

TROUT IN BIG LAKES

by Malcolm Meintjies

An Awesome Introduction

My introduction to Lake Taupo took place on the 31st October 1983 at five o'clock on a dank misty morning. I could hardly see in front of my face as I was ushered into water so cold it took my breath away. Mercifully I was unaware of that which lay before me, but as the morning brightened, so the full import of Taupo Moana - the Sea of Taupo - hit me.

I stood alone, chest deep in the Waitahanui rip, casting into 240 square miles of water. If there was a trout in that expanse, I felt convinced that it was nowhere near my fly.

When one is accustomed to angling in comfortable dams seldom extending beyond single figure acreage, the cultural shock of the Taupos of the world can be considerable. Where indeed does one even start to fish when the water disappears into the distance with only a smudge on the horizon betraying the opposite bank.

I have been fortunate to have fished some of the world's great trout lakes. Perhaps I might share some of my experiences with you, with the thought in mind that, if you have ever felt lost and alone on a water of handsome proportions, then some of the lessons learned may be of interest. It matters not whether the water that seems prepossessing is a more than sizable farm dam, a reservoir such as Wemmershoek or the great Taupo itself.

Size is relative

No matter whether one is fishing that more than sizeable farm dam or a Taupo size lake, size is relative in that to that angler the water looks too big to handle. The greatest problem really lies in the mind set of the angler for it is likely that he will be overcome by the vastness of it all. We all know how much more confidence a favourite fly can conjure up and the same goes for angling as a whole. I have watched anglers, ignorant of their shortcomings, take home good trout simply because they believed it would be so.

I felt overwhelmed that day on Taupo. The fly appeared insignificant for surely no trout could see it? But see it they can and a whole lot better than you think. The battle I had was not that the water before me was Taupo (for Taupo's reputation goes before it) but the fact that I had no logical starting point and therefore no confidence.

The great secret

The first lesson I learnt about tackling massive waters is that the trout are not spread evenly. It is therefore of little use to saunter down to the water's edge in the hope that one spot will be as good as another.

Thus the next step is to break the water down into defined areas and even sub-areas until you no longer have to contend with a reservoir, but a much smaller part of that water which now has description. Once you have done this, your confidence should improve immeasurably if for no other reason than that you have done away with the psychological barrier of fishing blindly.

For example, look at the contours of the reservoir and classify those indentations into bays and promontories, dam walls and inflowing streams, cliff arcs and weedy shallows. The job, if done properly, will surprise you for, at the end of it all, you will probably once again have too much water to fish - but it will be logically fishable water.

In New Zealand, most of the bank fishing on the big lakes is done in the vicinity of inflowing and outflowing rivers. The most famous of these at Taupo are the Tongariro and Waitahanui rivers, but there are well over a dozen other smaller streams that enter the lake at various points and all of these are well-known trout holding areas. Substantial catches of rainbows take place prior to the spawning period when the upstream runs begin, but outside of this time, the cooler water and the oxygen contained in the current are sufficient to attract trout close in and the main danger is to underestimate how close they will lie. Many an angler wading in tactlessly has sworn to the ghostly shadows of rapidly retreating trout.

Bass anglers like to speak of "structure" and virtually any form of structure as mentioned above will be worth investigating. In many big reservoirs, another familiar apparition is the "drop off", where the bankside shallows fall away into deep water. In the early morning and evening, trout will venture into the shallows in search of food, but as the sun climbs, so they will tend to lie not far off in the deeper, colder water. Fishing a fly over the lip will often produce good fish.

Shallow bays in South African conditions are perfect for the simple reason that much of the food in an otherwise featureless lake is to be found here. Sub-surface weed beds with a bit of depth and cover are just what the doctor ordered. Wherever there is food, trout are never far away even though they may have moved into the cover or slipped into deeper water. A prime spot that I always look for is an area of deeper water adjacent to feeding shallows.

So take your favourite reservoir and analyse it in terms of its structure. The big lake will become a series of smaller entities and that territory will suddenly become much more familiar.

Some more observations

Depending on how big your reservoir is, the defined sub-segments may be permanent or variable and the time of the year may well play a part in determining just which short-list you should follow at the time.

I have mentioned weed-beds, which may not be present early in the season, but which might pop up after summer. Stream or river flows may be stronger at certain times than others. Perhaps after winter rains, the streams are still enthusiastic in early spring, but as summer draws on so the inflow slows to a trickle. The advantage that the trout sought in spring is no longer and the deeper water flanked by a convenient drop off is more productive. Subtle depths can be gauged by two simple

techniques. One is to observe the contours of the land behind one. This will give a good idea of what lies in front under the water. Secondly, a good pair of polaroids will betray shades of water colour - the deeper the hue, the deeper the water.

On a point of interest, trout do not need a huge expanse of deep water to escape to when the day becomes too bright and too warm. I have taken trout out of relatively small pockets no greater than the size of your bath. An old river bed may be no more than a couple of feet deeper, but that makes it no less useful. Even the tracks of an old rutted road leading into the water are worth looking at. Any sudden variation in depth should catch your interest and be noted down.

The factor of mobility

The angler's mobility on a big water is important and by this I do not just mean the ease by which he can move from one bank section to another by car. Mobility extends beyond this. Even a selected portion of a reservoir can be a large stretch of water and a boat (or float tube) allows one to move over widespread areas in search of fish. In the big western Irish lochs, few anglers venture out without a good boat and partner (or boatman) and success or failure can depend almost entirely on how the conditions are read.

I know that regulations may prevent boats from being used and this is a great pity, for the number of trout that can be taken from the shore is insignificant compared to the true potential of a lake to provide good angling. Such rules can even be counter-productive if breeding is possible in the streams running into the reservoir. It does not take long for breeding to outstrip the natural food supply and it is only a matter of years before the trout begin to lose condition and the size drops.

