

Jeff Currier *global fly fishing*

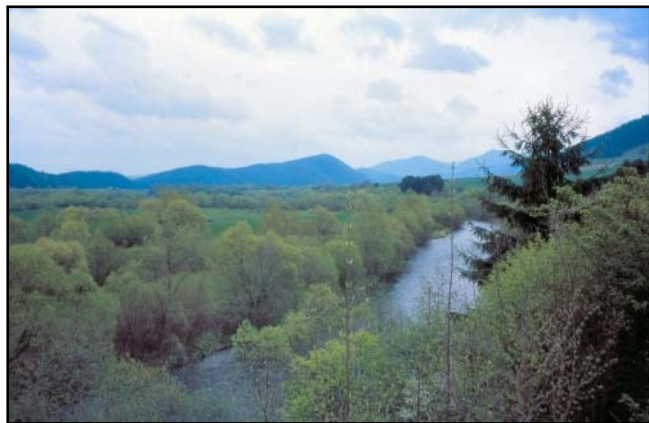
Holy Huchen!

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By Jeff Currier

A day of fishing in the Slovakian countryside.

I'm usually fishing somewhere warm in the spring, maybe stalking the flats for permit or macheteing my way up a jungle river in South America. But in April of 2004, I found myself in the small Eastern European nation of Slovakia, cold and wet and scouting the Vah River for the U.S. Fly



The Vah River

Fishing Team. I was also spending time with one of my best friends: Poland's finest angler, Vladi Trzebunia, who I was hoping could supply some info on the Vah that might benefit the U.S. team. But I had other motives as well.

The huchen, also known as the Danube salmon, is the world's largest freshwater salmonid, and one of the rarest. Like its Russian cousin, the taimen, some specimens have been recorded at over 200 pounds. Once abundant in the Danube River system of Eastern Europe, the huchen was nearly wiped out by pollution, poaching, and dam construction. What few remain are usually solitary, hiding out in the deeper sections of swift-moving rivers.

I first encountered the huchen in 1998 while visiting a hatchery in Poland. I later saw two in the wild that year but did not catch either. The difficulty of catching a fish has a commanding effect on anglers. From the cautious trout of the Henry's fork to the line breaking payara of South America, when a species is too hard to catch it sends rod holders wild. It has the same effect on me; I had Ahab-like devotions to the huchen. Unfortunately, catching a huchen under the World Championship August sun would be near impossible. To seek one now, seemed a waste of time.

Five days into the mission it was evident that Vladi's idea of scouting was brutal coaching sessions on nymphing techniques for European grayling and it had started to get to me. Nymphing is one of my least favorite fly fishing methods and European grayling are my nemesis. My trip turned into "fly fishing boot camp" rather than vacation and the constant presence of rain did not lift my spirits either. Noticing my downward spin, Vladi offered me a day off for a tour of the Slovakian countryside.

The rare day off from training found us driving out of Liptovský Mikuláš parallel to the upper Vah, gazing down into hundreds of pools and eddies, when I suddenly thought I saw a huchen. The fish had a distinct mahogany color that I vividly remembered from my first sighting six years earlier, but the figure was so big it could have been a log. I knew the chances were slim, and because I didn't want to seem foolish in front of Vladi, I didn't declare a positive sighting. But a mile later, I couldn't take it anymore. "Vladi," I said, turn the car around. I saw a huchen!"

"Ha!" Vladi laughed. "You don't know what a Huchen looks like."

Reluctantly, he backtracked anyway.

When we reached the area of the sighting, Vladi peered out the window. "It's a log" he said. But I knew it wasn't. The "log" had moved upstream.

Too excited to listen to such pessimism I jumped out to get a better look as Vladi started to pull away. Vladi had no choice but to park. He came to me and started reiterating it's a log, not a fish. I ordered Vladi to stand at the guard rail and monitor the "log" while I

got my waders on.

