

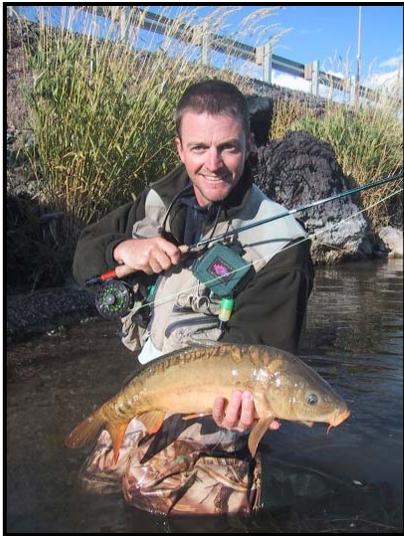
Jeff Currier *global fly fishing*

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Carpe Carpio, or Catch the Carp

By Scott McMillion

The carp is a fish rarely discussed in polite society. For most people, if they think about carp at all they think about foul water and sewer pipes, an appetite for mud. Trash fish.



Jeff Currier, with a Mirror Carp

Rough fish. Bottom feeders. People stalk them with arrows and bullets, just to kill something, like gophers, or rats at a dump. To carp at someone is to squawk like a fishwife.

Mention carp inside the tonier fly fishing loops around the West and you'll draw some funny looks, if not downright sneers. If trout symbolize choice tidbits on the menu of sport fishing, served on fine crystal, then carp are cold Spam sandwiches, sweating grease in a sour lunch box.

Talk about carp to Jeff Currier and you get a different story.

He's a member of the American World Fly Fishing Championship team, the only North American to bring home a medal from those prestigious angling contests.

He's also a carp fan.

"It's an absolute ball," Currier says of fly fishing for carp.

He caught his first carp 20 years ago, in a pond near Lander, Wyoming, while aiming for walleye. A carp took his bug and took it hard, but it was Currier who was hooked.

"I said that's it, no more walleye fishing today," he said. "I started pursuing carp immediately after that."

Currier is a famous guy in the fly fishing world. He throws bugs at fish all over the globe, writes books and magazine articles and gives seminars and lectures around the country.

When he's not doing that, he manages fishing operations for the Jack Dennis Fly Shop in Jackson, Wyoming.

When he wants to go fishing without company, he hunts carp. "Unfortunately, it's the only way to fish by yourself any more," he said.

Trout fishing has become so popular that prime water get crowded fast. Fish and game agencies even offer etiquette tips, telling people how to stay out of each other's faces.

A dearth of elbow room is rarely a problem with carp stalkers.

Plus, it's a lot of fun. If you're good at it, you can land lots of big fish -- twenty pounders are common and if you want a record book fish you'd better count on doubling that.

And carp are everywhere, rooting the muddy bottoms of stock ponds and reservoirs, cruising the concrete banks of urban rivers, scouring prairie potholes and finning through blue ribbon trout streams.

They're like coyotes: smart, adaptable and strong. While they'll eat about anything, they're wary and suspicious. You've got to work for them.

"They're hard as hell to catch," Currier said. "It's no gimme."

Cyprinus Carpio, a Little History

Carp didn't always have such a lousy reputation. Natives to China, Siberia and the Danube drainage, carp so impressed the conquering Romans that they hauled them in oxcarts to western Europe, where they are carefully cultivated as sportfish today. In this country, the United States Fish Commission cited the carp's ability to turn muck into meat and dumped the first buckets of them into a Baltimore pond in the 1880s.

Today, they live nearly everywhere and grow fat under almost any conditions. At water temperatures that would poach a trout, the carp just smile. When algae blooms or pollution kill everything else, the carp is the last fish standing. When necessary, the carp will poke his tubular mouth toward the sun and breathe air.

Tom Conner thinks carp have such a bad reputation in this country because people somehow blame them for poor water quality. Because the carp can prosper in overheated slime, people somehow think it's the fish's fault the water is foul.

