

Dry Flies of the Steppe

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Mongolia, a distant land with a rich history, known for its military prowess during Ghengis Khan's rule and the harsh environment of the Gobi Desert. However in reality we are talking about a friendly nation filled with impressive landscapes and miles upon miles of untouched lands. Although an environment of very low rainfall and harsh winters, the north of the country is home to many beautiful streams and rivers that flow through the steppe.

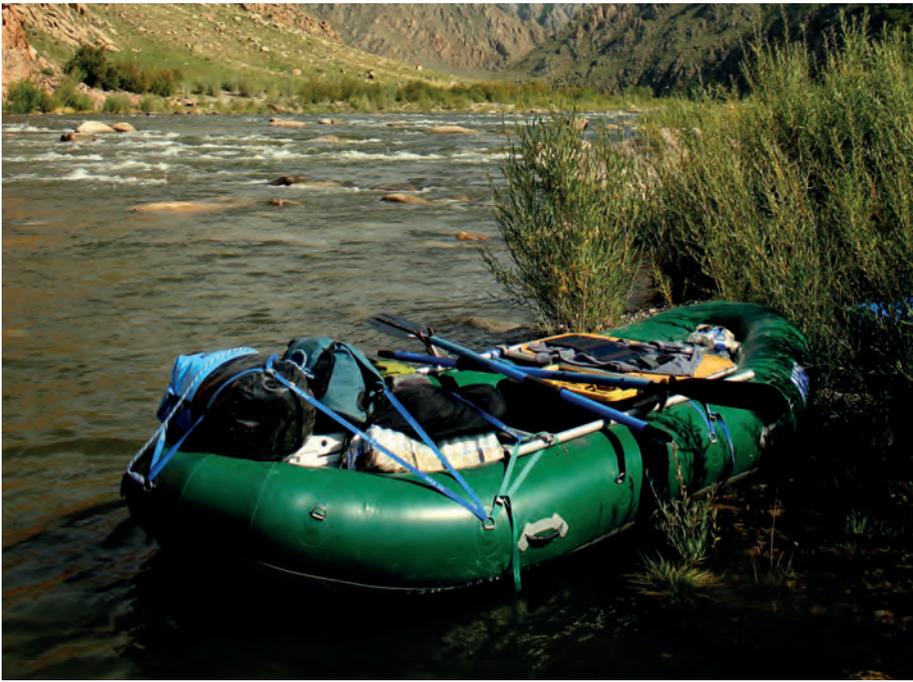
It is the rivers here that have for some time caught my attention. They are the

home to the world's largest salmonid, the taimen. A fish that has been known to reach weights in excess of 200 lb and grow to nearly two metres in length. It is no surprise that they have been incorporated into local legend, often being referred to as the River Wolf. The legend tells of a giant taimen trapped in the winter river ice. A group of starving herders found the fish and were able to survive the winter by hacking off pieces of its flesh. In the spring, the ice thawed and the giant taimen took revenge and climbed onto the land, tracked down the herders, and ate them all.

Needless to say, many Mongolians have a fear of water...

Rather than fear, this fish had sparked an interest in me that I simply had to take further. It was with great anticipation that I first travelled to Mongolia, and feeling that once was not enough I was soon on a plane back there just one year later. The sight that greets you when you arrive in Ulaanbaatar is an odd one - it is a place with a split character. A weird mix of grand and flashy new builds and worn and tired structures, Chinese and Russian influences alternating with large swathes of ger





camps. At first you attribute the tired look to a lack of care but when you consider it is not a temperate climate as in the UK but one that regularly sees minus 40 degrees Celsius in the winter, the annual wear on structures must be immense.

A brief stop in the city is certainly recommended but the real adventure starts when you fly out to the border area between Russia and Mongolia. The city bustle slips away into the distance and rolling grasslands come to the fore. By no means a short trip, it is an unbelievable adventure requiring multiple modes of transport; depending on the trip this includes everything from planes and helicopters through to rafts and horseback. Once on the rivers the journey continues. From full ger camps to smaller fly camps you are always well looked after. The traditional ger tents, are spacious and comfortable. Beds and tables sit around the edge whilst a wood stove sits in the centre. The stove in a traditional ger acts much like a range, providing not only heat but also a place to cook. For us anglers it is also a place to dry wet clothes and waders. The food prepared by the Mongolian camp staff is fantastic given the limited resources, it is flavourful and plentiful and will keep anglers well fuelled.

