

two ways to be one

Just the other wintry day, I ambled up to Scotts Flat Reservoir pining for some holdover or wild 'bows and/or some really fucking slow-moving - and exquisite-tasting - black bass. I picked apart several points in blue-dawn light with a bouncing spoon, hoping to entice a wakasagi-huntin' 'bow. Despite smooth casts and aching addictive presentations, nary a trout stuck itself to my hook: water was just a touch too cold for the 'bows to really be on a fast-moving prowl. With the sun rising and the light illuminating the glassy reservoir water, I switched taxa and focused on dragging a smallie or biggie out of boulder-strewn corners, finally sticking a big ol' bronze bitch on a slothfully crawled tube jig. The sun passing its daily apex and sinking slowly towards the cold, cold evening, and signifying the typically worst part of the day to catch a fish - afternoon - I opted to sidle over to a shallow point by the dam (admittedly not the greatest location), bomb out some skewered nightcrawlers on light-line sliding-sinker rigs, and hope a lazy trout would shimmy on over and slurp my bait.

That little bait-dunking spell, during which a fish didn't even breathe on my baits, was, nevertheless, the most stimulating type of hunting I conducted that icicle day. Crouched on haunches, still, intensely watching the gossamer lines for the slightest movement that would indicate a fish succumbing to my baits, it struck me, it bashed through my consciousness how fucking much I was *enjoying* the seemingly boring, static enterprise of bait-fishing for trout. It got me thinking, as these mini-epiphanies always do, as to *why*. That the bait-dunking for wild/holdover trout tapped into deep nostalgic fibers coursing through my mind was no doubt part of it - from myriad numbing wintertime Gregory and Arrowhead and Green Valley treks for fat 'bows in my teens, to the hazy years of my 20s when I reenacted the same rite but at Cuyamaca in San Diego County and Harriet Reservoir way north in Oregon, to my middle-age years plying the waters I now consider home, such as Sly Park and Sugar Pine and Rollins - a rich tapestry of memories existed in my mind, needing only a cursory re-creation of some aspect to be fired, which both the similar mixed-coniferous forest ensconcing Scotts Flat and my statuesque posture provided. But perhaps more important was that the sit-and-wait approach - ambushing really - has become an uncommon way for me to pursue fish of late, when I'm usually donning the guise of the active stalker, as I did at Scotts Flat that morning with the trout-spoonin' and the bass jig-draggin'.

And, fuck me, the ambush approach to catch winter still-water trout is so very often goddamn effective and efficient - *it works*. Unlike black bass and lotic trout, which tend to stick to one very defined profitable place and so require a predator to go to *them*, still-water trout, especially 'bows, tend to cruise more (Dedual *et al* 2000, James and Kelso 1995). Given autumn turnover, trout are no longer restricted to cooler, deeper water during winter, rendering food abundance - if other water-quality conditions such as turbidity remain favorable - the primary determinant of *where* trout'll be roaming. Often, the still-water areas hosting the most food are the inlets (Fillion 1967), which deliver both stream-produced foods and nutrients for fueling lentic food webs. Thus positioning at an inlet at the right time of day - mornings but especially evenings - with an appropriate bait [*e.g.*, worms - though worms are virtually absent in trout in still-water diet studies, damn, they are still one of the most abundant invertebrates in the benthos of lakes and reservoirs (Popp and Hoagland 1995, Fillion 1967)] is a pretty fuckin' intelligent strategy, especially since the water is often below trout optimum temperatures (*e.g.*, in the 40s°F) and so the fish are really unlikely to chase a fast-moving lure or fly while happily gobbling a stationary, natural bait. In a way, it's an inverted actualization of a tiered optimal-foraging

theory: the food patch is stationary (the inlet), the next-level predator is mobile (the trout), and the *next*-level predator (the human) is stationary. In contrast, the active-stalking approach creates another moving dot - the human - in the equation, squaring and thus reducing the probability of contact, in addition to presenting a moving lure low-metabolism trout are less likely to eat.

