

TROUT & SALMON

THE VOICE OF GAME-FISHING SINCE 1955

WIN
AN ASQUIT
SALMON RO
PLUS Introducing
all-new G. Loom
range, p131

After the Mayfly

Solving fly-fishing's most ticklish puzzle

**WHEN
THE HEAT
IS ON**

The rule of thirds
on small stillwater

12

**NEW RIVER
TROUT RODS
TESTED**

Shannon salmon

A journey through
the pools of an unsung
Irish beat

AUGUST 2021 £4.75 ON SALE JUNE 24-JULY 21

08 >



IDENTITY CRISIS

What constitutes fly-fishing in the modern world? asks Simon Cooper



WE ARE ALL FLY-FISHERS. RIGHT?

Whether we tie on a Squirmy Wormy or a Blue-winged Olive. Whether we elegantly cast a three-weight rod, a nymph on a whip, or slap a six-inch fly into chummed ocean water attached to a 15-weight with a butt the thickness of a wrist. We are all equal in the eyes of whatever god looks over fly-fishing.

Or are we? Are we kidding ourselves? Has fly-fishing turned down a path that has largely transformed itself from imitative artfulness to crass creations that lure rather than deceive? Or maybe fly-fishing, like beauty, is simply in the eye of the beholder?

I ask these questions of you because, with my old pal Charles Jardine, we have recently held the debate entitled *When is a fly not a fly?* on Zoom and subsequently via YouTube and The Fishing Cast podcast. With many hundreds of contributions, and hours of chat, I can definitively tell you the answer: there is no answer. But I can tell you the three essential conundrums that exercised most of the conversations: casting, realism and rules.

I think we were all agreed that fly-fishing required some degree of casting. So, does Tenkara, with a fixed length of line and no reel, make the grade? I think not. Euro-nymphing or Czech-nymphing, both of which require super-long leaders (think 18ft plus) and heavily weighted nymphs are at best on the cusp; it strikes me as being not much more than trotting with a nymph. The International Game Fishing Association, who police fly-fishing records are definitive; you need to cast. Catch a world record brown trout trolling a fly behind a boat on Lough Corrib and it will not count.

But leaving aside the niceties of presentation, does the term “fly-fishing” demand the imitation of a real insect. Now, the modern-day founding father of fly-fishing Frederick Halford would certainly say so.

Skues, the man who gave us the nymph, would demur. A nymph, he would say is simply a soon-to-be-fly. But, as someone astutely pointed out during the debate, the nymph may later become a fly, like an egg may become a bird and subsequently be able to fly... an egg can't fly, so it's not a bird, it's an egg. Sorry to say, if we are to treat evolution as truth, nymphing decidedly fails the realism test.

Unless, of course, the goalposts of fly-fishing have been moved so far apart as to define the imitation of anything that a game fish might possibly ever eat — *eg* an ova or a small fish. Which brings us in turn to salmon fishing. We all know salmon don't eat in freshwater so surely all salmon flies are lures? If that were an essay question, the next word would be discuss.

The one thing on which we were all agreed was rules: stick to them. Breaking them, or even breaking the spirit of the rules, is like cheating at patience. Utterly pointless. Let's face it: if you were fishing to eat, fly-fishing would rarely be the first-choice method. In fishing with a fly, we are narrowing the goalposts; we know there are easier ways of catching a fish but for reasons of sport, tradition or perhaps sheer cussedness we choose to take the path more difficult.

That, to my mind, is what makes fly-fishing special. Some might term this elitism. Others plain daft. But it is a truth I hold dear. ■

Simon Cooper is managing director of Fishing Breaks (fishingbreaks.co.uk) the leading chalkstream fishing specialists. He is author of Life of a Chalkstream and The Otters' Tale.