

Intruders *on the Pitt*

Danny Spelic recognises that some tactics are developed because of local conditions. Even if developed overseas, some of those techniques can be applied here given the right conditions.

A scheduled stopover in British Columbia, Canada, during my family's around the world holiday, was carefully planned to coincide with some fishing in the area. With 468 species of fish, more than 350,000 lakes and 100 river systems, it's easy to see why Canada is considered by many to be an angler's paradise. The diversity of the fishing means that several methods have been developed and refined over the years to cater for the specific species and locations.

Learning new techniques and discovering new flies is always something that I enjoy, particularly at an exotic location, but even more so when I can use my new found skills in my day to day fishing back home. Canada certainly didn't disappoint in this regard and I quickly discovered some new methods and flies for fishing fast water that can be used to great effect in Australia.

The Pitt River in the Canadian province of British Columbia is the last place I thought I'd discover something new that I could apply back home. It is a river like none in Australia, and would rival many of the largest, glacial fed rivers in New Zealand in terms of size and velocity. Despite being less than an hour from Vancouver, the river is in an isolated location only accessible by air or jet boat. The glacial fed headwaters empty into Pitt Lake, which is one of only two freshwater tidal lakes in the

world, and it is not uncommon to see seals in the upper reaches of the river, chasing trout and salmon on their annual migration!

This highlighted that it was very different to the Thredbo or Eucumbene rivers to which I was more accustomed. So what lessons was I to learn from fishing the Pitt?

Upon my return to Australia, news of higher than average winter rainfall and a return to a La Nina weather pattern meant that the drought was now over in more than 90 per cent of the state. Many rivers were breaking their banks and dams were filling fast.

The immediate effect of these high inflows had made the fishing challenging to say the least. Fast flowing, dirty water can be difficult to fish at the best of times, but with rivers at levels not seen in years, catching fish in these conditions would require a re-think in strategy. With some help from my Canadian counterparts, I found that catching fish in these conditions is possible and surprisingly productive using the right technique and flies.

Intruders

One of the first things you first notice when fishing a new location is the variation in flies and lures suited to the water you will be fishing. When our guide, Rod, pulled out his fly box it was visibly bursting at the seams. It was as if someone had stuffed a whole chook



Bright and bulky flies work well in high, dirty water and rarely miss their mark when tied with a stinger hook in the tail.

in there – wings and all – and jumped on it to close the lid. These were seriously big flies for seriously big fish. We were fishing with flies known as Intruders. Although specifically tied for salmon, Rod also used them to catch bull trout and rainbows. We were a little early for the first of the salmon runs so we settled on catching the bulls.

Intruders are tied with bulky materials such as marabou, rabbit fur and bucktail. They are sometimes double jointed or made in two parts, and commonly have a single stinger hook tied in the tail. They are tied in a range of colours and sizes, with the most important aspect of the fly's design being the bulky silhouette achieved by incorporating materials such as turkey feather, deer hair and ostrich herl. This ensures that the flies are seen in fast flowing, dirty water conditions, and strikes are

'The subtleties in presentation are crucial and often make the difference between catching lots of fish rather than a fish or two.'

Bull trout are a prime target in the fast water of the Pitt River. Our guide, Rod, displays a fine specimen that fell to a bead head chartreuse intruder.



Long rods provide the angler with added reach when fishing across the current and assist in landing the fish as displayed here



often induced through the careful positioning of the cast and the variation in the retrieve.

When tied and cast correctly, they are also relatively easy to deliver on a 6 weight fly rod although with larger fish like salmon, a heavier rod is recommended. In Australian waters, a fast 6 weight is more than adequate on rivers such as the Eucumbene and Thredbo, with a 7 weight perhaps better suited to tail race fisheries like the Tumut and Derwent, particularly during water releases and high flows. Additional weight is seldom required when fishing with a sink tip fly line. The weight of the line pulls the fly to depth, yet the fly itself remains elevated in the water column, which prevents fouling.

I have also been experimenting recently with slightly smaller flies on jig hooks, which further reduce the possibility of the flies being caught up on the bottom. The unique design of this hook ensures that the flies ride point up, further reducing foul-ups. This is nothing new (it's commonly used by the Europeans when nymphing in fast water) but there are few commercially available flies tied on these hooks, probably due to their specialised application.