Now many highfalutin fucking fly-guys scoff and deride bait-dunking as too easy, a crude, Neanderthal method for pursuing wild or holdover trout, but they're just being precious, ignorant, classist, and provincial, as if chasing trout with space-age gear and all the latest overpriced trendy garbage (*e.g.*, Simms leakable waders, fucking Go Pro, Yeti cooler) is somehow a more authentic interaction. It may be easier to get a fat 'bow that chewed a worm on an appropriate rig to hand than to get the same fish to stomp a slowly crawled wooly bugger and meet its maker at the bank during winter, but it ain't by much. In both cases, whether with fly rod or spinning rod, the leaders need turn over properly - if not, then the fly gets tangled with the leader, or the bait leader gets tangled with the sinker and so won't freely feed line when a trout takes, causing the trout to dump the bait. Thus each method requires skillful fluid casting motions. Both require careful line management - with the fly rod, maintaining as straight a connection as possible between rod tip and fly so to detect the often subtle strikes in such cold water, and with the spinning rod, making damn sure that plenty of slack remains in the main line so trout can take the bait with no resistance while balancing keeping the main line from slipping beneath rock and wood. When a fish does take, the bait-dunker often has a more difficult battle to face since the leader has to be as thin as possible to even get trout to take, while a fly (or lure) guy can generally get away with a heavier leader and still get bit; further, the bait-dunker often has to contend with more obstacles since it's often necessary to sink the line below any surface currents to get that requisite main-line slack. Leader length and bait placement are also important, as it's often all too easy to have a too-long leader [wild fish tend to feed benthically more than hatchery fish (Rowe 1984)] and to put it in too-deep water, let alone identifying the coarser patterns (inlet, time of day) correctly for a successful fish hunt.

That being on-point when bait-dunking for coldwater lentic trout is absolutely required has been reinforced far too many times by my successes and the concomitant failures of many of my prodigies when I've sent 'em into the Sierra with very specific directions. I recall a trip three of 'em took to Stumpy Meadows Reservoir, and not a single one caught a trout. The next week, I took one of those kids and instructed him in person how the rig should look, how it should be cast, where it should be cast, and while he indeed caught a nice holdover, that was a third of what I went home with. Another time I limited with ease at Scotts Flat, following which a protege rolled up the following week to capitalize on the same pattern only to get smoked, even after he called me while on the water for ideas. And these are *smart* kids. Easy it ain't, motherfucker.

Bait-dunking for coldwater trout varies from fly-fishing and lure-chucking in that success depends much more on what is *seen* while bait-dunking than what is *felt* when fishing more actively. Given the balance needed in bait-dunking between having the main line slack for a weightless take yet still keeping it somewhat taut to minimize snagging on bottom debris, a bait-dunker needs to be zeroed in on that line to both discern whether floating vegetation or wood caused that line to tighten or if a trout took and so extra slack line needs to be fed so the trout really eats it (coldwater trout are often very slow in engulfing a bait such that they often need many free-running feet for the hook to get deep enough for a solid hookset). For lure and fly guys, it's more the feel - you gotta set the hook, whether it's a nymph on a fly rod or a marabou jig on a spinning rod, as soon as the trout mouths the lure since they will eject fakes in a second,

and that requires an acute sense of touch. Hence bait-dunking and more active methods depend more on different sense modalities for success.

The end result is this: the ambush strategy of bait-dunking for winter lentic trout ain't some fucking lazy-ass way for some dipshit human to catch fucking wild, wily 'bows. It's a motherfucking skill and art, requiring finesse and knowledge and understanding and sensitivity and discipline. Further, it complements the sensory modalities and strategies of the active-stalker mode of fishing - it *completes* and fuses whole a fish Romanticist, while leaving those poor, poor fly-only guys who display ignorant, imperious, staunch adherence to feathers and fur and stripping and dipping only fragments.

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