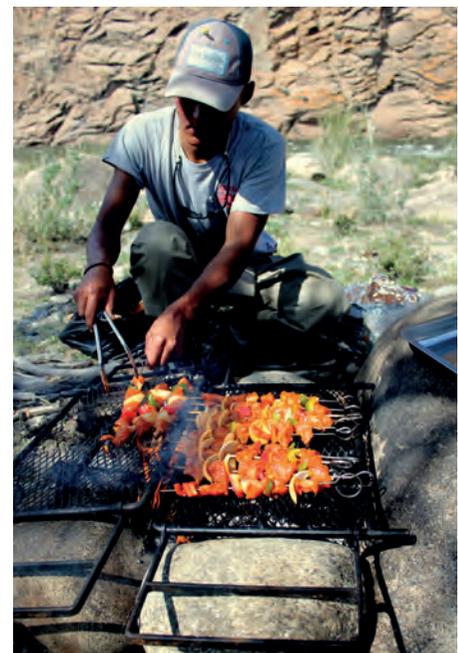


The taimen themselves offer a unique experience. They can be likened, in part, to so many species but ultimately they are one of a kind. They can be pack hunters like perch, yet striking their prey with ruthless pike-like ferocity, they move between fast waters and pools like trout and salmon. Best of all they love to chase down and smash surface flies - they are one of the ultimate dry fly predators. I must admit, I use the term dry fly very loosely here. The mass of buck tail, rubber legs, rabbit fur and foam strapped to a 3/0 hook requires every ounce of the 9-weight single handed set ups to get it in the right place.



The flies are relatively simple, merely trying to imitate a struggling rodent, bird or fish. Natural colours seem to provoke more of a reaction, especially when combined with red or orange hot spots. Subsurface flies on the whole are more productive but part of the joy of fishing for taimen is witnessing their explosive surface hits.

My first ever taimen is one that I will never forget, working hard, repeatedly casting flies and stripping them back it is easy to drift off and lose concentration. I was just getting to the final couple of strips of my retrieve, beginning to think about the next cast, glancing at the scenery, pondering lunch and so on, this was the exact moment everything changed. The fly had slowed up and changed direction slightly in the flow, and that was it... something had triggered a reaction, before →



I knew it water was spraying everywhere and my fly went up into the air. It was hard not to be disappointed as the fly dropped back on the water without it being attached to a fish, but based on some advice I had been given I tried just hanging the now lifeless fly in the flow. Within seconds a reddish-brown shape appeared, eyes widening, and it simply lifted through the water and rose gently on the fly.

I stood in awe as the fish went from stunning strike to graceful sip in a matter of moments. I did just about remember to set the hook before all hell broke loose across the surface. It was certainly no giant, but it had me hooked. This was a species that I had to dedicate more time to fishing for. Since that first one I have now managed to

encounter one or two giants, even one of 48 inches off the surface.

Taimen, however, are not the only fish in these waters and they are certainly not the only ones that fly anglers should target. There are four subspecies of grayling located throughout the country; black grayling (*Thymallus nigrescens*), Amur grayling (*Thymallus grubii*), Arctic grayling (*Thymallus arcticus*) and yellow-tailed grayling (*Thymallus brevirostris*). I am lucky enough to have encountered two of these, the Arctic and the yellow-tailed, up to about a 1lb. They are fierce surface eaters, even chasing down the taimen flies from time to time. The black grayling is one I hope to one day cross paths with; they grow to sizes that would shock many.

There are also northern and Amur pike, the Amur trout and some other weird and wonderful things, but it is the lenok trout that is truly mesmerising. I once saw them hailed as offering the best dry fly fishing that you have never heard of, and I cannot argue with that statement. They are a fantastic fish to target with dries. An odd looking fish, the lenok trout (*Brachymystax lenok*) looks like it has spawned from both brown trout and grayling. It has the brown, spotted markings and sharp dorsal like trout whilst also having a forked tail and down-slung mouth like our European grayling. Much like a trout they appear to position themselves in the river close to structure and cover. They love boulder-ridden edges and undercut banks as well

as mid-water obstacles such as large rocks, shelves and washed-up debris.