I was beginning to love this self-made chaos, in fact I thrive on it. We had planned some pike fishing later in the trip, so my 8-weight was ready to go. It seemed a heavy enough rod to battle a huchen. By now Vladi was convinced the log was a huchen. He watched it disappear into a deep hole. With the rod, a handful of pike streamers, and a sturdy leader, I made for the river.



Huchen On!

back. As I reached the bottom of the pool I had yet to see any sign of the huchen and my disposition was starting to sour. Vladi was waiting, though I couldn't tell if it was to take a picture or to get back in the car. After a small sympathy soliloquy he started packing up the camera gear. Still determined, I told him to keep it out, I needed another attempt.

I thought my lack of success could be attributed to my floating line, so I trudged back across the river and ran to the car to retrieve a Type V full sinker. It was time to get down in a hurry. I also decided that a change in flies was in order, so I tied on a Sanchez double bunny in hopes that my co-worker's fly would bring me European success. Vladi tried to follow me to the car, but I made him stay over the hole and keep

The huchen was low in the hole which was located on a big turn abutting the highway. My best shot was to cross the river and dredge from the other side. The crossing was not as easy as I had initially thought; the current was fast and the river deep. But downstream I found a spot.

Once across I hiked stealthily to the top of the run. For the next hour I meticulously worked the hole with a six inch pike fly, casting my floating line into the bank and stripping

watch.

I worked the hole again for forty-five minutes with the same result as before. I was getting frustrated and could only guess how Vladi felt. He had had enough, packed up and went to the car. My attempt at the rare huchen was over, I felt spent and luck did not seem to be with me today. I took off the double bunny, looked over my shoulder hoping to catch one last glimpse of huchen and started making my way to the bank.

At the top Vladi greeted me with words of encouragement for another day which provoked another attempt. I decided to work the run once more for some browns and grayling with my 5-weight Thomas & Thomas and if I hooked up the huchen and broke him off; at least I could say I hooked him. I rigged up the rod with some of Vladi's tied nymphs and headed back to the river. This time I started at the bottom of the hole and worked up under the watchful eye of coach Vladi.

After nymphing the entire pool I came up short again. Discouraged, I reeled in and started making my way across the river. Vladi was watching my crossing when he suddenly yelled, "There he is! Very big fish, very close to you." Looking up, 30 yards away moving into shallow water was the huchen. Within fifteen seconds I pulled both nymphs off and slapped back on the double bunny.

With my eye on the fish I cast my bunny straight upstream to its left. The bunny fur was not sinking, so I slowly stripped it past the fish and soaked the fur and cast again. The second cast fell ten feet above the huchen and sank nicely. The fish got excited with the first strip, waved its tail and attacked. All I could see was the great whiteness of the open mouth as my fly disappeared. One strip-set and he was on.

To my disbelief the huchen started to head towards me, and I promptly stripped in as fast as my hands could work. A few feet away the fish stopped and started to build momentum in place, charging energy. When he felt he had enough, he exploded off the starting blocks, making me doubt if my tippet and rod could handle the fight. I really started to worry when he peeked his head and vigorously tried to shake my fly. The fish that I knew was big was a monster.

The huchen was putting up a good fight, but not so much that I could not land him. Just as my confidence started to climb the huchen bullied his way into the deep pool, exactly where I didn't want him to go. As he got to the pool I tried to maneuver him with my rod to keep him in the shallow end but it was hopeless. One wrong move could induce a strong run and destroy the puny 5-weight.

Five minutes after a tug-of-war stalemate, the fish put on a fight you'd never imagine. Using all his big-boy muscle he surfaced and thrashed, trying to jump, but was too big. He then turned downstream and bolted. I gave chase, now entering foreign waters, not knowing the layout of the river to come. As I tried to navigate, the huchen burst with even more speed downstream and put me into my backing.

My desire to keep up took over better judgment and soon I was no longer wading as much as bouncing along in the strong current, reeling myself towards the fish. The chase was on for fifty yards when I noticed I was gaining line at an unreasonable pace. The huchen had done an about-face and started charging me. Now both of us were fighting the current and its' effects on the line. I found myself reeling in like a crazed man. As he passed me, not ten feet away, there was an exchange of glances between the gigantic fish and angler. I could tell he was fighting harder than I.

