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Why does a grayling suddenly take a dry fly after refusing it several times?

The ladies' prerogative

VINCENZO PENTERIANI believes that the fly itself is not always the only explanation for a refusal or a take from a grayling

Which of us has not repeatedly experienced the following situation when fishing for grayling? We have a nice grayling rising just

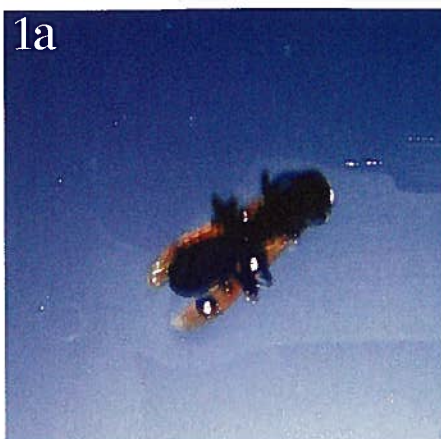
in front of us, but it seems impossible to convince it to take our fly. After the first casts, its interest for our imitation fly has clearly decreased. We have already changed fly several times, but the situation has remained the same and we are now getting frustrated. Hence, we decide to continue casting the same fly, which seemed to have initially interested the fish (thinking we were probably close to something the fish considered edible ...). Suddenly, the grayling rises again and this time, it takes the fly. To our surprise we are landing an 'uncatchable' grayling! What has happened? Why has a grayling that refused this fly several times finally decided to take it without any apparent reason?

We are fishing over a school of grayling, and less than a dozen fish are rising on a large, flat chalkstream pool. On the first cast, one of the grayling rises from the bottom of the river and takes our fly. This is a good start! Using the same fly that has fooled the first grayling we continue to fish the pool, but the result is not what we were expecting. Only one other grayling takes this same fly. Two other fish rose to – but refused – our imitation, and three other fish in the same school showed no interest. What is it happening? Why have these fish behaved so differently?

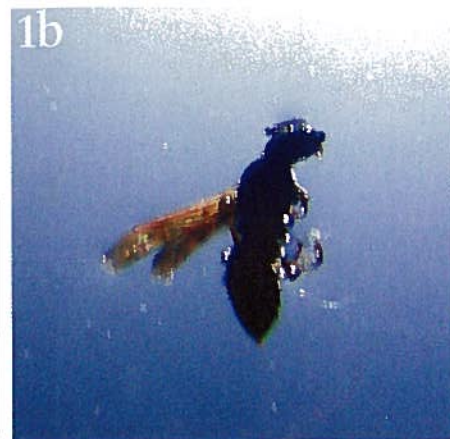
Two non-mutually exclusive explanations can account for such apparently puzzling results: (1) each fly presentation (by presentation I mean the way that the fly looks when directly in front of the fish's head) may be different because of the way the fly lands on the water and floats towards the fish; and (2) fish also have personalities. Let's talk about fly presentations.

Infinite range of presentations

What happened in each of the two situations described above is quite thought-provoking because it is difficult to understand what changed in such a short period of time;



1a
Natural variation: a natural insect on the water surface can look very different to a fish, depending on how it sits on the water.



what would convince a grayling that has previously refused a fly to take it, and how could a fly fool some individuals, but not others? This may mean that we need to pay attention to elements other than only the fly dressing: although the fly remained the same, the effect it had on the targeted grayling was completely different ... why, after passing several times over the head of the fish did the fish unexpectedly decide to rise and take the fly? Is it possible that the grayling saw the fly differently than before (i.e., it appeared more similar to its feeding search image) when it finally took the fly? This is an interesting point, because this can be a key detail for understanding this apparently unpredictable behaviour of grayling when faced with our flies. Something happened to our fly to give it the appearance of a natural insect, identical to those that grayling easily recognise and have fed on since they started to eat insects in that river. The appearance of our fly, when floating above the fish, may be the answer we are looking for, or one of the possible explanations for this typical grayling brain teaser, at least.