Down and across

When fishing the fly, the cast is made slightly upstream (with a slower to-and-fro motion with the rod to account for drag created by

FWF THE INTRUDER

Scott Howell Signature Series

Hook: #4/0 Mustad 36890 with hook bend cut off. Gamakatsu octopus style hook size 4 attached 'stinger' style with 30 pound Fireline or mono

Thread: 6/0 Uni-Thread

Eyes: Nickel plated lead or tungsten dumbbell eyes

Wing: Ostrich herl

Hackle: Ostrich herl

Thorax: Ostrich herl

Body: Silver Mylar tinsel and fluorescent orange deer hair.



Notice the well defined lateral line in this photo. Salmonids are well equipped to detect their prey even in discoloured water.



Niki Spelic inspects a fine bull trout, which ate the fly as it started to lift in the water column just before the 'swing' phase of the swim. Notice the 'fluff' on the guide's fly patch—purple is a popular colour.

the bulky, air resistant fly) and a big mend is made in the line upon entry. This takes all of the initial tension off the fly and allows it to sink closer to the riverbed. Just as the line is about to come tight, another small mend is made, straightening out the little slack line remaining. You then just have to follow the line around with the rod tip. It is important to get this second mend in before the line comes tight and the fly starts to swing. Otherwise, the mend just pulls on the tightened line and lifts the fly closer to the surface.

The first mend is the more important one and needs to be made immediately the fly enters the water. If the mend is made a fraction late, the drift takes control and washes the fly downstream before it enters the strike zone. This reduces the length of the drift and the time spent in the fish zone. Although this may sound trivial to some, its importance cannot be overstated. The subtleties in presentation are crucial and often make the difference between

catching lots of fish rather than a fish or two.

As the fly nears the end of the drift, action can be imparted on it by incorporating a range of retrieves. Short, sharp jabs seem to work best and you can induce takes by lowering the rod down to the water and feeding some line out towards the end of the retrieve. Often fish will follow the fly all the way downstream, but only commit once the fly becomes stationary or as it begins to dart up the water column. Takes are usually fast and aggressive, which reduces some of the guesswork in when to strike.

The stinger hooks rarely miss their mark with short takes, particularly at the end of the drift when the line is fully extended, seldom being a problem providing that contact is maintained at all times. The long and sometimes jointed bodies, which are a common characteristic in the Intruder style flies, add to the action in the fast water and draw fish to the fly even when no retrieve is being employed. This is one of

the main differences to flies used in traditional down and across fishing methods as generally used in Australia.

Roll casts, snake rolls and other casts that assist with changes in direction and line extraction are essential with this style of fishing. Longer rods (10ft) are also useful to maintain control across the current and allow for extra reach, particularly when fishing over faster water to reach slower water on the other side. Rhythm and repetition is also essential with erratic movements or sudden changes in direction usually ending in disaster.

Sink tip lines and leaders

Although the flies sink well when used in conjunction with a sink tip line (any of the more reputable brands work well), leader design and material is an important consideration to ensure that the flies reach optimum depth early in the presentation. Relatively short (6ft), level leaders constructed of fluorocarbon material help the flies to sink quickly through the water column, whilst the short leader ensures that contact is maintained and no belly forms between the end of the fly line and the fly. In high flows and discoloured water, fish are not leader shy and you can afford to shorten up. I generally use a minimum of 6lb fluorocarbon and more commonly 8lb or even 10lb in heavy water containing large boulders and timber.

Fishing at range is far more important than casting a long way with a long leader and not being able to control the presentation. Short casts extending not far past the floating, running line ensure good contact and control, and also reduce the likelihood of any extra line being affected by the current. In slower water or very deep runs, DI 3 or DI 5 sinking lines also work well with the Airflo Sixth Sense being my line of choice. These lines have no stretch and superb bite detection qualities, but can be difficult to control in faster currents, particularly when wading.

I recall using the Airflo DI 3 at the 2009 Australian Fly Fishing Championships on the

Derwent River in Tasmania in fast flowing water with much smaller flies and longer casts with some success. However, I have since found that the Canadian method of using bigger flies on a shorter line works just as well, if not better. I just wish I had had some Intruders in the box to try on the Derwent!

Locations

Most success using this method seems to come in areas where heavy flow is diverted by obstacles or fanned out and spread over a larger area where the riverbed widens. This creates pocket water, back eddies, seam lines, drop-offs and even areas of reverse flow where most of the action is likely to occur. Fish don't like to expend energy with little or no return and will only occupy the fastest water for short periods whilst moving upstream or downstream.

