

DO TROUT LEAP ON A SLACK LINE?

By WILLIAM C. HARRIS

IT is very interesting and at times amusing to gather and attempt to digest and reconcile the conflicting opinions of fishermen as to the habits, the best tackle, the baits and methods of killing, on the rod, the trout, the black bass and other game fishes. It is also somewhat surprising to find them differing widely as to the actions of certain fish when held on the same tackle, in the same pool, and caught on a similar bait by anglers of equal skill and experience. This divergence of opinions can be readily understood, but the reason why fish, restrained by the line, do certain erratic things will always remain an unsolved problem.

Many men are so constituted mentally that whenever an incident occurs outside of the plane of their ordinary experience, it is apt to assume a semi-curious phase, and to be classed as peculiar in its nature and infrequent of occurrence, yet every day in the year things of like character are occurring to other people. Now, this mental condition will be more frequently observed among fishermen than any other class of "out-of-doors" pleasure seekers, and it is very generally conceded, even by anglers themselves, that if one of their number has an unusual experience when fighting a hooked fish, all of its ilk are frequently credited with similar and constant qualities, because that individual fish chanced to show peculiar traits when it was being killed on the rod. And, for all time thereafter, fishers of the same species under all or any conditions of the atmosphere and the water, in every quarter of their habitat could and would do just as that certain fish did, when that fisherman caught it. Anglers, like their rods, are sometimes so set that nothing but a heavy weight, hung dead, to the tip of their fads will straighten them out. To illustrate:

Fifty-two years ago I caught my first trout while wading down Pleasant stream in Lycoming County, Pa. On one of the upper but relatively larger pools, a rock in the center of it protruded eight or ten inches from the surface. A half-pound trout was hooked a few feet to the right of the rock, and after a few dashes, hither and yon, the fish made straight for the rock and leaped clear over it, covering at least three feet in the act.

I had been reading for several years of the gallant and graceful leaps of the brook trout, and my experience on Pleasant Stream convinced me that my fish was the champion acrobat of the trout waters of Pennsylvania. Years passed on, during which I fished the streams where *fontinalis* lived, from the Laurentian chain to the mountains of western North Carolina and from the Mississippi River to the Atlantic Ocean. During this extended fishing period I read with avidity at home, in camp and

during the many noonings on the banks of the fishing waters, the magazines and weekly journals devoted solely, or in part, to angling, and was never stated by the florid tales of high-leaping trout and flashing rainbows in the spray thrown into the air by their desperate convulsions, knotted sinews and contorted bodies.

At last, after a ten hours' successful fish on the Beaverkill River in Sullivan County, N. Y., the day ended with a camp-fire talk, and one of the zealous extremes of the party, after relating his conquests, wound up by telling how his biggest trout made a grand leap, upward and arch-like, but was creeded after a hard fight. All at once it dawned upon me that no trout, and I had about twenty line ones, caught by me on that day, had sown its entire body out of the water, and only a portion of it when held hard by the rod. And still more, my memory failed to recall a single instance, except the one that occurred on Pleasant Stream described above, wherein a red-spotted trout (*fontinalis*) had leaped into the air on a slack line, although many of them had fought, perforce, on the surface when tightly held by an over-strenuous angler. I questioned my brother camper:

"Did your trout leap on a looping or slack line when making an inrush?"

"Of course not! I never give a trout or any other fish an inch of line, unless he makes me to do so."

The alleged leaping habit of the trout then became a subject of an earnest camp-fire talk, and while my four companions had a childlike faith in the aerial flights of *fontinalis*, none of them could verify by their own experience a single instance in which a trout came voluntarily out of the water when the line was loose or belling in it. The personal experience on Pleasant Stream was related, and it seemed to them to confirm the general opinion that the trout was an acrobat when hooked. But the matter had been thought out and the reason why he had so leaped three feet across a surface-protruding rock was explained. He was held taut, and when the strong surge towards the rock was made, the fish could not go below it; if he struck it a broken nose or neck would result, and the figure of the angler standing out in the glare of the sunlight just in front of him, so frightened the trout that he dare not rush forward; hence, no other recourse was left except to leap over the rock, which was done obliquely and rightly up stream, owing to the relatively short line and the tautness of it. There was nothing voluntary in the act; it was his only hope of escape, and exhibited no reasoning powers but simply the mere brute instinct to avoid being killed.

Ask an hundred trout fishermen if the trout leaps after being hooked, and ninety

of them will doubtless reply that he does. Read the angling journals, and ten chances to one you will find, here and there, not only a vivid description of this trait of the trout, but an illustration of one of them in the air fastened by a straining line and a fly-hook imbedded in its jaw or tongue. Dozens of fishing tackle dealers use such illustrations in their business, and every young angler goes upon a trout stream impressed with the belief that every trout he may catch will frantically seek the air as a factor of escape from the steel. Stranger still these tyros, young and old, fail to remember, when they return from their outings, that the red-spotted beauty did not come out of the water unless forced to do so by the rod.

