

# Fishing Like A Predator

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*The ability can't be taught,  
but you can develop it.*

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KEN MIYATA

**A** GOOD FISHERMAN thinks like a fish. If you've ever searched for precisely the right shade of dubbing for that Sulfur Dun, if you've ever tried to decide whether a big brown trout was taking duns or emergers during a hatch, or if you've ever tried to excite a finning bass into striking a deerhair bug, you probably agree that there is truth in this simple statement. But it is only a partial truth, one with the potential to mislead as much as enlighten. It is an axiom that must be interpreted rather than accepted at face value.

Trout are finicky and sophisticated, bass are belligerent but smart. Fishing writers over the years have bestowed human characteristics on gamefish. This can be a useful literary device, but it obscures one central fact: Fish are fish and anglers are people. Fish don't think—they react. They react in one way to food, in other ways to possible mates and competitors, and in other ways to potential predators. These reactions are largely innate, the product of long evolutionary histories, although there is no question that fish are also capable of some learning. But fish simply don't think, at least not in the same sense that we do, and thinking like a fish is really a metaphor for understanding their basic biology and natural history. To be effective, you must think like fish, but you cannot think as a fish.

The danger in thinking like a fish does not lie in transferring human needs and motivations to a lower vertebrate. You can become a competent angler if you learn to think like a fish. You'll learn a great deal if you take the time to observe your quarry—what types of water are best for holding and for feeding, why fish may sometimes choose to feed selectively, and what flies may work when there is no apparent activity. But if you want to go beyond competence, if you want to become a truly skilled fly fisher, there are better models to seek in nature than

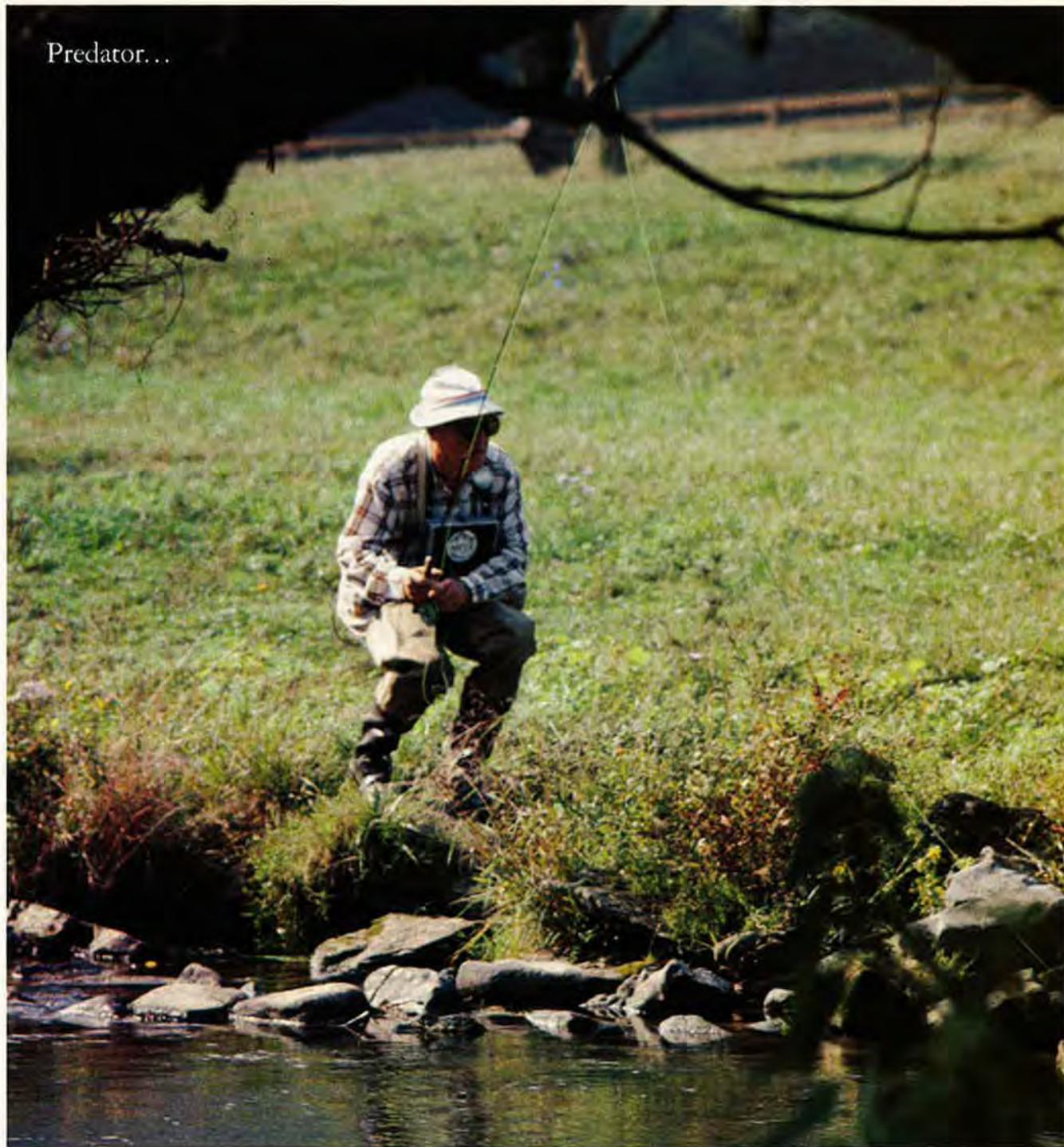
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KEN MIYATA drowned on Oct. 14, 1983 while fishing the Big Horn River in Montana.

