

Grayling

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Pat Stevens and Dr Ron Broughton
busy tying at the Peover Show
Photo - Rod Calbrade
Editor of 'Grayling'

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The Grayling:

An Unpredictable Fish or an Erroneous Approach?

Results from Behavioural Observations

Vincenzo Penteriani

& Roberto Pragliola

When flyfishermen focused their attention on graylings as interesting for dry fly, it became immediately notorious as a strange and unpredictable fish. All grayling flyfishermen agree that it is nearly impossible to predict the reactions of this fish to the dry fly, and their fly boxes contain a great number of highly differentiated imitations... If we analyse this situation from a more scientific point of view, we must admit that it is impossible that such a fish, result of million of years of evolution, did not follow a series of rules to become well adapted to its environment.

The data I present here are the result of several hours of observation of the grayling behaviour, their diet, and their reactions to the dry fly.

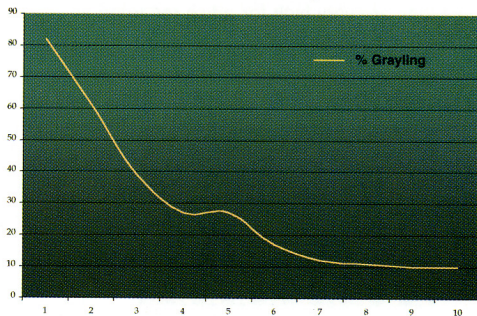
School strategies and its behavioural implications

To well understand the grayling reactions in front of a dry fly, we should consider the social structure of this species, the school. This is a very efficient anti-predator strategy (i.e., to protect them against birds and pikes), modelling the individual behaviour in a very peculiar way, and making them so "strange"...

Our approach to the grayling fishing should consider the implications of a life within a group, which is for us a key of understanding the psychology of this fish. First of all, when we present a fly to a fish, we should understand that numerous individuals of the school contemporaneously see the imitation and the reactions of its neighbours. A group works like a unique entity, in which the duty to share the trophic resources with neighbours, thus modifying each individual's foraging strategy (i.e., living in large open segments of river for more space and more food), are compensated by a more secure situation. If an individual detects a danger, all the school members get the information. Consequently, what follows the cast (i.e., a refuse, the catch of a school member, the fly dragging) will interact with more than one individual at once, determining their immediate reactions. And their neighbours will observe the reaction of a single individual, and their successive and immediate responses will determine, as in a chain reaction, the behaviour of all the school.

For example, an unnatural reaction of a school member in front of a dry fly will condition the reactions of all the other grayling. Results of this group strategy clearly show in the Graph 1 that chances of success decline with the time length of the fishing action. Chances of grayling rising on a dry fly at the first cast are over 80%, dropping to 40% after our fly has passed over the school for the third time...A good fishing strategy is to avoid insisting on the same group: the more casts, the longer it will take for the school fish to come back to a normal situation without stress.

Fig.1. Relationship between the % of grayling *Thymallus thymallus* rising to dry flies and the number passing over the fish school



Not only the school...

We should not forget the individual experience of each member of the school, which can complicate the parameters playing a leading role in the success of our fishing action. Several parameters can help us to individuate if we are using a good fishing strategy, showing us that grayling is not strange but only adapted to its social and natural environment. The distance of renunciation (Croze 1970) represents the length covered by the fish to take the fly before abandoning and coming back to the school. This is a good test to evaluate the efficacy of our imitation: the longer the distance, the closer we are to the best imitation.

Obviously, the reaction of an individual will always be observed by several other school members, thus conditioning successive reactions. Several other elements linked to the natural history of graylings should also be considered:

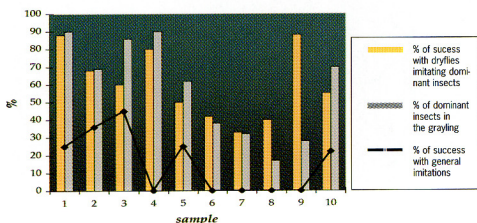
- a)** visual vigilance in regard to possible prey passing increases with hunger and during those periods when the individual cannot feed for different reasons (i.e., sexual activities, disturb, etc.; van Holst 1948, Tugendhat 1960, Beukema 1968);
- b)** high levels of hunger can drive to accept a large variety of food (Beukema 1968);

- c) the annual and circadian rhythms;
- d) the availability and quality of food; and
- e) the local and periodic search image.

The search image is the prey type that a fish is searching.

A good knowledge of the graylings local diet, and of the hunting hours will improve our success, as shown in Graph 2. The choice of a dry fly that really imitates in size, shape and colour the grayling natural prey (dominant insects in the diet) drastically enhances our chances of catch success. My experience in that sense proves that a good imitation increases the mean of effective rising allowing catching (65.9%; range: 33.3-87.5%). These percentages are very high for a fish regarded as strange and unpredictable!

Fig. 2. % of caught grayling (TU) using dry flies imitating the insect on the river and in the diet of the fish vs. general imitations



Conclusions

A more scientific approach to grayling fly fishing will provide us with a better knowledge of some reactions. We can conclude that the social structure of grayling can originate behaviour considered as unpredictable if analysed like solitary species, and without considering all the other possible external factors playing a role. And this, is only the top of the iceberg...

Flyfishing can be a useful tool to acquire more information, a sort of conjunction ring between two perpetually changing worlds: water and air, so close and so distant at the same time...

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The authors are now working on grayling behaviour in Slovenian waters to try to move a step forward in the knowledge of the reactions of this fish as regards dry flies. They thank Joze Ocvirk, the director of the Fisheries Research Institute of Slovenia, for the logistical help and authorisations.

Easy-Peasy

Upside-down Mayfly

Roy Christie

For the adult stages of the *Ephemeroptera*, when grayling are feeding on dun or spinner, a fly with good presentation and an effective light pattern can produce excellent results.

Upside-down flies are not new but I have designed a very easily constructed upside-down dry-fly which has been the downfall of many fish to my own rod and those of many friends.

This is the Easy-Peasy USD. Tied on a dry or grub hook of your choice, this imitation covers dun, spinner and dap by the simple expedients of dressing the tails round the bend and pulling some fibres through the collar hackle on 'top' of the hook shank. This creation lands delicately, floats upside-down and provides a low-slung profile and a realistic footprint.

Here is a pattern for an Easy-Peasy USD BWO dun.

- Hook: Sparton Trighammer or longshank grub hook
- Thread: Rusty brown 8/0
- Tails: Cree cock, tied in 30 degrees round the bend
- Rib: Copper wire
- Body: Dubbing to match the hatch
- Thorax cover: Pheasant tail, to match underside of the natural
- Hackle: Cree cock dyed gold
- Wing: Light grey polypropylene (Optional)
- Thorax: Dubbing to match natural