observations, more than on suppositions and beliefs that may be completely erroneous and extremely negative in the long term. And this is especially true when fishing for grayling, one of the most intriguing and enigmatic fish of our freshwaters.

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