

Jeff Currier *global fly fishing*

The Mysterious Mirror

By Jeff Currier

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The October skies are clear in Southeastern Idaho. Nearly all the leaves have left the aspen trees and only a few glimmers of gold rattle in the fall breeze. Beyond the naked aspens, there's a clear view of Sawtell Mountain towering over the fabulous upper reaches of the Henrys Fork. Its summit bears the first blanket of snow since June. On the Henry's Fork, such conditions are sure to brew a magnificent mahogany-dun hatch, a scattering of Baetis, and some accidental plunges from hearty terrestrials that have survived the first nighttime temperatures below freezing.



The Fork's big rainbows know this and are ready to scarf down as many bugs as they can. Best of all, it's my day off, and if I leave the house now I can be presenting a thorax mahogany to a Henrys Fork rainbow in less than an hour. But I choose not to fish the Henry's Fork. I choose to fish a nearby lake for mirror carp.

"Carp!" you might exclaim, "You can't fish for carp on such a day! How could you?"



It's quite simple. Catching a mirror carp on a fly is an awesome and challenging feat from the stalk to the release. You must hunt them, find them, and then get within casting range. Good luck. When it comes to presenting flies, all carp are every bit as choosy as the most selective trout. They

detect trouble from a nearly perfect fly.

If you do trick one to eating your fly, be ready for a fight. Mirrors from Idaho average between six and nine pounds, and they know how to throw their weight around. They get bigger too, huge in fact. Mirrors frequently surpass 20 pounds, so you always have a chance of sticking a true pig.

Carp Facts

To most anglers, a carp is a carp, but there are many different types. Carp are natives to Asia and Europe, where there is a variety of species. The most prevalent and widespread is the common carp (*Cyprinus carpio*), which is so common that it is found in 48 of the 50 states and on five of seven continents. The mirror carp is a mutation of the common carp and is so different in appearance that one might incorrectly assume that it is a separate species. But it's not. It is actually descended from common carp bred by monks back in the 12th century to have few or no scales, making them easier to prepare for eating.

The mirror carp's shape is similar to that of the common carp, but its scales are fewer and significantly larger. The scales are so big, that when many anglers catch their first double-digit mirror carp, they remove one and save it as if it were the scale of their first tarpon. Usually, the scales are arranged in linear fashion, with two rows on top of the back, one down the lateral line of each side, and a row along the belly, all separated by golden brown skin. Some mirrors, however, have completely haphazard scale designs, and others are fully scaled. No matter how many mirrors you catch, no two will be the

same, but all will be beautiful.

Near my home in southern Idaho, as well as in parts of Utah, mirror carp inhabit many reservoirs and rivers. I have enjoyed the thrill of catching both the mirror carp and the common carp in nearly back-to-back casts.

Gear and Tactics

Although mirror carp can grow very large, the best all-around rod is 9-foot 6-weight. As long as you have about 50 yards of 20-pound backing and some basic fish-fighting skills, you can horse-in mirrors up to 20 pounds in about five minutes. Mirror carp generally feed in the shallows, so a floating line and a 9-foot, 2X leader are all you'll need. If you see carp feeding on dry flies, dropping down to 3X may result in more takes.



Among the carps, the mirror carp is the easiest to catch, but be aware that all carp are spooky. They are alerted as easily as any trout. Luckily, mirror carp seem less spooky than most other species. Despite this relative obliviousness, mirrors exposed to consistent angler pressure can frustrate even the best carp fly fishers.

When you start fishing for mirrors, focus on an individual fish. Look for cruising mirrors, protruding tails, or a muddy area created by feeding fish. Don't bother casting to free-jumpers. There are many theories as to why they jump, but it is certain that they are not feeding on the top. Mirrors do at times feed on the surface, but they sip their food gently like a trout eating a beetle on a spring creek.

Cruising mirror carp, the most difficult to catch, like to move about in pairs. Sometimes

they travel quickly and seldom stop to eat a fly. Other times they push themselves along for a couple of feet, stop to detect any food on the bottom, and then repeat the process. Although their barbells are doing the detective work, mirrors have respectable eyesight and are always looking a foot or so ahead for any fleeing prey.

That is where you present your fly. Drop your cast about two feet in front of the lead fish. This allows the fly to get down near the bottom. When the mirror gets within about six inches, give the fly a short strip. If the fish makes a sharp turn away from where the fly landed, gently pick up the cast and try again.

Mirror carp feed most heavily along the bottom. They usually have their noses down searching for plant life, aquatic insects, crayfish, or minnows. As they root around, they kick up debris from the bottom. This debris often forms a cloudy or muddy spot in otherwise clear water called a "mud". Watch the mud to determine which direction the feeding mirrors are traveling. Place your first cast slightly ahead of the mud. Then gradually move your casts closer to the mud until you finally drop your fly in the center of the mud. Let the fly settle, and start slowly stripping.

A tailing mirror, with its nose on the bottom, is engrossed in feeding and has let its guard



down. This is one of the best opportunities to get a hookup. Despite this advantage you must make a good cast. Try to drop the fly three inches in front of the fish. To the fish, your fly will look like disoriented prey trying to get back to bottom to hide after being stirred up. Hold your rod tip low and get tight to the fly. Be prepared for an aggressive grab on the first strip.

Fly Selection

Mirror carp are opportunistic feeders, so many patterns work well. If your lake is crawling with crayfish and you suspect the mirrors are searching for them, try a crayfish

pattern. Nymphs are also effective. One of my favorites is the Rubber-leg Hare's Ear in a size 10. When you see mirrors feeding in reeds or cattails, try a damselfly nymph.

Occasionally, mirror carp feed on the surface. They may appear to be sucking air, but are actually eating algae, weeds, floating seeds, midge pupae or small insects. Fish for them with a 12-foot, 3x leader and the smallest dry fly that that you can fit the tippet through. You can also try casting to slurping mirrors with Chernobyl Ants in big sizes. A size 6 ant may appear too large to us, but it looks like prime rib to a mirror. The pattern is deadly and should accompany you on every mirror-carp trip.

Find Some Near Home

Once you've got a mirror carp on the end of your line, the amazing power they display separates them from most other freshwater species. Top all this off with the stunning beauty of the mirror and you have the near perfect gamefish.

Anywhere common carp are found, there could be the occasional mirror carp, but major populations are infrequent. That's not to say a population isn't near you, for random populations seem to be scattered throughout the United States. If you have carp in your stomping grounds (and most of you do) give them a try. If you're lucky, you just may find the handsome and mysterious mirror.

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