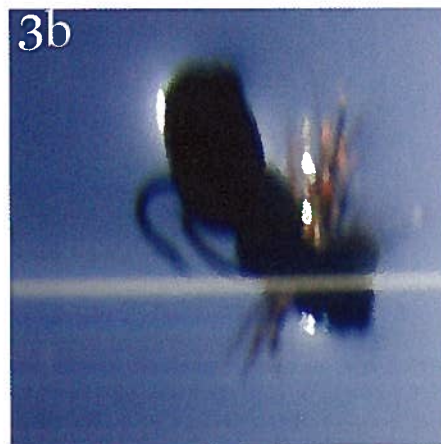
It is hard to believe that grayling refuse artificial flies because they are conscious that this floating object is a threat to survival. It is simpler to infer that a grayling refusal is a consequence of the fact that, at a given moment, the fish do not recognise our imitation as food. Some other factors may influence our

fly presentation, such as drag, but I'm not taking into account this factor here. What we are interested in is what differentiates two equally good and correct fly presentations of the same fly?

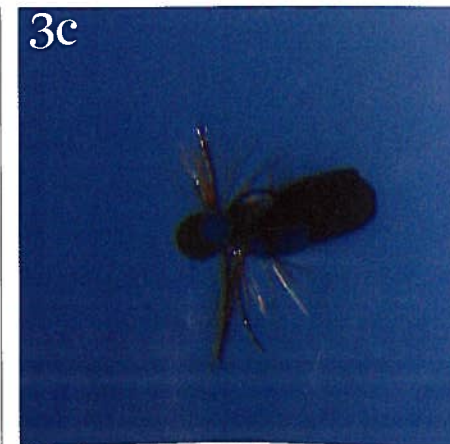
The famous Heraclitus quotation, "ever-newer waters flow on those who step into the same rivers," seems perfectly suited for fly fishing: rivers never reproduce the identical situation, everything is always changing and no two streams are equal, even if they appear similar. The river dynamics make it impossible for two conditions to be repeated. Both food and our flies, which float on rivers, are subject to these changing conditions and never impact on the fish in the same way. This is a crucial point; the same fly cast twice can appear before the fish in a totally different position, although we think that we have presented it in the same way. Different stream directions and speeds or the way the fly and the leader land on the water may create an infinite number of ways to present a fly when the fish decides to rise or not. In some cases the same fly may appear different, or at least may become more or less attractive and convincing. This is especially true if the vision of the fish is extremely sharp, as recent scientific studies on grayling seem to highlight. Since the time of *The Trout and the Fly* by Clarke and Goddard, as well as *In the Ring of the Rise* by Marinaro, there has been a lot of



3a
A foam terrestrial imitation.



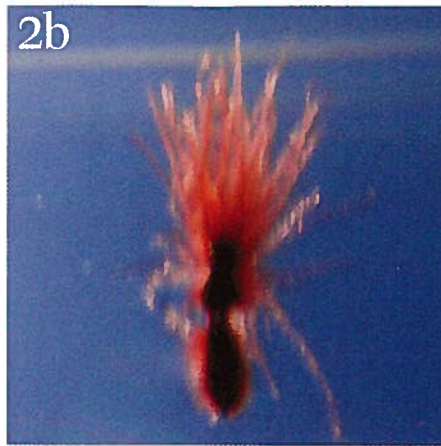
3b
An underwater view of the foam terrestrial imitation.



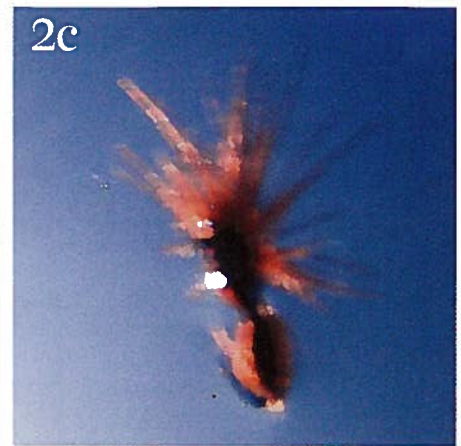
3c
A different underwater view of the foam terrestrial – is this difference which makes up the grayling's mind to take or refuse?