*Eyes riveted to the water and to his target fish, the predatory angler fishes with a single purpose—to catch fish.*

TOM MONTGOMERY PHOTO

Predator...



JOHN RANDOLPH PHOTO

Like a kingfisher, George Harvey wastes little energy in stalking trout.

the fish themselves. A kingfisher, for example, can teach you a great deal about fishing if you take the time to observe.

A kingfisher will find a convenient perch overlooking a shallow reach of water. It will sit there patiently, eyes glued to the water for signs of food. When it spots a small fish in an exposed position it swoops from its perch to grab its hapless prey. A kingfisher is an example of what biologists call a "sit-and-wait" predator. It hunts efficiently because it wastes little energy in searching for its prey. A kingfisher must choose its perch carefully, however, or it may go hungry and even in the best of

conditions, it may take a long time for it to capture enough fish to satisfy its needs.

Another flying fisher, the osprey, takes a different approach to fishing. Ospreys are "searchers." They hunt on the move, flying slowly and scanning lots of water until they find their prey. They expend more energy in the hunt than a kingfisher, so if they choose to hunt at the wrong time they may use up more energy than they gain. On the other hand, they can cover more water and they may catch more fish in less time.

Despite their contrasting strategies, kingfishers and ospreys approach fishing with a single-minded intensity



TOM MEADE PHOTO

With predatory intensity, Valentine Atkinson took three trout in this Pennsylvania limestone stream.

that characterizes efficient predators. Their eyes are riveted to the water—they know precisely what they're looking for and their attention doesn't lag until they find it. There is a game of life and death, and the fate of both predator and prey hangs in the balance. Our game of fly fishing is played for less serious stakes—if not for the prey at least for the predator—but the very best fly fishers always remind me of efficient predators.

A truly skilled angler is an efficient fish predator. His predation may be symbolic—even if he eats his fish his *survival* is not dependent on the kill—but all the best fly fishers show a singleness of purpose that even a wild predator might envy. These anglers approach the water with an intensity that rarely relaxes. It is this predatory intensity, this singleness of purpose, that sets these anglers apart from the crowd.

A predatory angler is easy to spot. Many anglers make a ritual of rigging up their rods, making sure that everything is ready before they move to the water. A predatory angler rarely has patience for this. He either keeps his rod rigged or partially rigged in the car, or he rigs it up as he walks to the stream. But this seeming impatience to get started disappears as soon as he hits the water. No matter how familiar he is with a piece of water he will take the time to look before he fishes. And once he starts fishing his eyes will rarely leave the water. He watches it when he talks to his companions, he watches it when he eats, and he will try to watch it even when he relieves himself in the bushes. Some even use binoculars to scan the water, trying to spot fish a bend or two upstream before they make their move on nearby fish.

A good fly fishing school can teach you the basic skills you need to become a fly fisherman. Thanks to improved equipment and instruction, neophytes can walk out of these schools with casting abilities that would put many veteran anglers to shame. It takes longer to learn the

niceties of presentation, the subtleties of reading water and the details of streamside entomology, but a diligent student can learn a great deal by reading the superb how-to articles and books flooding the sport. If you couple book and classroom knowledge with sufficient experience on the water, you will be well on your way to competence.

### Cultivating Senses

THE PREDATORY INTENSITY that distinguishes gifted fly fishers from others can't be taught. I used to think that it couldn't be learned, that it might be a part of the genetic hardware we're saddled with at conception, but I've come to modify this simplistic sociobiological notion. While I still doubt that this predatory intensity can be learned in the conventional sense, I now think there are ways in which you can cultivate your latent predatory attitude.

