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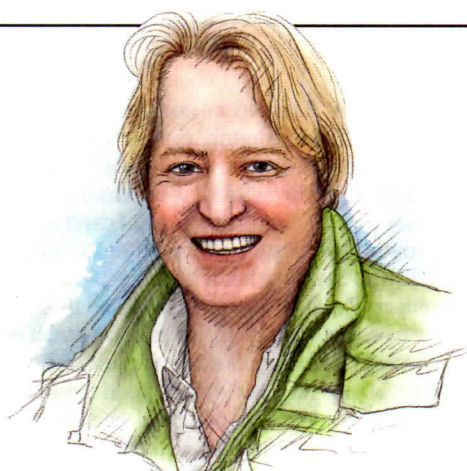
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CHALK TALK

Survival specialists

Simon Cooper pays tribute to the indomitable nature of trout

IF YOU WERE A BROWN TROUT around this time of year you'd be exhausted. Spent. Three months of courtship and spawning will have diminished your plump autumn brightness. Your chances of seeing the upcoming spring are no better than one in four. Months of basic survival stretch ahead. Hunkering down in a deep hole or among a tree root you'll eke out each day with a little food and a lot of inactivity. You don't actually know that better days are ahead, but millions of years of evolution point you in that direction. So you wait.

It is a strange thing, but many people think of *Salmo trutta*, one of our few truly native freshwater fish, as a sensitive soul, yet it is tougher and more resilient than you might suppose. Of all our fish, it is the most widely distributed across the British Isles by a country mile; there is barely a pond, lake, stream, river or canal that doesn't contain brown trout. How might that be? Well contrary to general opinion they are not, left to their own devices, great travellers; there is no mass migration to the headwaters for spawning. In all likelihood, when you catch that little wild "fish with speckled skin" as the Roman writer Aelian described them, it will be born, live and die within 50 yards of where you made your cast. Brown trout really have simple needs: water, food, cover and gravel in which to spawn. If you have those, why bother to move?

We tend to think that trout prefer fast, clear, tumbling water, but they will live anywhere. Talk to anyone who has trekked miles over the Scottish Highlands; even the remotest loch, devoid of apparently all other life, will produce a trout. When we were filming the movie *Chalk*, trout were living just a few yards from Battersea Power Station in a river many might regard as Wandsworth's storm drain. There are, of course, the perils of man-made pollution, but even then, trout are far more tolerant of that than their game-fish cousins, the grayling, who disappear at the first sign of difficulty.

To survive for millions of years takes some doing. We worry about climate change today, but it is as nothing compared to what the brown trout has endured to maintain its prolific status. Floods. Droughts. Extended periods of heat. Extended periods of cold. It has survived them all. But how? Well, take its ability to become a sea-trout. This is simply a survival mechanism. A way of preserving the species as the fish, largely females, driven from the river by some cataclysm, stay away until it is safe to return to lay down the seeds of a new generation. And as for spawning, they have made it as simple as possible. Courtship is not overly elaborate. Redds are a modest indentation in loose gravel. The greatest danger is a lack of well-oxygenated water flowing over the eggs, but even in a lake or slow-moving canal, they'll find a springhead to do the job.

Trout, like all fish, are food obsessives. This is what determines their daily lives. But trout, unlike some fish, have incredibly gregarious feeding habits. There is really nothing a trout will not consider eating, which is part of their amazing ability to survive just about anywhere. Think of the vast array of flies (using the term loosely) we have in our boxes: insects of every type. Spiders. Ants. Shrimps. Beetles. Moths. Fish. Grubs. Snails. I could go on, but you get the idea. I'm sure plenty of you have sat beside the River Test at the Mayfly Inn, watching kids feeding crisps to the waiting trout until some smart Alec flicks a cigarette butt into the current. Nine times out of ten a fish will come up to

"Nudging its bloated corpse were two trout gorging on the maggots they dislodged"

swallow it down before promptly spitting it out. Trout are both curious and smart when it comes to food. They don't let an opportunity go by. Years ago, in Dorset, I came across a rotting sheep floating in the Sydling Brook; it was maggot-blown. Considerably decayed. I smelt it before I saw it. And there, nudging its bloated corpse, were two trout gorging on the maggots they dislodged.

This ability to adapt to changing circumstances goes a long way to explain why brown trout are now a global species but, in evolutionary terms, this is only a recent development. If you flick through any glossy coffee-table book of amazing fishing destinations there is sure to be someone holding a monster New Zealand brown trout. But these are not natives: they were introduced in the late 1800s when the indigenous grayling all mysteriously disappeared. *Salmo trutta* is really a European fish, its natural range a box, the northern extent being Norway and Russia. The southern, the Atlas Mountains in North Africa. The east, Afghanistan and Pakistan. The west, Iceland. So any of those fish you see in the Americas, Antipodes, Asia or anywhere else for that matter had their genesis in either England's River Itchen, Scotland's Loch Leven or Germany's Black Forest.

So let's take our hats off to the brown trout: survivor, migrant and sporting fish that now encompasses and enraptures the globe. **IRS**

■ Simon Cooper is managing director of Fishing Breaks (fishingbreaks.co.uk), the leading chalkstream fishing specialists. He is also author of *Life of a Chalkstream* and *The Otters' Tale*.