



# Moments of Perfection

## Hooked on Flies and Split Cane

by Keith McAllister



**T***o where the water ripples from a sweeping movement beneath the surface, and where then a dorsal fin has risen clearly, I cast out the line. Softly the large dry fly imitation alights on the upset reflection of the sky and the fish turns again.*

These moments, when time holds all, are well remembered. Instead of spectating, you are immersed in a situation and need calm nerves. With an element of both skill and luck you might come out victorious. It is just perfect, especially if you happen to have the occasion witnessed by someone else. You may even have to swallow a smile and act as if you could do it all again a thousand times over without much effort.

Those moments come at the least expected times too and, I suppose, that is what makes them so great. You will, however, notice that they happen more often when you are away from the desk, emails and spreadsheets. It is not a hardship by any means when I often find myself with a fishing rod in my hand. I do a lot of thinking on the riverbank and have traversed some areas of the world I would never have seen without using this form of hunting as an excuse.

For example, after a couple of weeks of being eaten alive by Tsetse flies and mosquitos in the East Madi Wildlife Reserve, in Northern Uganda, I thoroughly enjoyed catching some Nile Perch at Murchison Falls. I was baking in the sun and watching a wandering line swirl out from the cliffs edge. Suddenly the line ran and after a couple of seconds I had to set the hook, resulting in the rod quivering from the convulsions of a confused fish. Later on we used what was left of the bait to catch some catfish in the light afternoon rain. The cascading waterfall could be heard all the while as the sky turned to dramatic rain clouds and in the last of the sun's warmth a cold beer appeared, as if by magic.

That same year, and in the Outer Hebrides, I managed to turn a salmon from its slumber and my heart flat-lined as I saw it rush the lure. The humped back created a bow wave crested by his dark dorsal fin and it came within inches of the hook only to turn and lose interest. The disappointment was crushing as it went back in line with the other fish. Dozens of Salmon were waiting for a heavy downpour to swell the rivers allowing them to make their way inland to spawn. In the meantime they mostly just sat and waited, ignoring what temptations you could offer them. The weather was too good for us on that trip and so we retired to sea fishing for the remainder of the holiday. I only managed to hook a Parr (which is a year-old salmon, about the size of a small trout) before I had the crazy idea of hooking Pollock on a fly line.

A fishing buddy of mine, who is aptly named Simon Hook, had tied a lovely imitation lure about three inches long and resembling a small mackerel. We agreed that the best plan would be to use a fast sinking line cast from his boat. The following day, after two or three casts, I figured there was a flaw in the plan as plenty of Pollock were coming in on the hand-lines. I figured the line was sinking faster than the mackerel fly and therefore taking most of the movement out of the lure. So I tied a lead weight an inch above the hook and after a couple of swift jerks on the line the rod bent seaward and a three pound Pollock was on the fly. Job done.



Only last week I was up in the Outer Hebrides again and managed to finally hook into a nice 8lb Salmon. He was an old Cock Salmon, of the Atlantic variety, whose colouring had changed to that of brown and red. It was the last hours of the Salmon season and this old boy was caught in a beautiful Loch surrounded by heather covered mountains. Some guests of the estate had decided to go deer stalking that day, which meant that the river system that would have been at their disposal was open to other guests. The phone rang in the cottage I was staying at and the local Laird told me I was free to try my luck at his invitation.

It made for a great celebration to finally catch my first full sized Salmon, at Uig, on the Isle of Lewis. I hope I will return there to do a full story on both deer stalking and salmon fishing next year for Hunting & Safari Magazine.

Over the years, almost every holiday taken with my family has resulted in some effort towards fishing. This was in spite of the fact that, in my immediate family, I am the only one even remotely interested in fishing. It has taken a lot of patience from

my parents and three siblings to allow me time enough to pursue the hobby. Ever since I caught my first fish at Lake Naivasha, in Kenya, at the grand old age of ten, I have been stealing hours and days to take myself off fishing.

At Lake Naivasha the Large Mouth Black Bass, which we used to catch with some regularity, were introduced by Theodore Roosevelt. He had thought that the good people of Nairobi needed a sport fish nearby for relaxed weekends of camping and fishing.

Even back then I had noticed the effects of changing weather which is so much a part of fishing. In the late afternoons the lakeside would darken from the blanket of steal grey sky, the sorrowful fever trees would dull, and the remaining daylight then filter through gateways of monstrous indigo cloud. With this transition came an increased chance of catching fish higher in the water after the heat and the glare of midday had finally passed.

Kenya also gave me my first brown trout. These had also been introduced, but by the British, who contrastingly thought that the



## hunting season



good people of central Kenya should enjoy the gentlemanly pursuits of fly fishing (and afternoon tea). I caught my little brownie on a tiny Mepps lure repeatedly cast across the front of a waterfall, and dragged through the torrent of the stream until the tug of a fish interrupted the monotonous repetition. I threw him back as he was rather small, but he had made a lasting impression on my memories of fishing.

