Trout Fishing Different Water Tempertures

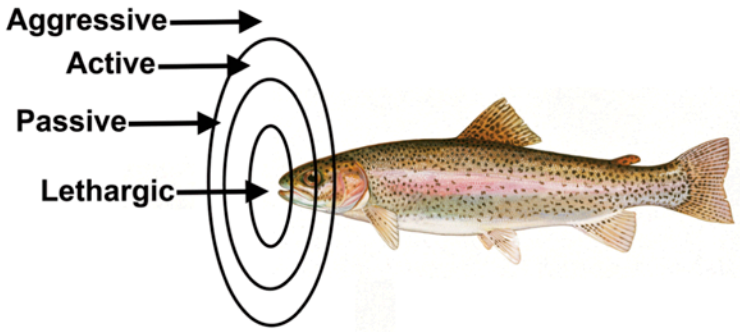
by Walt Fulps

Photo Credit: Walt Fulps

I watched *Animal House* earlier this year on television, just like many of you did, I'm sure. It's one of those movies I can watch repeatedly, mainly due to the plethora of memorable and quotable moments. For example, "Fat, drunk and stupid is no way to go through life, son." That line led to this article, although I'm pretty sure trout don't get drunk.

You may not be aware, but trout have been defined by a lot of popular mythology. "Trout are smart," for example. Actually, trout do not possess a cerebral cortex — that gray wrinkly part of the brain you pictured when I said the word "brain." That means, generally speaking, that trout cannot attack a problem logically. They simply experiment behaviorally until they discover something that works, and then they repeat the behavior. If they can't find the successful behavior, they die. That's pretty much the extent of their intellect.

It also bears noting that trout don't "like" cold water, either. They are cold-blooded fish, which means their body temperature changes to roughly match the water temperature. Just like a lizard will appear to become slow and lazy when temperatures drop, excessively cold water will also push trout into lethargy. The reverse is also true, though. As the water temperature warms, their heart rate and respiration increases, their reaction time improves, their muscle twitch activity accelerates, and their metabolism jumps. That means they're burning more calories, which in turn means they're HUNGRY! But that cold water has to come into play somewhere, right? Yes, it does.



The size of a trout's strike zone will vary. Warmer water increases its metabolism and encourages aggressive feeding (larger strike zone), but low D.O. makes it more lethargic (smaller strike zone).

Just like all fish, trout require dissolved oxygen (D.O.) to survive. D.O. refers to those spare O2 molecules stuck in between the H2O molecules that we know as water. Different species of fish require different levels of D.O., and trout generally require more than most other freshwater species like bass, crappie and catfish. Since cold water has a greater ability to carry D.O. than warm water, cold water is where you tend to find thriving trout populations. Therefore, as the water warms during the summer, it gradually sheds dissolved oxygen, meaning those trout that are growing hungrier and hungrier are also finding it harder and harder to breathe.

Many moons ago, I took a mid-August trip to fish the Blue River west of Denver. I called a fishing buddy who was going to school out there and invited him to join me, but he warned me off — it's too darn hot for trout fishing, he said. But, in the end, I was the more persuasive of the two of us. We camped and fished for three days with almost no luck at all. We decided to spend one more night, tie a bunch of goofy radical flies, and give it another last-ditch effort the next day with whatever silly flies we came up with. One of my inventions was an enormous buggy-looking thing loosely based on a stonefly. If memory serves, I tied sizes ranging from #4 – #8, mostly in black or brown, with a ridiculous row of green rubber legs — green was the only color I had. I dubbed it "Walt's Ugly Bug, the Sequel," since I had already invented a "Walt's Ugly Bug" during a prior trip. My fishing buddy thought I was crazy, but after catching a few fish, he jumped onto my bandwagon. We caught a bunch of fish and only left after the last of our giant flies had disintegrated to barely more than yarn on a hook.

What we discovered that day was that we had believed yet another common myth about trout — that they prefer small bites of food in general, but especially so during the summer. It turns out the truth is the opposite. Each fish will have in mind how far he is willing to travel to inspect drifting food of a certain size. For example, a tiny midge might get a trout to simply turn his head a bit, while an injured minnow could potentially trigger that same fish to swim across the river to take a look. Additionally, a trout's attitude will affect the size of the strike zone, with an aggressively feeding fish chasing your lure all over creation, but a more passively feeding fish requiring you to drift your bait fairly close by. As D.O. decreases, so does that strike zone. Paradoxically, however, a rumbling tummy means that trout is really keeping his eye open for anything sizable that will be easy to grab — high caloric return with minimal caloric output. That sizable something, my friends, will actually increase that fish's maddeningly small strike zone.

So, the answer to the mystery is — giant flies that do not run away. Unless there's a hatch going on, the fish won't be picky. Just tie on something big that looks like food, drift it nearby, and the fish will eat it. This often means fishing a spot much more thoroughly than you normally would, but the payoff is quite satisfying. Get those giant flies deep, drift them slowly and cleanly, and watch for subtle hits, and you'll catch more than your fair share.

If you still struggle, don't worry. Anytime now, we'll get a rainy cold front signaling the coming of autumn. The cold rains will oxygenate and chill the water, swelling the river's flow, and triggering some upstream migration and a more aggressive outlook on life. So, while September can be a tough time for trout fishing, October's coming!

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