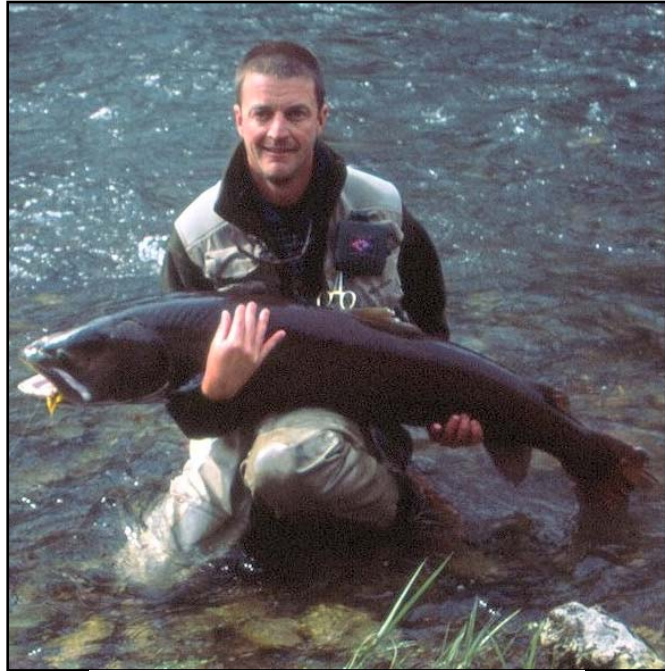
In a desperate move he headed towards the bank covered in overhanging willow branches. If my leader caught on even the smallest branch the fish would surely be lost. Fortunately he went low and hugged the bottom, clearing my line of any obstacles. Like so many times in the past fifteen minutes, I received a little miracle to get me out of certain catastrophe.

The huchen kept heading upstream, which meant I was destined to go too. I knew he was heading back to his pool which made me feel more comfortable because I knew the terrain. By the time we both got to the pool Vladi was bankside spewing out frantic words of encouragement in Polish. The fight to this point was so intense I had forgotten the presence of my best friend.

Every time the fish pulled I gave a harder pull, eventually feeling the fish getting tired. It was time to land him. Even the huchen was ready, but it wasn't that easy without a net

the size of a Volkswagen.

Tired, the huchen practically drifted out of the pool and into me. I was worried that a bit of oxygen in the faster water below could jump start the fish and start another fight I couldn't finish. Instead he just drifted further down, a total dead weight, pulling out line as he drifted into faster water. As I pursued the huchen downstream once again, I spotted a back eddy and assumed I could land him there. Again I misjudged the weight of the fish against current and the huchen drifted past the eddy into the next riffle.



Huchen Landed

I had to try another tactic. The huchen drifted downstream towards another back eddy and instead of trying to steer him to the bank with my light rod, I reeled myself to him. In a desperate and daring move I left just enough loose line to throw my rod onto the bank. As soon as the rod left my hands I lunged for the huchen, and to the astonishment of Vladi, put the enormous fish into a bear hug. In Vladi's 56 years he had never seen a huchen as big as this. The moment was filled with wonder from the both of us toward this awesome creature.

I would have never imagined myself clenched to such a magnificent fish on a cold, wet spring day in Eastern Europe. Surely, I expected a fish of such a caliber to top off a jungle adventure in the Amazon or a salty excursion on a distant ocean. But somehow a fishing phenomenon occurred on an unexpected fishing day. In fact, everything about this catch was a miracle. How I spotted it out the window of a moving vehicle, managed not to give up trying to hook it, and then the luck of the 5-weight.

The fish measured a whopping 127cm or in American terms, 50 inches, and I'm

guessing it weighed between 35 and 45 pounds. Upon release, the Huchen powered out with an unreal display of strength. Vladi and I returned to the car in silence, but we both knew we were headed to a Slovakian pub to celebrate the most memorable fish of our lives.

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