

The truth about lies

By Paul Procter



It's always challenging writing for *Salmo trutta* as members are well informed and of course, share similar philosophies! Worse still, many who grace these pages hail from a scientific background regarding the ways of trout. Take WTT conservation officers Prof Jonny Grey and Gareth Pedley. Both ooze natural angling ability fortified with PhDs and the likes, little wonder few trout escape their attentions. So to share thoughts here about where trout might call home feels like walking the plank.

That said, since being a nipper, I've spent an inordinate amount of time pestering wild creatures, with brown trout topping my list. In fact, a good friend claims I've already racked up three lifetimes worth of fishing to everyone else's one. And being a self confessed "trout bum", I'll hang my hat on that peg every single time!

Granted, my education played second fiddle to the outdoors, yet countless hours spent by water blessed me with invaluable ►



A solid trout taken from a summer feeding lie that was totally unoccupied in spring



Matt Eastham tempts a summer trout feeding in the shade of willow trees

intel on the movements of trout. If I'm good at one thing, it's observation and rarely do the comings and goings of creatures escape my attention, including trout themselves. Discussed here then is an enthusiast's approach to where we might encounter trout. Bear in mind these findings are not the gospel and instead act merely as guidelines. After all, we never step in the same river twice!

During my formative years most books touched on the subject of trout lies, outlining the three principal areas fish occupy. On the face of it, much of what appeared was sound information though from memory those pages

seldom acknowledged how freely fish roamed about, leading me to believe trout faithfully guarded a chosen lie for an eternity. Initially then, the idea of trout defending their patch 24/7 led me a right merry dance.

Put simply, a lie is a place where fish station themselves in a river at certain times. The reasons they select these areas are for food (feeding lies), for shelter (resting lies) or a combination of both (prime lies); nothing new with this universal language. Wrongly however, I concluded these places applied to singular fish. Yet situations occur where trout happily share residence, albeit temporarily, which I

Feeding on black gnats mid-river on a pool tail, this decent trout calculated the risks were worth it



refer to as "communal lies" and contrary to popular belief, these are more common than first thought.

As mentioned, we'd do well to remember rivers constantly change. The dynamics of running water means no two days are ever alike. In fact, on spate rivers, conditions can alter in minutes let alone hours or days, which will have a profound bearing on trouts' movements. Rising levels increase flows, seeing fish desert their preferred hunting grounds. Conversely, droughts render streams gin clear, resulting in nervous fish that usually abandon exposed feeding lies in favour of sheltered areas. To some degree, the seasons dictate where fish might dwell. Bare trees in early spring offer minimal overhead cover, yet a blossoming summer canopy creates shade where trout feel secure from preying eyes.

The message then is never treat any two trips alike. I've a fishing buddy who announces he's going to fish pool A using X, Y and Z nymphs, based on the fact it worked last time out. That his visit happened three weeks earlier during a raging flood matters little to him. Perhaps we're all guilty of being habitual from time to time by fishing a familiar beat on autopilot, even to the point of approaching certain pools in the same way. Instead, try to treat each visit as a blank canvas and let your eyes lead you to fish rather than memories!

Resting lies provide protection and shelter from strong flows as well as predators, so fish can recoup undisturbed when they're not foraging. Most resting lies physically hide trout, like sunken logs, tree roots or even boulders as well as undercut banks. For whatever reason, big trout tend to favour large boulders and many times I've watched specimens appear from under such stonework. Most bolt holes generally accommodate single fish, maybe two at most. Undercut banks could easily house several occupants in one go though again, fish prefer their own company in these tight spots.

One area that's rarely mentioned is deep water, especially where a channel exists with a broken bottom of randomly sized pebbles that help break up fishy outlines. This is even more desirable where ruffled surface currents occur, which act like a curtain to prevent predators from getting a fix on their prey. Unlike other places they tend to be permanent dwellings too, when low water might expose tree roots or undercut banks, putting them off limits for resting fish. Generally, I view deep pots as communal areas, capable of accommodating several fish



Sometimes, it can be worth staking out a pool, even after it's been disturbed

at once.

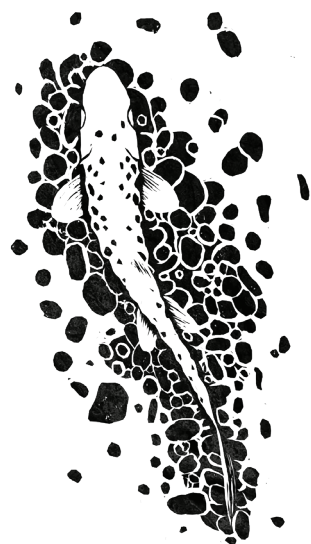
Of more interest to fly-fishers are where fish go to dine. Feeding lies come in many forms though one thing they all share is converging current lanes that concentrate food. To the untrained eye these places aren't always obvious until heightened insect activity sees trout move in and begin rising. Wrongly, many believe fish may have been permanently holding here. However, feeding lies seldom offer full protection, making fish feel vulnerable. With that, trout only occupy them when sufficient food is available; in spring this may be a mere one hour window and once any hatch is done, trout retreat to resting lies.

Individual fish tend to reside over numerous lies and which one they choose at a given time depends on many variables. Water height and overhead conditions will dictate to some degree, but the overriding factor is food quantity and type. Desirable feeding lies are located in shallow, open water (a pool head or tail), which incidentally is where aquatic invertebrates develop best. Yet, these exposed places put fish on edge, making it a trade off as to when they might decide to occupy them. Heavy hatches, or blanket falls of terrestrials see trout prepared to take greater risks. Dull, cloudy days have a similar effect with the added advantage that emerging flies favour them too. Under sunny skies when trout sense they're more obvious, or during sparse insect activity, ►



Brown trout are particularly fond of undercut banks both when feeding and for shelter

Overhanging boughs laden with leaves often trail into the margins to create interesting currents that become natural filter lanes for insects. Trout are quick to line up here



fish usually prefer deeper water, or lairs close to cover.

