

The Intelligence of a Fish

We have been in business for about ten years. In those ten years we have done about 60 shows. Some of the shows were well attended (New Jersey, for example, drew 8,000-10,000 in three days). Throughout all of these shows I started to pick up opinions about the intelligence of fish. Some anglers think they have zero brains, zero senses, and are just plain dumb. Other anglers believe that there is some intelligence in a fish but they never really elaborated what they meant by that statement. There were some in the crowds that felt just like I do that fish are very intelligent and you have to bring your “A Game” every time to hook a fish. There is merit behind every anglers thought and here is my rationale.

Many of the anglers I spoke to Back East were dealing with hatchery fish. Not all rivers or streams are stocked, but most include hatchery fish. No wonder their thoughts on the intelligence of fish was different than mine. I rarely chase trout in stalked ponds or rivers so I have very little to justify their stance. These anglers were able to tie just about any fly on and have a day of fun. This sounds a heck of a lot different from the “Ranch” on the Henry’s. There was a common denominator in all the conversations: The fish out west have PhDs. Here is my case in point.



I fished last summer on the Henry’s below the Ashton Dam. My buddy and I stumbled on a massive pod of feeding fish. There were some gigantic fish in the bunch. At first sight I couldn’t see anything as to what they were eating; only thing I knew is they were adult biting. Upon closer examination it was a tiny little yellow mayfly that had the fish going totally bonkers. The hatch was a Pseudo (Psycho) and the closest fly I had on me was

a #22 PMD No Hackle. The Pseudo was a little smaller but my imitation was pretty spot-on for the bug. My No Hackle was spot-on color-wise and the silhouette was perfect. I never even had a fish come to the fly. I put it right on the heads of some of the fish and yet they paid no attention. The wing color on my No Hackle was dark, the exact opposite of the real bug. It made little difference that I had 25-30 targets in range and yet not one of them would eat my bug. The fish could identify that my fly was not real. The wings were way too dark and the fish knew that and treated it like dirt. The hatch lasted one hour and in that hour I landed one 13-inch fish. This pod of fish was intelligent to their environment.

Last summer I took a trip to the “O” and found myself right in the middle of a gigantic PMD hatch with hundreds of duns floating the feeding lanes of fish. There were hundreds of feeding fish throughout my run. A PMD Convertible #18 hooked a mass of fish, PMD Comparadun #18 hooked a mass of fish, PMD Parachute #18 hooked some fish, but the PMD No Hackle hooked zero fish and not one fish false took it. During this hatch and because it was explosive, I had a chance to really test out my theory on the appropriate wing color. The Comparadun tied with

goose CDC, and the Convertible tied with cinnamon bear were spot on to the naturals. My No Hackles on the other hand had dark wings and the fish knew it right away. The fish on the "O" treated my offering literally like dirt and after messing around with that fly and not hooking the mass of feeders that were out in front of me I put it away. I didn't just try one, I tried several and in different sizes. The fish just didn't like the offering. When I switched back over to a Convertible the fish came right back with zero hesitation and zero false takes. It had nothing to do with my deliveries, approaches, or basic skills. It was all about my fly that the fish had absolutely dialed.



When you are chasing fish out west and I don't care if it is Utah, Wyoming, Montana, Colorado, Idaho, or Oregon, the fish demand perfection. They are fully in tune to their environment and they know exactly what is going on subsurface and top. They have the utmost intelligence and should be treated as such every time you hit the river. If you are a tier, spin your bugs with the most acute colors right down to gnat's you know what. If you buy your flies, be very specific and sift through the bins and make sure you pick out the most accurate flies that you can find. The fish will demand this. Don't waste your time like I did on two separate trips because my flies were a shade off of normal. If you don't know what an actual species should look like, walk the river's edge and collect samples. Nothing will get you closer to the truth than a natural in your hand.

If you are looking to hook the biggest baddest fish in the drink start thinking like the fish and give it some credit for its thoughts. If you're only out to hook the little guys in all the runs just keep doing what you are doing because it is working for you. Because catch and release, I like to see the "Beaver" in my net and that is why I approach every river the same way. Fish have brains, senses, and are always aware of their environment especially when it comes to the food they're about to eat.