

FISHING THE "GREASED LINE" FOR SALMON

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Mention the greased line method of fishing for salmon and A.H.E Woods name instantly comes to mind. There has been much written about the method that the mans name has become synonymous with, but there has been very little written about his overall approach to salmon fishing. At the time Wood was not the only practitioner of the floating line technique. There were other eminent greased line anglers living at the time. These included such gentlemen as W.J.Barry, E.M.Crossfield, Arthur Hutton and Anthony Crossley, all of whom corresponded regularly with Woods on many aspects of catching salmon on the fly. At the time, some regarded Barry, as a far superior greased line fisher, than Woods. Regardless of the differences of opinions and practices exchanged through letters to each other, both gentlemen became very close friends. It was through correspondence with Barry and other authoritative anglers of the time that we can get a better idea of Woods overall approach and thinking about the sport.



Arthur H.E. Wood of Glassel was sufficiently "well heeled" that he could indulge himself in the best that the sport had to offer. By fishing the Cairnton beat of the Aberdeenshire Dee, at the time, the first main holding water for fish running in from the sea, he was in an excellent position in which to pursue his passion. He was a man that liked to excel in everything that he did and his salmon fishing was no exception. Some will say that having unlimited access to possibly the most prolific beat in the country at the time had a lot to do with his outstanding success and perhaps it did, however Wood was without doubt an innovator and a thinker and it was by approaching the sport with these qualities that helped establish him as one of the "greats". His catch record book regardless of ones thoughts on the

matter makes fascinating reading.

As mentioned previously a great deal has written about his controlled drag techniques, but not much has been written about his other practices and thoughts on the sport. Wood knew that of all things in salmon fishing the water height was of the utmost importance if any chance of sport was to be had. This was evident by the fact that he had a water height gauge installed in the study at Cairnton Lodge, so that the exact height of the river could be checked without leaving the house. When it came to water temperature Wood only gave much attention to it when it fell to around the 40 degree mark. Above this he was more concerned about the depth, clarity and speed of the water. In a reply to a letter from W.J. Barry concerning the successfully taking of fish early in the season with a greased line Wood wrote, "With the temperature at 38 degrees I should start by using a No 1 or No 2. If I failed to get one on that size, I should put on a much smaller until I get a kelt. Having got a kelt I should get a size larger and stick to it. As long as there is no cold wind, or if the wind, at any rate, is warmer than the water, the fish will come to the surface quite freely". This at first might seem like a strange approach, but if we accept that some kelts may resume feeding again when descending the river it makes a lot of sense. Then like today kelts were much more plentiful than spring fish, so what better way of finding the correct size of fly for the prevailing conditions, than fishing for a fish that had starting to regain its feeding habit after many months of fasting.

When it came to fly styles Wood preferred one with a solid wing and slim profile dressed on a single hook. When fishing during the summer he liked his flies to be as thin as possible, at times his flies were so worn and tattered that all that remained, and I quote " was a body and just two hairs as wings". Wood referred to his "well- worn" flies as Nymphs. These flies were tied on long- shanked light summer hooks, because he believed that they hooked and held the fish better. In correspondence Wood wrote " I use these long-shanked light summer hooks as the fish do not appear to take much notice of them and it enables one to have a small fly tied at one end of the shank and yet gives one a chance of getting a fair grip on the fish, as I find that the very small hooks with the fly tied on give no hold on the fish, and if at all freshly run you have no chance". How things have changed, because the style of fly that he developed has now passed favour by many of today's anglers, the majority preferring a more mobile hairwing pattern tied on either a small low water double or treble. Perhaps he had a point though regarding the hooking of fresh run fish. He favoured the long shank hook with the dressing up front because he believed that with a fly dressed on this type of hook he would hook more fish well back into the mouth. In saying this he only hooked about 50% of the fish that he rose. In April and May Wood while fishing at Cairnton hooked 336, killing only 179 of them, i.e. 53%. Possibly this is because Wood favoured feeding

slack line to a taking fish, a method that does not favour a largish hook with a wide gap, such that he used. During communication with Barry, Wood wrote about his anxiety and failure when it came to hooking and loosing fish. Both Barry and Crossley had far better success rates by fishing with doubles and by lifting against the pull of a taking fish. By doing this they killed a significantly higher proportion of fish raised than Woods. Incidentally when Barry fished at Careysville Cairnton and Tulchan with single hooks during March April and May of the same year he hooked 323 fish, killing 176 i.e. just a little over 54% of the total number hooked. It was after this incident that Barry started to favour the double hook. On hooking fish Wood wrote "you want to get the fly at the right angle for your fish to take it perfectly. This angle must be such that he takes the fly broadside on". He describes his technique further, ".I either try and keep a straight line as long as the fly is swimming at the right angle down and across the water, or by manoeuvring my line I try to keep three or four yards near the cast slack giving the fish the fly, so that he can go at least a foot or two before he feels the pull of the cast" " If I succeed in doing so I never have any pulls or plucks" This I find hard to believe, however he goes on, " Misses of course I am bound to have a few even with everything being all right, as the small fly can pass through the fish's mouth without hooking as no doubt it often lies flat in the mouth". This to me would seem to be a strong case for the use of double hooks, but as so often is the case when someone is set in their way of thinking it is very difficult to change their mind, especially in salmon fishing if their method has brought them past success.