Beginners mistakenly believe trout rarely tolerate one another's company when feeding. Admittedly, some lies (mainly shallow depressions, or small boulders) only have room for single occupancy, though if these spots are deemed highly desirable then fish joust for prime position with larger specimens usually the victors. However, occasions do occur when fish cram into small areas to gorge on a concentration of insects. Now, even big trout happily lie shoulder to shoulder.

I've been fortunate to witness this several times. During one visit to my local, three hefty fish were clattering duns in a spot no larger than 6ft square. I tempted the rear most specimen of 3lb 10oz, which sadly sent the others scurrying. Some weeks later, the same river (different pool) perfectly illustrated a communal feeding lie. It was early May, when close to 11am the first large darks came sailing past. By the time I'd moved up river to where I wanted to be, olive uprights and iron blues had joined the party.

The pool tail in question that usually housed two good trout, boasted no less than five fish. Knee-deep water demanded a painstaking approach and in the time it took me to position myself, more duns were piling off. With trout intent on getting their fill I managed four belters ranging from 2lb 2oz to 4lb 8oz, all in one spot. The only time my feet moved was to back away after hooking up. An acrobatic display from the fourth victim finally convinced his remaining companion it was time to bugger off, who duly made for a partially submerged tangle of fence posts and sheep netting. Admittedly, not your archetypal trout lie, but a welcome lair for alarmed fish.

It's worth staking out such disturbed pools, as trout are extremely eager to make hay when the sun shines, especially during dense hatches. On this particular day however with dwindling fly this fish clearly thought it too risky for what it might harvest in return. Indeed, even in undisturbed pools, fish rarely loiter after a feed and instead head back to their dens.

As mentioned, tree-lined banks provide important cover for trout especially in summer. Now overhanging boughs laden with leaves often trail into the margins to create interesting currents that become natural filter lanes for insects. Trout are quick to line up here and it's one of the first places I look when assessing a pool. In favourable

conditions there could even be a procession of fish strung out here.

A day on the Cumbrian Leven saw one such feeding lane produce the goods. The first went 4lb 10oz (rear most fish). The second (middle trout) topped 2lb 12oz with the third (lead fish) going 2lb 5oz. What's curious here is the order of size from large to small when usually we'd expect the larger, more dominant trout to take pole position upstream of his competitors. Not the first time I've seen this phenomenon.

Areas that offer food, shelter and protection are "prime lies". Finding these ingredients together in one place is like striking gold, making prime lies the holy grail! Years of observation have taught me prime lies tend to be seasonal when trout only take up residence periodically. For example, a spring prime lie when large dark olives are present differs from a summer prime lie that sees terrestrials tumbling to the water. Feeling safer now, trout may park themselves in a prime lie for several days/weeks at a time, to take advantage of seasonal fly life and once a specific food source dries up they move to pastures new.

In reality, any pool on a river contains a limited amount of holding water that provides food and cover for a given head of fish. Within this domain each trout overlooks a series of resting places, feeding lies and of course prime lies (where they exist). Rather than relying on one lie, you could argue then that fish are more faithful to a chosen area, which they've been reputed to return to year on year.

Good friend Richard Tong and I once knew of "old trusty" that occupied a lair on and off for some years who we instantly recognized by his markings. A solid 3-pounder, he was christened such because he could be trusted to be on point (in a prime lie) and rising each time we checked. That after spawning this fish returned to exactly the same pool fascinated us.

In essence then, trout are very much like ourselves who have designated areas to eat with other spots reserved for resting. When it comes to dining, we do so at various restaurants, not the bedroom, which is where we sleep. I guess then the sofa would be labeled our "prime lie" where food and rest can be enjoyed simultaneously! □

Paul Procter is a Vice President of the Wild Trout Trust. He writes for Trout and Salmon magazine and is well known in trout fishing circles for his remarkable ability to winkle out large trout from their lies.

Paul's fascinating observations ring very true with published science on trout behaviour. Robert Bachman's classic paper in 1984 was the result of three years of detailed observations of trout in a clear stream from an elevated platform. Bachman described trout has having home ranges, areas that contained several feeding and resting lies. The home ranges of different individuals overlapped, so no single fish occupied the same lie all the time, but a 'pecking order' existed where the most dominant (usually the largest) secured the most favourable lie for the prevailing circumstances (e.g. a particular fly hatch). The hierarchy was sometimes reinforced by brief scuffles between individual fish. Noteworthy was how the frequency and severity of the conflict increased when stock fish were introduced - to the detriment of all parties, with fish becoming exhausted and displaced.

The implications of Paul's observations for habitat are clear - variety is key. Pools and riffles, deeps and shallows, broken and smooth water, boulders, undercut banks, overhanging trees. Much of this is determined by the physical shape of the channel (and whether or not it has been disrupted by straightening, deepening or dredging), but there are things that are within our gift as anglers and fishery managers. Note the importance Paul attaches to low, trailing cover from trees and bushes and the angling opportunities these provide. All too often on WTT advisory visits, we see this cut back to facilitate casting. The clear message from this is - don't! And if your banks are grazed bare, fence out the livestock and grow some trees.

Tim Jacklin



Midstream boulders are the ideal hiding place for big trout