An ant imitation.



One underwater view of the Red Ant imitation.



A different underwater view of the Red Ant.

interest on presentation and the way fish may perceive the artificial fly. Now it is time to move a step further and focus on the way each single fly may change its position and its flotation on the water surface, therefore assuming extremely different shapes on the surface. This can be especially true for small dry flies (typical of grayling fly fishing), for which flotation and stability rely on a very small bunch of fur and feathers. Consider the CdC flies, for example. They look different during the first

pictures show, the same fly looks very different in the images 1a and 1b. As for the red ant (2a), the imitation reaching a grayling as in 2b will look very different than in 2c. Finally, real insects may also appear very different, and after looking at the pictures 1a and 1b we can barely say that this insect is the same species.

To conclude, despite our inability to know exactly what kind of image the grayling is able to see, our fly moves, turns, spins on its axis and floats differently at each presentation (as

ies across very different animal groups have clearly shown that each individual differs according to its personality. Such an individual identity, mainly reflected in different behavioural choices and strategies across individuals of the same population, is determined by a relatively large range of elements like genetics, the environment in which the individuals have grown up, the place in which they have decided to settle and food availability. Moreover, personalities are not restricted to solitary species, but are also evident in animals living in groups, herds, schools and swarms. Finally, personalities may also change with sex, age and experience, which makes things even more complicated. As with many other animals, fish have personalities, too. This means that they do not have to behave exactly in the same way, although they share the same space and physical constraints. The second scenario I described at the beginning of this article may be easily explained by the action of the grayling's personalities when they are feeding; this is not, evidently, the only explanation for this behaviour, and this is why I stressed that fly presentations and fish personalities are not mutually exclusive factors influencing whether a fish rises. Grayling living in the same school may show profoundly different behaviours, and thus, the same fly cannot have the same effect on all of the fish.

If we know that a fly may look very different when it appears above the grayling, and we have to take into account individual personalities in the response of the fish to our imitation, we have the possibility of learning two important things. First, easy and universal solutions do not exist in fly fishing: dressing may be important, but when flies shift from our desks to the river things may change. Second, the explanation of some apparently unpredictable and 'bizarre' behaviours of grayling may reside in a complex combination of several factors that when combined may help explain odd refusals and unexpected take. This unsolved mystery behind a rise is why grayling fly fishing is so fascinating.

Vincenzo Penteriani is a Spanish biologist and an overseas area secretary for the Grayling Society.



Success, but what made the grayling change its mind so suddenly?

casts than they do after a time, when they become wet; as a consequence, they may assume very different positions and rotations on the water surface – completely upright at first and then lying on one side after a while. Do they look exactly the same to the fish? No, they do not. Over this huge range of presentations, how the grayling interpret our fly may be diverse, causing them to examine the fly more closely, take the fly or just leave it to float harmlessly above their heads.

Look at the photograph sequences (1, 2 and 3) which depict a foam terrestrial, a CdC Ant and a natural insect (hymenopter) from below (that is, from a fish perspective), you can clearly appreciate how the same fly may appear different when floating on the surface of the water. Evidently, we cannot know exactly how grayling really see insects from below, but this sequence of pictures is still noteworthy because it helps us to understand how the same dry fly (and even a natural insect) may modify its appearance and thus look different because of the movement of the river streams. For example, despite the terrestrial

well as during the same presentation!). This means that the pattern of a dressing is not the unique variable we have to take into account when explaining a grayling refusal or hook-up; the position of the fly at the moment that the grayling decides to take it is crucial. Try to remember those grayling that you have seen rising from the bottom and following the fly with their mouths a few centimetres from the imitation before deciding whether to take the insect ... undoubtedly, in some cases the dressing of the fly would have had a major impact on the fishes' decisions, but who knows what role the way the fly plays presenting itself to the fish?

Living in a group does not destroy individual identity

At the end of the last century a novel line of research began to emerge within the scientific community of behavioural ecologists: animal personalities. Since then, many stud-