

Winter Evening Report

Peter Cockwill – 19/11/15



Peter Cockwill is a well-known contributor to Trout Fisherman but I was surprised that it extended back over 30 years. He has managed a trout fishery for 20+ years and owns the largest fly-only fishing shop in Surrey. On top of that he teaches casting, arranges corporate days, and escorts trips to various parts of the world. What more can we ask of a speaker?

The plan was to talk about grayling experiences in Alaska, trout fishing in Patagonia and to finish with a question and answer session.

Peter's passion is the Grayling, which, because of his location, is mainly pursued on the Test and Itchen without the aid of Czech nymphing, French leaders, Tenkara or any other of the modern developments. He mentioned the distinctive aroma of the grayling which some might think resembles cucumber and, indeed, down under the grayling is often called the Cucumber Mullet. However, *Thymallus* is derived from the Latin for *thyme smell*. Take your pick! It took Peter a long time to catch a 2 pounder in the UK which eventually succumbed 12 years ago.

Grayling are relatively slow growing and will only reach 2lbs after 8 years. Thankfully, now that they are no longer persecuted, the chance of a fish attaining 2 pounds is that much greater providing they can avoid predators such as cormorants.

There are quite a few sub-species of grayling. The European grayling has a pear shaped eye but most noticeably an underslung lip. The Arctic grayling shares the sail like dorsal fin but boasts equal length jaws and also teeth. Yes - teeth, which means that they are carnivores and can be caught on a spinner (and fish have been caught on a tube fly intended for salmon). Although the Arctic Grayling is very dark coloured, Peters slides showed (presumably not Photoshopped!!) they may also sport yellow, green, blue, and red tails: the pelvic fins are frequently striped.



He set out to catch a huge grayling and initially chose the Great Bear Lake in the Northwest Territories of Canada as the most promising venue. It is an H shaped water with a length of 120 **miles** and widths varying from 25-110 **miles** and straddles the Arctic Circle. Consequently it was only open for fishing for ~4 months of the year unless you fancy drilling through 10 feet of ice! The

pressure of ice produces a lake bed covered in flattened pebbles. The water is very transparent and it is possible to see down to 40 feet.

Anglers normally seek out the Lake Trout as the World record of 72 lbs came from its depths. The largest Grayling was 5lb 12 oz caught from the inlet where the River Katseyedie runs into the lake. Was this the slide where the fish barely looked a 3 pounder? Peter may well have shown us pictures of the fish he caught but I only recall the other wild life on the shore line, including caribou, bears, bison and wolves.

He swapped venues to Nome* which is on the Alaskan coast, facing Russia, and famed as the centre of the gold rush in the 19C. Some mining relics still remain. It took 3 trips to finally sus out that he had to visit the area in late August to allow the Grayling to bulk up by eating the remains of pink salmon which had run the river system to spawn. The technique was to drift down the river and camp overnight. A foam skater fly deceived the fish and raised the Alaskan record from 4 lb 13 oz to 5 lb 1 oz. The fish was measured at 21½". It was interesting to learn that scale readings were not an accurate means of measuring the age of some fish. A bit of research showed that a combination of dyeing, tagging and dispatching was necessary to perform a measurement on an ear bone. It was reckoned that the record fish was probably 35 years of age! Out of interest the UK record is 4 lbs 4 oz from the Frome. Reports of a 4 lb 10 oz fish from Scotland have not been verified. Even less likely are reports of 7+ lbs fish from Europe.

After a short break we went to the opposite end of America (not many people realise that it took early man 12,000 years to do this journey) to Patagonia. Therein lays Lake Strobel which is now popularly referred to as Jurassic Lake and the home of monster rainbow trout. Size-wise, the water is a mere 10 x 8 **miles** but frequently strafed by fierce winds which deliver

formidable waves to the shore. It is possible to find sheltered areas and according to videos I have seen (<http://www.toddmoencreative.com/strobel/>) , casting across the waves can be productive.

The trout were introduced by accident, allegedly from an abandoned fish farm in the only feeder stream. The growth rate of the fish was phenomenal thanks to a high density of shrimp, daphnia and snail in the lake. The average weight was 6-8 lbs but 20 pound fish appear to be commonplace. Their life span was in excess of 12 years. The condition of the fish was superb. The fish apparently cruise around with their mouths open taking in food rather in the manner of whales. Fly patterns were not too important according to Peter but they must be on a decent sized hook, say a size 6 Kamazan 175 tied to a 15 lbs leader. Imitations must not be stripped but retrieved with a steady figure of eight. The fish are noted for their powerful, jumping, extended runs, requiring the minimum of 150 yards of backing.

The lake is surrounded by large white boulders and set in a barren lunar-like landscape, devoid of trees. It puts a different meaning to the word "wilderness". Summer in Patagonia corresponds to our January but even so a Christmas visit can be cool, after all, the lake is ~3000 ft above sea level. A trip to Strobel will set you back about £5000 for a week (plus a couple of days travelling at either end) but this does not include flights.





Come the question and answer session, someone in the audience suggested that catching the stew pond reared trout in lakes such as Dever Springs was easy peasy. (area 3 or 4 acres!) Peter soon put him right, explaining how these huge fish patrol up and down the lake in full view and show no interest whatever in any kind of offering. I seem to remember that one frustrated angler was accused of using a heavily leaded "imitation" and snagging the trout as it passed by. I did not realise that brown trout were also grown on to the same huge sizes as rainbows and have been for the past 3 or 4 seasons. Peter said it was more difficult to do but I noted some magnificent specimens in the latest issue of Trout Fisherman. At one time, success at Avington was attributed to selective breeding but I am not sure that this is the case at Dever as the brownies were sourced from Scotland. Someone mentioned the fact that genetically modified salmon were recently cleared for sale in the US**. Possibly this technique may provide another route to large fish. However,

judging from what we had heard during the meeting, success in achieving great weight in the wild depends on a continuous source of nutritious food and conditions which favour a long life such as the absence of predators.

I am still smiling at the story Peter related about a comment he delivered to a member of one of his corporate groups who were waiting to go to lunch. Hurry up and land that fish or the hook will rust out!

Finally, Peter was clearly taken by the general bonhomie shown by the club both to himself and other members. He urged everyone to support the elected officials which I am sure we do in any case.

DGJ - Nov2015

Editor's notes – We would like to thank Peter for allowing us to use some of his personal photographs in this report.

Peter can be contacted at Albury Game Angling

* gold mining on a small scale is still happening in Nome. Further info on a reality TV series featuring this https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bering_Sea_Gold

** further information on GM modified Atlantic salmon <http://www.salmonnation.com/fish/gefish.html>