



THE BROOK BULLHEAD

by Dr. Simon Wright

I have the privilege and pleasure of fishing a Cheshire stream that is packed with sizeable trout, and equally, sizeable challenges in how to catch them. That stream nestles within the Cheshire Countryside as it carves its way through the outer edges of South Manchester and Cheshire for about five miles. This very attractive stream on an old estate is home to an association which this year celebrates its one hundred and fortieth anniversary, and puts it amongst the oldest of fly fishing clubs. Sightings of leaping salmon have occurred further downstream and scientific studies have occurred to trace migratory trout.

To date, no sea running migratory fish have been either seen or caught on our brook, but the fishery does support a good head of Brown Trout and a variety of coarse fish with Gudgeon, Stone Loach and Bull Heads in substan-

tial numbers and size. There are also stocked rainbow and blue trout each season to keep sagging spirits alive when the browns can be difficult, but the very special aspect of the brook is its 'migratory' browns. These special fish actually migrate from the brook to still water through connecting streams and pack on weight by eating all manner of fish and crustaceans found in the meres and lakes that they visit. These fish can reach some phenomenal sizes and brown trout in excess of five pounds are regularly caught each season, but perhaps unusually although being very young in age, when they return to the brook they predominantly continue their cannibalistic habit. Fish of around six to seven pounds are caught and indeed the record brown is currently 7 lb 1 oz on this amazing little water. Greater leviathans lurk beneath the pretty surroundings in the depths, but tempting them can occasionally be both a test of will and endurance.

The Brook is packed full of natural food, and shrimp, caddis and other fly life are abundant alongside the myriad of small fish, this is effectively a trout's heaven. Despite a predominantly sandy bed, intermittent gravel and weed beds have allowed natural fly such as Yellow Sally, Blue Wing Olive and Mayfly to increase and this position has been further improved by the general husbandry of the fishery and a fly board system.

The fishing on the Brook can best be described as "rough stream" fishing and walking along its banks can be a real delight where the sight of hares, kingfishers and buzzard are common. A highly successful - though generally little practiced method for the wilier resident browns is upstream nymphing, and those who do practice this method are frequently rewarded with good fish. A deftly placed dry fly can also bring results, and often this is a "speculative" dry fly even when a rise isn't that evident. However, because many aspects of the natural food are sub surface, or river-bed dwelling, that is most

often where you will find the fish. In order to maintain as natural a habitat as possible with shade and shelter for the fish, and retain the challenge for the angler, bushes and trees have been allowed to remain over many favoured pools, some of which possess long and fabled histories. This policy led to the evolution of the most commonly practised method of fishing that became known as the "The Brook Drift". This is akin to angling alchemy on this fishery; this skilfully well practiced method will produce trout of memorable proportions.

The Brook Drift method involves the paying out of line under the overhangs of a sheltered trouty haunt, with a heavy, yet realistically tied food imitation on the end. Then it is retrieved with the variety and skill of the fisher. Done properly the resultant wallop is pure joy! Of course, there is a little bit of luck involved, but the more that you practice, the luckier you become.



In the last decade The Brook has tended to 'buck the trend' in the decline of fly life, as Mayfly and other up-winged flies seemed to increase their numbers where other fisheries have seen a decline in their fly life. This had the effect of producing some fine rises, usually at dusk but still the main feeding has occurred either just under the surface, or towards the bottom of the stream. In fact, because the upstream nymph method is not widely used, and the rises to surface fly occurring at dusk, most of our fish are caught below the surface and this applies equally to brown and rainbow trout.

Last month the Editor referred to this phenomenon elsewhere, and fish in many streams are now predominantly caught, sub surface. Elsewhere this may be because of a decline in surface fly, but this is not the case at The Brook, but the masses of sub surface food has generated a predominantly sub surface feeding habit by the trout who will seek out the easiest meal.

In 2005 The Brook Fly Fishers commissioned a scientific survey of the stream and a component of that was the electro-fishing of the stream. The volume and quality of the small fish captured during the exercise was staggering. Gudgeon, of probably record proportions were caught, so too, bullheads and stone loach in numbers that could not be ignored as significant and plentiful, food items for our trout. All this drove me to the reference books, and my fly tying bench, to design a fly for the Brook and attempt to emulate the fishy larder that the trout enjoy. I looked for fish fry patterns and eventually came upon Dave Whitlock's

Sculpin, a pattern designed for stream fishing in the USA and one with a proven record of success. I fiddled and tweaked the pattern as fly dressers do and came up with two that I use, and have used, to very good effect to imitate the bullhead and the stone loach.

Both the bullhead and stone loach are bottom dwellers and that is where the trout find them. The bullhead particularly scurries and jerks amongst the sand and detritus of the river bed and I wanted a pattern that could do just that, and in the process, kick up a little silt as it did so, just like the real thing. To that end, I wanted a pattern that would drive its head and shoulders into the sand and silt without getting caught. In addition to the Sculpin pattern I 'kicked about' various Muddler patterns, as the Muddler seemed to emulate the shape of the bullhead especially, but less so the stone loach.