"Instead of admiration, they somehow blame the fish," said Conner, the fly fishing editor for an organization called Carp Anglers Group and a professor of sociology at Michigan State.

Like other carp nuts, he compares carp to bonefish, a resident of salt water flats that commands high respect from anglers. "Carp are smarter than trout," he said. "It's easier to catch trout on a fly."

Like bonefishing, most carp fishing is done by sight casting. You spot a fish -- often when you see its tail poking out of the water as it roots in the mud, looking for food -- and then cast a nymph to it. Your aim must be true and your presentation impeccable. Good timing is mandatory. Flub any of that, and the carp will flee.

Carp have loose, flexible mouths with teeth back in the throat. They graze by roiling up mud, sucking in a mouthful and then seining the inedible and spitting it out. Anything that doesn't taste right will go back to the bottom fast, so setting the hook is no easy task.

Another method is to spot fish cruising the shallows. Tempt them by plopping a fly -- nymphs and crayfish imitations work well -- in front of the fish, making sure to minimize any splash. When the fly hits bottom, give it a twitch to create a little puff of sand or mud. If you do it right, the carp will pounce and your reel will scream.

The technique is similar to what bone fishermen use. And while bonefish take off like a rocket, carp act more like a tractor: not as much horsepower, but plenty of torque and traction.

Landing the fish, Conner said, is largely a matter of steering them.

Try to horse them in and they'll snap your leader. Chances are, they'll put you into your backing, probably more than once. And since most anglers haven't seen their backing in a while, check your knots before you make your first cast.

On the right day in the right spot, you can work big fish all day, fish that fight long and hard. And chances are, they live near you.

"Carp aren't quite as smart or quite as fast as bonefish," said Todd Wagner, an Oregon angler who's caught plenty of both. "But it doesn't cost \$3,000 a week to go carp fishing."

Dry flies work sometimes, too. Currier said he's caught carp on chernobyl ants and hopper imitations. And since carp are omnivorous, good anglers can catch them on imitations of puffy cottonwood seeds or mulberries. Others advocate a bit of softened dog biscuit, coated with floatant. In urban areas, carp often follow ducks around and scarf the bread and popcorn that people feed the birds. Flies imitating those foodstuffs, as well as canned corn, have also landed carp.

If all else fails, chum the water.

"It works in muddy conditions," Conner said.

Spreading the News

The word is out on carp fishing. Currier, who has written a book about warm water fly fishing, said that when he speaks at trade shows and conventions, people now ask him more questions about carp than they do about trout.

Seven or eight years ago, a presentation on carp fishing raised more eyebrows than interest.

"Now it's standing room only, anywhere you go," he said. "If the room holds 50 people, 75 show up."

As interest grows in carp fishing, the respect level rises, too.

It's already high for anybody who's landed these bottom feeders with a fly rod.

Wagner said he first caught carp as a teenager in the 1960s, sight casting from the earthen dam that creates Montana's Fort Peck Reservoir.

He'd done a little fishing prior to that, but not much catching.

"They were the first thing that got me going on fly fishing," he said.

"I have fond memories of those carp."

This story was originally published in the Big Sky Journal in 2006. Big Sky Journal is dedicated to the celebration of Montana and the Northern Rockies...art and architecture, ranching and rodeo, hunting and fishing...they touch on all aspects of this remarkable region in each of their six annual issues. In order to communicate the clearest, most distinct possible vision of the Northern West, Big Sky Journal pair subjects of regional

interest with the exceptional talents of the writers, photographers and artists who have found their inspiration there.

About the author: Scott McMillion has lived in places as diverse as New York City, South Korea and Antarctica. He returned to his native Montana in 1988, where he serves as environmental reporter for The Bozeman Chronicle. His environmental writing, investigative reporting and humor have appeared in The Denver Post, The New York Times, The San Francisco Chronicle and other publications. He lives in Livingston, Montana with his wife and daughter.