This doesn't mean that you should overlook areas of seemingly uniform depth and fast flow, as these will often produce fish if there is sufficient cover on the riverbed in the form of boulders and depressions (common in freestone rivers).

Prime locations are where fast water and holding water lie adjacent to one another, which ensure a constant supply of food and respite from the current. Most strikes come in

the transition zone, however all of the water should be fished methodically, particularly in the evening and at night when fish are on the move. At these times, fish can be found almost anywhere along the river, although most will settle into a holding position and can be located with a degree of predictability in the prime locations.

Australian rivers

Although my experience to date has been limited to the Pitt and Fraser rivers abroad and the Eucumbene and Thredbo rivers at home, (mainly targeting rainbows), this method can be applied to similar waters such as the Tumut, Derwent, Murray and Goulburn rivers to name a few. At the time of writing, even smaller rivers such as the upper Murrumbidgee and the Goodradigbee have seen above average flows where big flies in dirty water are now a real proposition.

I am convinced that this technique would have some merit targeting natives in heavy flow, particularly early in the season. Intruders are the perfect fly for Murray cod and golden perch in their natural environments, and fishing them on a short line off a rock bar at my favourite cod hole is definitely something I will be trying in between my trout fishing trips this season.

Conclusion

If the short term weather forecast is anything to go by, we are going to have a much wetter spring and summer than usual. This means that higher than average flows and dirty water are going to be with us for a while to come. A such, we should employ methods that we know work in these conditions and make the most of it, even if sometimes they may appear foreign and out of our comfort zones.

One thing I have learnt from fishing in Canada is that fish do not recognise borders and the use of new techniques and flies should not be restricted to their place of origin. As a friend of mine once said, if you put a rat in a rabbit burrow, at the end of the day it is still a rat. Fish are much the same.

Danny Spelic is a fishing journalist and CIT fishing instructor based in Canberra. He is a long standing member of the Professional Fishing Instructors and Guides Association and is a FFF Certified Casting Instructor. He recently represented Australia at the World Casting Championships in Croatia and competes in Fly Fishing and Fly Casting Competitions at both state and national level. Although Fly Fishing is his passion, Danny also enjoys casting lures for natives, and catching trout on all forms of tackle.



FWF FRASER RIVER LODGE



The food is superb and prepared with local produce by professional chefs. I rate the meals as 5 star. The bar is fully stocked with some magnificent beers and wines and there is even a cigar fridge.

For the non-fishing partner, a day spa, games room and gym are also located on the premises. There are alternative eating establishments in the nearby town of Harrison Hot Springs.

Weather and season

The salmon / trout season runs from May to December, whilst sturgeon fishing is available year round. Weather at this time of the year is mild to warm.

Currency

The Canadian dollar and Australian dollar are about on parity at the time of writing.

Visa

No visa is required for Australian citizens.

Fishing equipment and guides

All equipment can be provided upon request. The lodge has an extensive range of waders available and the guides can provide all tackle, flies, bait etc. For the wilderness fishing I used a 9ft, #6 weight fly rod and a sink tip line. Leaders do not need to be very long and 8-10lb monofilament will work fine. Multi-piece rods are a definite advantage. There is also a small, but well equipped shop at the lodge for those last minute supplies.

Costs

Prices vary depending on the package and the type of fishing, but start from as little as \$75 per person per night based on double occupancy and \$75 for breakfast, lunch and gourmet dinner. The lodge also offers special rates for fill-in anglers that want to join a party and share costs. This is a very effective way to fish inexpensively if you are on your own.



Location: Agassiz, British Columbia, Canada

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How to get there
Fraser River Lodge is situated on the banks of the Fraser River around an hour's drive outside of Vancouver, British Columbia.

The Lodge
The lodge is a well-appointed log-style retreat situated on 18 acres of land within walking distance of the Fraser River. There are spectacular views of Mount Cheam (7000ft) and the surrounding hills from the main dining area and spacious balcony.

Guests have the choice of staying in the deluxe or executive rooms. We stayed in the deluxe rooms, which included a private full bathroom

and separate shower, high speed internet, satellite TV, oversized beds, down-filled doonas and a variety of pillows.

The bar area and main dining room have floor to ceiling windows to take advantage of the magnificent views across the river to Mt Cheam.