It is possible that even wading might be banned but, if not, a good pair of waders will come in extremely handy. I am an advocate of careful bankcraft in that, on the Eastern Transvaal and Natal waters I take the majority of my fish within 15 metres of the side. But on a big reservoir, the ability to cover water must be utilised to its fullest extent and this also means that long casting should be part of an angler's armoury. A productive area, whether it is a weed bed or drop off may be further out than the average caster can manage and an inability to reach the good water could well be the difference between success and failure. If you're going to challenge the big lakes, take the time to learn to cast a full line.

Techniques to ponder on

We have discussed the basics of analysing a lake with the object of distinguishing the more productive parts from featureless water. Each area will however have its own characteristics, thus tactics and techniques used should be aligned to the conditions that prevail. This means that anything from a floater through to a high density lead core shooting head will have to be considered if consistent catches are to be expected.

If you have to get down to really deep lying trout, the depth of the water will turn a light fast sinker into little more than an intermediate. Both in New Zealand and South America, most of the massive browns in particular are caught using lead core lines of 100 metres length and big heavy lures. On Lago Puyehue where the Rio Gol-Gol enters the lake, I was able to do well even against spin fishers, only for the reason that I had a nine weight lead core shooting head and an eighteen inch leader. The trout, a mere ten to fifteen feet below me in the swirling current, could not be reached by other means. And some of these trout are caught 60 feet down by trolling. In fact, reading back in some of the old Piscators, there are reports of Wemmershock trout being netted by the authorities at depths of 60 feet.

This brings me to the often crucial aspect of depth in a large reservoir. The level at which the trout on the whole lie (or feed) is important simply because to find trout where excessive depths exist is obviously harder than in dams where most of the angling takes place in water no deeper than ten feet. Depth of presentation is a critical factor and although there are times when trout will move some distance to a fly, it has been my experience on many more occasions that if the depth of presentation is not correct, then trout will not bother to move to the artificial.

On the shallower farm dams of Natal and the Eastern Transvaal a carefully manipulated floating line or intermediate can do useful work much of the time, especially if leaded patterns (sometimes heavily leaded) are used, but I have found that in deep clear mountain reservoirs and lakes, the

ability to get a fly down quickly is a great advantage. In hot weather, trout will lie extremely deep and the fly must be presented to them at greater depths than anglers normally feel comfortable with. As I have mentioned, trout will go to such depths, despite counter theories that there is no food down there. To the contrary, these deep water trout are usually in good condition and the Wemmershoek trout that were previously mentioned were full of midge larvae.

There are exceptions to every rule, but I find it simpler to believe that, unless there is some reason to fish your fly near or on the surface, one should concentrate on the bottom. Trout in mid-water will be few and far between, unless there is a reason for them to be there, such as daphnia. This rule proposes then that the two major techniques will be floating line or fast sinker, depending on the prevailing conditions.

Some common occurrences

Adapting to conditions is a prime requisite especially as it is likely that the analysis of the lake will have offered a choice of vastly differing conditions. To be proficient, one should be able to relate to the particular stretch of water and the prevailing conditions. A combination of these two factors ought to result in some appropriate tactic being chosen.

Obviously in a general article of this sort, it is impossible to be specific about those tactics, but many of the big waters seem to share some characteristics. While hatches of local fly will occur, there is a tendency for terrestrials, such as grasshoppers and beetles to make an appearance and be blown on the water. In these circumstances the use of a small Muddler Minnow on a floater cast into the windlane on the windward shore is always worth pursuing.

Another common feature is the existence of one or a variety of small fish species. When these small fish move into the shallows to spawn, the accentuated activity can alert trout and they will follow into the range of anglers. An attractor (fry imitation) with a "releaser" built in should do well.

But, for much of the time, the angler usually finds that sinking line techniques are the bread-and-butter tactics especially if times of entering and departing the reservoir are restrictive. It may be that anglers are forced to leave the water before the evening action occurs and that the majority of fishing takes place during hours which are not conducive to interesting imitative techniques with nymph and larvae patterns.

The most common sinking line technique (though still one of the most effective) simply consists in allowing the fast sinking line to skin by a countdown of seconds until the bottom is reached or the level of the trout is found. Once the level is established, the angler merely concentrates by counting the same number of seconds.

Very deep water often lies off a rocky cliff area and more tackle is lost than makes the angler comfortable. A technique to help overcome this and to fish that dangerous level more effectively is to cut the leader length down to three or four feet (or even less). This allows one to fish the fly at the depth of the flyline and not higher up in the water. Remember, it is the level of the fly that is crucial and if trout are moving off the bottom or along a rocky outcrop, then that is where you want your fly.

By shortening your leader, the fly is dragged down to the deeper lying flyline, but it is very snagable and to overcome this, the fly itself should contain some buoyancy, which will keep it riding slightly above the obstructions. The most common fly for this is the ubiquitous Muddler Minnow, but the Booby patterns, tied with a pair of polystyrene "eyes" (or similar materials) will be effective.

The retrieve is then very slow, so that the fly is not pulled into the rocks. The pull of the retrieve will make the fly dip, but on the pause, the buoyancy of the fly will prevail. In this way, the fly can be fished at the correct depth with a minimum of fuss. And of course, it's right in trout (or smallmouth bass) territory.

The end of the line

Confidence, logic and adaptability are three of the basic rules to remember. Anglers who have learnt their lessons well find the big waters fascinating for there is so much scope.

And, of course, there's that magical feeling of not knowing what lies within those dark blue depths.