The one concrete skill that distinguishes the competent fly fisher from the gifted is the ability to see fish. Anyone can see rising fish in flat pools or on calm ponds, but even experienced fly fishers often miss the subtle rises of large trout in fast currents. Even if you know what to expect and where to look they are easy to miss. Anglers fishing the autumn *Baetis* hatches on the lower Madison, often are oblivious to the delicate creases at the current edges that hide large trout, casting instead to the 12- to 16-inch fish that make more conspicuous rises. And they are good fishermen—the less experienced may be completely unaware of the surface activity because they have been told that streamers are the best bet on such large water in the fall.

But spotting a rising trout is a simple matter compared to spotting trout that aren't rising. It's no accident that trout are difficult to see from the surface and it's no

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coincidence that wild fish are more difficult to spot than hatchery fish. The wild golden trout of the Sierras may appear gaudy in the hand, but against the pale golden gravel of their ancestral streams they are ethereal wraiths, while the hatchery-bred golden palomino trout stick out like beacons against the dark slate beds of Pennsylvania trout streams. Natural selection in the form of flying predators weeds out the conspicuous, and wild trout holding deep are never easy to see. You must learn to look *through* the water in order to see them.

It might be useful to list a few characteristics that most of the skilled fly fisherman I know share.

Most of them fish with the same equipment all the time. Art Lee used the same battered Scott rod last fall on the Henry's Fork that he uses on his home waters in the Catskills. Although fishing conditions were different, he was using similar flies, so sticking to the one outfit made sense. However, my friend Jack Gartside uses the same outfit to fish both gaint weighted streamers and delicate dry flies. He always uses a floating line, because "enough split shot on the leader will sink anything." This fidelity to certain tackle, I'm convinced, is no affectation. Different rod-line combinations have different feels, and it requires some thought to make the necessary adjustments. A skilled angler wants his tackle to respond as he expects it to.

One of the biggest obstacles in the path to becoming a skilled fisherman is the lure of exotic waters. Who among us hasn't been tempted to venture to wilderness waters where giant fish abound? This can be a dangerous trap, however, because easy fishing prevents you from growing as an angler.

You need only watch the grizzlies that congregate along Alaskan rivers during salmon runs to understand why this is so. They are obviously amateurs at the fishing game, yet they succeed because fish are so abundant. Skill has nothing to do with success.

Predatory intensity can be a fleeting thing. There are times when it stays with me all day, but more often than not it waxes and wanes through the day. How often have you enjoyed your best fishing at the beginning and end of your fishing day? I used my computer to check my fishing logs back

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through the 1981 season. In 172 of the 281 fishing sessions, I caught my first trout within 15 minutes of when I first wet my line. I'm convinced that increased concentration—sharper predatory intensity if you will—is the cause of this phenomenon. When I begin fishing my expectations are at their highest and I can give each cast and each drift my fullest attention, not yet deadened by failure or jaded by success.

Learning to fish with a predatory intensity does not necessarily mean that you'll enjoy your fishing more. You may catch more fish and you may catch larger fish. A few years ago I did both. I used to stare at a tiny dry fly on the big, sun-drenched flats of the Henry's Fork from six in the morning to nine at night, so intent on the fishing that I often forgot to eat. This could go on for weeks, and at the end of each day I would crawl back to my car, hungry, dehydrated, and sun-burned. I enjoyed myself immensely at the time, scarcely noticing the headaches and blurred vision. I no longer find much pleasure in these marathons. I rarely fish such long hours anymore—I like to break up the day, eat my lunch on the water, and talk to friends.

The predatory intensity I've discussed may not sound like much fun and it certainly isn't necessary to become a contented angler. Among the people I enjoy fishing with most are a few tremendously gifted anglers and others who are gloriously inept, but I can't say whether one group enjoys the sport more than the other. I know that I enjoy the company of both equally.

My friends who don't fish well simply pack more pleasure into each fish. And I've noticed they spend as much time looking at the trees and hills.

Basic skills—casting, reading the water, streamside entomology, and presentation—can be taught, but you must learn how to fish like a predator. Along the way you may pass through many bear-like stages, but if you have the desire and the drive, these interludes will be brief and you may someday learn to fish like a kingfisher or osprey. Still, fly fishing is a complex, endlessly fascinating game, and there are many paths you can take to reach a high level of competence. And unlike real predators, we always have the option of enjoying our failures as much as our successes.

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