

Trout at the Top of the Country

The Upper Tees River in County Durham is not quite at the top of the country, it is however close to the Scottish border, and a very long way from Grafham. It is though close to the top of the country in the sense of being high up and way above the tree line, the North Pennines is a bleak and harsh but beautiful landscape of limestone and gritstone hills where all one may come across are sheep and the occasional intrepid hiker; and the adventurous angler.

The river is a strong run of rapid, peat stained water, full of boulders which can be treacherous for the unwary wader. Insect life in and around the water seems sparse. So how do fish manage to live and thrive there?



The boulder strewn river Tees

It was a surprise to be told that the river here has one of the highest densities of wild brown trout in England. And – not surprisingly – they are all hungry and eager to take a nice large dry fly.

So, with John Tyzack and Andy Cliffe, the author ventured up to the Upper Tees to try the fishing. A permit rate of £12/day was not considered excessive. After a drive along some estate roads and parking the car, a walk of 100 yards and the river is reached. Following advice, it was decided to trek further upstream: a 20-30 minute

walk which is easy, for the most part but does involve scrambling over rockfalls and boulders to get to the prime spots.

A stout staff is a necessity in this water if wading, although it can be easily fished from the bank as fish are often lying along the sides. A look at the river also illustrates what is meant by “pocket water”, which I had heard of but not properly understood. Cascading around the above and below water level obstacles, the water has still patches directly behind the rocks. The fish lie in these quieter waters, using minimal energy, watching keenly for food to pass by in the currents. Many of these streams show foam lines, where terrestrials and others get swept along. An adage for these situations is Foam=Food=Fish.



The author, wading carefully.

With the strong prevailing wind blowing head-on, casting is not easy. The method recommended, and which worked well, was to fish the duo, ie. a small beaded nymph with a bushy dry fly, such as sedge, on a 3” dropper about 18” above. The nymph does take the odd fish, however its main purpose is to carry the fly and stabilise it in the water. The cast is short, not more than a 10ft rod length, and drifts are short, a yard at the most.

Takes – and there are many of them – are rapid snatches; the fish have lightning quick reflexes and are feisty fighters which know how to use the currents and rocks before coming to the net. Many are small, maybe 8”, there are some twice this size, and a 2lb fish would be a prize. All are beautiful wild fish, typically with a darker back – presumably camouflage in peaty waters – and bright buttery bellies with red spots. There certainly is a good head of fish, looking for food, and once the technique is mastered double figures can be reached fairly quickly.



An Upper Tees brown.

The only unfortunate thing about this trip was that it was so close to the end of the season, in mid September, so with only a fortnight to go a return trip is unlikely. It is however definitely on the agenda for next season.

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