When it came to fly patterns Wood did not believe that it made much difference, but considered size of much greater importance. On the subject he wrote " I am a great believer in, and as far as I can make out the only

important thing, is the size of the fly." His technique was to start fishing with a size 1 and change down in sizes until he discovered the size that the fish would take, and I quote, " In the Blue Charm and Silver Blue I take all sizes from a 1 to 12 and change till I get the size that the fish will take." Once when fishing with Hutton he was asked by him why he used these two flies, Woods reply was " I do not care what fly I use" Huttons remark to this was as follows "If you don't care, why not fish with the March Brown" (a fly not often used at the time for salmon fishing) Woods reply was " Very well, I will not fish with any other fly for the rest of the season". After this Wood fished for the rest of the season with nothing else and took the same number of fish as he would normally expect. Near the end of his life he only ever fished with a Blue Charm or March Brown.

Wood disliked double hooks believing that flies dressed on this style of hook was too bulky and would not fish in the proper fashion, but the main reason for not using them was because he liked to feed slack line to a taking fish. He thought that by using double hooks the fish would have more time to detect the fraudulent feathered creation and eject it before the current had time to pull it home. Although he did not like double hooks he was later persuaded by Barry to try them, because of the high number of fish that he was losing to the single hook and slack line technique. He did reconsider them and gave them a cast or two, but until his dying day he was still committed to the single hook fly. Barry was convinced that Woods fished with a larger fly than he thought, because Wood used Hardy Low Water types, which were bigger than the ordinary standard hooks of the day. In a letter dated 23rd March 1924 to Barry, Wood wrote, that a Hardy no 8 single low-water- hook fly "as a mere midget". While Barry considered a low-water no 8 made " a considerable show in the water". Two great anglers with a completely different view about the same size of hook. When it came to fishing with droppers, there is only one recorded incident, it occurred on the evening of the 30th April 1931. Wood recorded a catch of six fish on the dropper out of a total of eleven taken. He believed that a salmon would always rise and take the smallest of the flies. This was something that Barry could not accept, because in his experience he constantly took fish on a large dropper fly, and used it to great advantage.

When it came to followers, i.e. fish that follow the fly but for some reason decided not to take Wood wrote, " In all my experiences I can, I think, say that I have never had more than 10 fish follow". This seems to me to be a remarkable low number of followers considering the fact that it is now commonly accepted that we are much more likely to encounter a following fish than one that will actually take. I for one find 10 an extraordinary low number for a beat that held such large stocks of fish. On the same subject Wood wrote," Your remark about your ghillie telling you the fish had followed your fly across the stream. I cannot say I have often had this happen to me, but in the early days it happened more often than it does

now; in fact I can almost say that I do not have this happen more than once in a year and I put down the cause of this following of their fly to the fact that the fly has never been presented properly to the fish and therefore is suspicious and not certain if it is safe to take the fly.----- So I think the whole fault of the fish following the fly is that is badly presented and has made the fish suspicious". He may have a point in some cases, however I cannot accept this as the main reason for the majority of fish following and not taking. However dare I suggest that what Woods was really saying was that he very rarely if ever presented his flies badly!

Shortly after Woods took the fishing at Cairnton lodge he had all the old jetties rebuilt as well as adding some new ones. This was for two reasons, first he did not like to wade, and second he thought that by being above the water he could see his flies passage across the pool and therefore control it better. By fishing from these vantage points he could see every movement of the fish and fly in the crystal clear waters of the Dee and it is because of this that a lot of people have interpreted his style wrongly. Many believe that all or the majority of fish which came to Woods flies broke the surface with a classic head and tail rise, because Woods wrote about seeing salmon rise and take his flies when fishing the greased line. This is certainly so, he did see them rise to his flies, but many of the salmon that rose to his flies did not break the surface, they were merely seen to rise through the water due to vantage point of where he was fishing from, a jetty.

Regardless of whether one admires Wood and his practices or not one thing is certain his place in angling history is secure, because if nothing else he was a thinking angler, something that there are far to few of these days. He was a man that was in the right time, fishing the right place, with some right ideas!.