Their menu is wide ranging from small baitfish, large terrestrials such as grasshoppers to large stoneflies and a plethora of upwing flies. The upwings would offer a fantastic study subject, as they are numerous and whilst very similar to those that I have encountered elsewhere in the world, they seem to be slightly different. Their sizes ranging from 22s to 12s. Even during the largest upwing hatches I have only really noticed the smallest grayling and lenok feeding on them, the larger ones remaining hidden but not unattainable. I have therefore not found smaller imitative patterns to be very productive for those searching for fish over 8 oz. Although, I am sure there are rivers in Mongolia where it would be possible to find larger fish feeding on these small insects.

Larger streamers and surface lures can also be effective. A lenok was in fact the first ever fish I landed in Mongolia. It wasn't my target, and the 9-weight I was using at the time did not allow for much fight, but the 12-inch fish had chased down and attacked my 10" mouse popper! I was amazed at the pure aggression of such a small and sedate looking fish. Since then I have landed a number of lenok on the taimen set up, both on the top of the water and subsurface. By far and away the most productive way I have found is to fish terrestrials in the American West fashion of 'bombing the banks'. This requires using big grasshoppers and generic dry fly patterns and casting at the edges of the river. Often the heavier the presentation the better, it is like ringing a dinner bell for any nearby lenok. They will often appear out of nowhere in the clear waters to gently rise on the large dry flies. Once hooked, they are strong fighters and will regularly take line from the reel and use the current to get the upper hand during a battle. They are much like trout in that they try and head for cover and structure. Anglers therefore need to be ready to apply side strain to get in control of the fish.

These are a fish that offer both quantity and quality. It is easy to find yourself carried away when you begin to target them. At first you see them as offering a break from the repetitive casting of the heavier rods, but after the first couple, you want a couple more and before you know it you have whiled away several hours. Often the lenok that you are catching are averaging 2-3 lb in weight, with a genuine chance of a fish in excess of 5 lb. I have even heard of giants of over 8 lb being taken on dry fly. When you also consider that it is possible to catch 5-10 of these in an hour, this truly does offer some of the finest 'trout' dry fly fishing around. Setting →



MONGOLIA

up for lenok is relatively simple and low tech, a 9-foot 4 or 5-weight rod with a relatively fast action (for turning over big flies), a reel with good backing capacity and good drag, weight forward floating line to match the rod and 9-foot tapered leaders down to an 8-10 lb point (they are not line shy).

Inside the flybox, it is easy to fill the box with many weird and wonderful flies but actually simple is best. Much like the fact lenok are not line shy, they are also not too critical when it comes to fly pattern. The three things that seem to matter are: fly size (bigger is best), high floating and a touch of red or orange. Go-to flies are variations on the following patterns; Chernobyl Ant, Fat Albert and the Madam X. If you also want to try subsurface, then

large stoneflies and woolly buggers tend to offer the most interest. You may still be wondering why there is a need for such heavy leader and emphasis on a good reel with plenty of line... This is not so much for the lenok but from time to time it is actually possible to find taimen in the shallows also willing to take a terrestrial pattern. Taimen have even been known to come in and take grayling and lenok mid-fight and end up hooking themselves. There is a story of a young boy who was fishing a grasshopper pattern in one of the camps managing to hook and land a taimen in excess of 50 inches on a dry fly rod, the extra backing would have been much appreciated!

Whilst it is not a short journey to Mongolia, it is one filled with fantastic adventure, stunning scenery, good food

and hospitality, and most importantly incredible surface fly fishing. For those heading to Mongolia, I cannot recommend the lenok fishing highly enough, so do not miss it by just chasing taimen. For those who have never considered Mongolia, you should, it is a wonderful place. 🐾

FACT FILE:

Aardvark McLeod arrange fly fishing holidays to several rivers in Mongolia. Each operation has been set up to work with the local community to protect the taimen and its habitat.

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