

Success not measured in inches.
Michael Salomone

When it comes down to it, angling can be a daunting affair. Pressure from friends pushes anglers to measure success through photographs and social media. The “big fish are the only ones worth posting” mentality elevates misguided conceptions for measuring success. Don’t let the value of an angling adventure be measured in inches. Revel in the simple beauty of the little fish.

Trust me, I can hear it in my head already, the razzing from friends stating that you only catch little fish. What is more relevant is how to appreciate any fish, even the little ones. Not every outing conjures up giants to our flies. A day spent catching 10-12” rainbows can not be misconstrued as a failure. Many anglers return from the river with nothing to show for their efforts. It is a fact, anglers can get skunked.

And maybe the measurement for success isn’t a giant trout. For new fly fishers any trout becomes an achievement. First fish on a fly rod is a special thing. Does it matter that the fish was stocker sized? No. First fish don’t need to be large to be memorable. And the angler that catches a big one for their first fish eliminates an important element in the development of a fly fisher.

Fly fishers should develop knowledge around fly fishing and skills on the water. They earn their successes through failures and rejections. Catching a big trout for your baptismal fish takes away some of that sweetness.

How you catch your fish. Where you catch your fish. Who you are with when you go fishing are the achievements that conventions can’t measure. Little fish take on new meaning when viewed from a different paradigm.

It could be the first fish your older brother catches on a fly rod. A palm sized bluegill on a popper with an Eagle Claw fly rod makes for a pretty memorable moment. Anglers more adept with dunking bait often misunderstand the attraction fly fishing delivers. Suddenly the familiar bluegill is elevated by the manner in which it was caught. Sometimes a little fish could be the best memory of an event. Maybe even a contest winner.

A fly fishing adventure with my younger brother in southern Ohio a year ago yielded a monster of an emerald shiner. The two inch beast took a size 18 red brassie nymph. The resulting photo turned out to be a prize winner. The FlyFish Journal is an excellent publication and their Smolt of the Month contest places emphasis on the little fish. My photo of Daniel holding out his fly caught shiner was the August Smolt of the Month winning image and is in the running for the grand prize later next spring.

Catching fish on flies is a foreign concept for some anglers. That alone can be the impetus for picking up a fly rod. One misconception is that flies are only for trout. Largemouth bass, smallmouth bass and panfish of all varieties readily take flies. Dry flies, nymphs and streamers all have a unique attraction especially to fish that don’t regularly see flies. Minimal adaptations need to be made to your trout fly box to achieve success with other fish that are infrequently targeted with flies.

Within the Vail area anglers can pursue the little fish that are guaranteed to enhance an adventure. Gore Creek is a prime example where size doesn’t matter. A grand slam of trout: rainbow, brown, cutthroat and brook trout caught on the same day is an achievable goal in Gore

Creek. This is a situation where a six inch rainbow is valued just as much as a sixteen inch rainbow. It is the species that we are counting, not the inches.

A hike into the mountains along a trickle of a creek possesses all the components of an angling adventure where even a small brook trout places emphasis on the event. Looking to secure a memory of a routine hike in the woods then add a fly rod into the mix.

Whether it is smallmouth bass and bluegills in Ohio or brook trout and cutthroats in Colorado, fly anglers should celebrate any fish, even the little ones. Yes, big fish are a goal, but not the only one. I still head hunt for big fish. But I'm happy with the simple beauty that the little ones deliver. Fly fishing sits at the pinnacle of angling, a place where even the little fish bring a big smile to your face.