The pattern then began to emerge as a hybrid of both the Sculpin and the Muddler, but it still lacked the ability to drive itself into the silt as the bullhead does, so I researched a little more. I wanted a pattern that would "kick up the dust" on the river bed and give itself away to the cautious, if hungry large trout, just like the living model. In my research I remembered an older fisher who I knew as a young man. He used 'keel flies' to good effect for sea trout, and I tracked down some suitable hooks and began to experiment with keel hooks. These hooks allow for the weight to be placed at the shoulder and head and became just perfect for my purposes, and the Keel Hook Sculpin Muddler evolved.

The success of this pattern was very good, while not surprising, and many large, and indeed ordinary sized, trout have succumbed to it. I have settled on two patterns, one for bullhead - predominantly Muddler style - and one for stone loach and gudgeon, predominantly Sculpin style, so I have actually taken the styles from elsewhere and just changed the proportions and colours to suit my purposes.

The key to making this work is the weighting at the shoulder and head, as it drives the imitation into the sand. There are occasional drawbacks as you can get caught under a log and lose a fly, which after taking up to an hour to make it is a pain, but all of that annoyance and anguish is abated when you catch a five pound fish, or more, on one of these keel flies.

Fishing them can be tricky, for if you try to cast these patterns in a conventional manner you will surely come to grief. Patience and stealth is the way to make them work. I swing the bait into the desired spot and let it sink towards the river bed. If need be then pay out some line in a 'B' Drift style until it arrives at the spot you want it to be. Then, leave it there. Sit down and rest a while. That is the hard bit because the temptation to rush to action is great, but ruinous.

Stay alert, but not active.

That is, be prepared for a trout snatching your bait, but do not move it yet. Let the bait sink into the silt like a natural and let the current of the stream perhaps gently push it to one side or the other.

After a while lift the rod and 'tweak' the bait in a small darting action. It is often on this first deliberate movement that a fish will attack from deep holes, undercuts in the bank or a weed bed, but if not, repeat the process through the pool. In-between each episode let the bait settle again on the river bed. You are thereby imitating the natural quite well. Takes are unambiguous, bearing in mind that a large trout will feed infrequently thereby restricting the need for unnecessary movement, and when it does so, it will do with the purpose of securing its prey.

In deep water you will not see your bait, and the same can be said for coloured water, but the fish will see it and I have had rods literally double over in an instant when a fish has struck. The contrast is immense, steady sedate fishing, whilst thinking about the gentle movement of the bait, employing stealth and purpose to bang' intense mayhem as you begin to battle a large fish. It is both an exciting and exhilarating form of fishing.

The line rig that I use for all of this is a floating #5 with a Roman Moser sinking leader and approximately 5ft of tippet. That keeps the bulk of the line where I can see it, while still helping the lure anchor itself where I want it. You can extend the length of the tippet, but the longer the leader the trickier it can be to place the lure exactly where you want it.

THE BULLHEAD MUDDLER



Hook: Mustad Salt Water Keel Hook - 79666s Size #4

Thread: Any strong dark coloured thread, suitable for spinning deer hair.

Weight: Lead wire wound from half way down the body up to [and including] the shoulder of the hook (illustrated below). For a heavier water version I sometimes double the coverage.



Tail: Black / Brown Chick-a-Bou feather for the first part of the tail.
This is tied in a horizontal plane to the hook and allows it to fold and expand in the current and looks very life like.

Body: Rabbit - Winter Coat, spun heavily, tightly and reasonably thickly.
Top / Bottom of entire body - Brown Rabbit Zonkers, ribbed with silver oval tinsel.
Tie these zonkers to the same length as the tails of the Chick-a bou to form the full tail.
These will be in the vertical plane to the hook.
When wet, this will move with the current, up and down.

1st Collar: Light Tan Sculpin Wool.

2nd Collar: Chestnut Brown Deer Hair spun and left trailing over the body, but partly clipped at the front

Eyes: Lead dumbbell eyes, or similar- optional.

Head: Spun Black deer hair clipped.

THE STONE LOACH



Hook: Mustad Salt Water Keel Hook - 79666s Size #6

Thread: Any strong dark coloured thread, suitable for spinning deer hair.

Weight: Lead wire wound from half way down the body up to [and including] the shoulder of the hook - see opposite.

Tail: Rabbit Zonker.

Body: Rabbit – Winter Coat, mixed with green “lite brite” and tightly spun
Top of entire body – Brown Rabbit Zonkers, ribbed with silver oval tinsel.

Gill Cover: Grouse wing hackle at either side .

Collar: Light Brown Deer Hair spun and left trailing under the body, but partly clipped at the front

Eyes: [optional] Lead dumbbell eyes, or similar.

Head: Sculpin hair in Light Tan, spun and then clipped.

These are “ugly” looking patterns, but the entire effect is achieved when the patterns are wet. The body, the sculpin wool etc., all soaks up water helping to make it sink, but they also seem to fill out to make a highly realistic silhouette. The lightness of the tail and the trailing deer hair sways and pulses in the current and the overall desired effect is of life within the pattern. You just have to inject that jerky, darting motion once it is in position on the bottom of the stream. Experiment, practice – enjoy.

For information about the fishing and availability of season rods on 'The Brook',
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