Fishing for trout in the Aberdare Mountains in Kenya, as I had been that day, is somewhat disconcerting. You have to continuously realise that you are in a national park and subsequently keep an eye out for buffalo, lion and elephant while trying to concentrate on the trout.

A couple of years ago I found myself on the Kennet River, in Oxfordshire, fishing for brown trout without the stress of a potential mauling by any member of The Big Five. On that day I reached the pinnacle of trout fishing by: catching a beautiful brown trout; in a chalk stream; on an English summer's early evening; with a Mayfly imitation dry fly; on a split cane rod.

To tackle the flowing streams filled with trout rising and falling in the wake of moving water, behind a rock or in the slow water below the veil of a willow tree, is to hide in corners of wilderness still left in Britain. As the summer light softens and makes way for the shadows lengthening to give the river bank a colossal presence in the quiet, there is a magic quite unique.

On the Kennet River, when the time of year is right, the Mayflies, like tiny fairies, strip themselves from the surface of the water and rise backlit into the air. All around you the white firelight of hatching flies evaporates from the stream and you can cast the flimsy imitation out into them, hopefully to have it rest on a trout's snout.

Sometimes, it just starts working the way it should. The rod gently works its magic, presenting the fly line out longer and longer, while tightening the loop in the back-cast. The rhythm of the cast becomes a calm familiar action and the fly reaches out across the water. In the surface tension of the silver topped river, reflecting the fading brightness, there might just be a trout rising.

When I was a child I remember being taken to see my great grandfather, on my mother's side, and all I can really recollect from that visit is the image of an old man smoking a pipe and hunched in an armchair. This was before I had been introduced to fishing, and so the fact that the old man was a great fly fisherman meant very little to me until perhaps a long time after I could have done anything about it. He had two or three split cane rods which I heard went to other relatives upon his passing and soon after that they became legendary things in my own mind.

I had spent endless hours as a boy in Nairobi reading articles in my collected and beloved fishing magazines, and had pretty much learned to fly fish from books and illustrated guides. When I bought my first fly rod in France one summer holiday, I did not mind that it was not a grand example of a fly rod. I did not mind because when I took it out to the river I saw the fly line hold out above the water and whirl through the dampness and broken sunlight, and a dream was realised. I was finally following the fading footsteps of the old man with the pipe in boyhood memory.

One of those beautiful mornings I headed out of the cottage by the river to meet the rising sun, cut through the misty valley floor, and watched the chased darkness melt into pink and then yellow light. Deer had darted into the thickets when I followed the swirling water and I found a great place to pilot the gentle swoop of the floating line across the tumbling waters. The only way that memory could



have been better is if I had been fishing for trout, but chub were all I could find the whole week. Soon the rod was retired and the holiday was over, but the morning river scene will stay with me always.

**'Before I am old I shall have written him [the fisherman] one poem maybe as cold and passionate as the dawn.'**

William Butler Yeats

In my late teens I gave up fly fishing for a time and went after pike in the canals across East Anglia, where I lived for some time, in a small village just outside Cambridge. This brought a moment's reprieve from the stresses and strains of having left my life in Africa for winter and dreary school days in England.

At times like those I would remember my life in Africa with fondness and with a sense of detachment. I might recollect fishing in the Indian Ocean for Marlin and Sailfish, with my longsuffering father,

who had no desires of his own to ever go fishing but for the constant nagging from his son. It would make me smile to think of him pulling in a Marlin because it was too big for my boyish arms to handle. Tired he would look around and see if I was enjoying the experience, with a slight wince of fatigue from having wrestled a powerful game fish for the best part of 20 or 30 minutes.

It was at that stage in my life that fishing changed its character and meaning for me. As a boy it was all about catching fish and when I lived in Runda, on the outskirts of Nairobi, I used to catch sardine-sized fish in a little trickle of river with insects and grubs on tiny hooks. I would long for weekend breaks back to Naivasha and, generally, just wanted bigger waterways with bigger fish in them. With every frustration of impatience characteristic of youth I longed to see the great fishes of the world. As time passed, and some of these great waterways have been found on my travels, the frustration has gone, but



with it, to some degree, so too has gone the need to continuously catch great fish.

These days I fly fish on the weekends with my good friend James Jenkins and we use it as an excuse from the daily obligations of work and domestic duties. We laugh on the drive to the rivers and lakes, and laugh the whole way back again. Then, after setting up our rods and kit, we both find ourselves alone and in the silence, taking separate directions across the fields and areas in which to fish. Our thoughts might start with our womenfolk, or children, or family, or work, or money, but they end in due course; when the line holds out across the water and seemingly takes our cares with it into hidden worlds far from the river bank.

In that respect fishing remains a moment of reflection, an abstract pursuit, a chance of excitement, and perhaps something of clarity, in my life. As everything seems to get more complicated with every passing year, it is while fishing that I find most of my Moments of Perfection.

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