These somewhat lengthy notes have been called forth by an interesting letter from Mr. W. H. Blake, of Toronto, Canada, in which exceptions are taken to a paragraph in *OUTING* of June last, on the jumping of trout. He is quoted in full because many fishermen have fallen into the habit, and an overindulgence of it, of caring less for a knowledge of the life histories and habits of the fish they catch, than the excitement of jerking them out of the water. The fact that trout do or do not jump out of the water on a slack line when hooked, is of far more importance than the ordinary angler considers it to be, for an accurate knowledge of the fighting tactics and resources of fish for escape, is as necessary to the fisher as the baits he uses to lure them.

If the trout simply pull hard and surge deep, the average rod and line man will readily reel them; if they leap into the air, turn somersaults (as I have seen them do when at play), or describe the segment of a circle in their aerial curves, the angler's best skill is requisite to kill them. Should the fish be, say, over a pound, and the rod in use weighing only four or five ounces, and such rods are now in general use, the tip of the rod should be in harmony with the actions of the fish, lowered instantly but not too much, as it dips obedient in its "yielding resistance" to the heft and strength of the fish. But if the trout is a small one, the spring of the light rod, and the backbone in the second joint should be (in a good rod be it ever so light) sufficient to sustain a trout of less than a pound in weight without breakage. It should not be forgotten that when lowering the tip of the rod to a large fish of any species, the line should never loop in the water as the fish reaches it, for he is apt to fall upon and break it through his sheer weight; nor should it be overlooked that the oftener a fish jumps out of the water, the quicker he becomes exhausted; hence, the error of some anglers in deploring the leap of a fish. They should rather be glad to have them do so, and when the fish is in the air on a taut line jerk them flat on their sides, as it is said some tarpon anglers do to exhaust and kill quickly the "silver king" of the Southern seas. Mr. Blake writes *OUTING*:

"Mr. Wm. C. Harris, in a very interesting article on the black bass, which appeared in *OUTING* for June, makes the following statement:

"The Eastern brook trout (*fontinalis*) never comes entirely out of the water when hooked, unless pulled out by an over-zealous rodster."

"Mr. Harris can scarcely have erred in his observations, but it may be interesting to your readers to know that *Salvelinus fontinalis* does not behave everywhere in the same way. Speaking of the Laurentian lakes and streams one seldom sees small trout come out of the water when hooked, but it is not very rare for large ones to do so. I have seen trout of from three to six pounds weight jump clear of the water after a run, and repeat this two or three times, so that the phrase, 'Comme un saumon, from our French Canadian guides was a most fit description of the manœuver. I recollect one prodigious leap, estimated by the eye to be not less than six feet from the point where the fish broke water to the place where he returned to it. Trout above the weight mentioned fight below the surface, so far as my experience goes, but I have it on excellent authority that one of eight and a quarter pounds jumped more than once when on the hook. I have also known these great trout to come clear of the water to take the fly, but this happens very seldom.

"Mr. Harris's statement in the main is true. A trout's first rush is generally downward, or with the current, but he knows the other trick, and sometimes uses it. Thinking over instances, I cannot say that this happens oftener in rapid than in still water."

If Mr. Blake has not erred in stating that the fish above named was a pure *fontinalis*, his letter not only throws a new light on the habits of this trout, but unsettles the confirmed experience of many years of old anglers, that small fish are more active and acrobatic than large ones of the same species. In the Laurentian waters we now hear that the large fish are the most agile. Certainly, from Walton down to the lamented Dean Sage—lapsed time over three centuries—we have all been adrift or else our correspondent has inadvertently dropped into error.

Referring to the leap of the trout, the possession of this trait or the absence of it in fish living in waters widely apart, has been shown by observations of the habits of the small-mouthed and large-mouthed black bass. It is conceded that the former seldom fails to leap when on the hook, and that the latter only does so in the waters of the far Northwest, notably in Minnesota. All the big-mouths that have been killed on my rod have come half-drowned to the net with wide open jaws and without a struggle, while those taken by several friends and correspondents from Minnesota have leaped repeatedly and fought desperately. Mr. John Owens, an earnest and experienced angler and a constant vis-

itor to Florida, told me that the large-mouthed black bass in some of the waters of that State came briskly into the air. Certainly what a bronzebacker can and does do, the more highly organized and clipper-built brook favorite has the power to do, although he fails to show to the anglers of the temperate zone the extent of his physical faculties. He surely does not show his velvety body to the anglers of the Middle States when handled on a fly-rod.

Years ago the columns of *The American Angler* were filled to the brim with angling correspondence, in which each writer, prompted by duty to his younger brothers of the craft, recorded their observations of the habits of the fish taken on their own rods. Of late, indifference in this respect seems to prevail. Will not the angling readers of *OUTING* send the editor of this department their experience with leaping or non-leaping trout? Let us commune with each other.

Mr. J. W. Bolgen writes to ascertain the opinion of this department about the best atmospheric condition in which to fish for small-mouthed black bass. He states that he has never found so many variant opinions among anglers as exist on this subject. This department is somewhat of an old fogey in regard to the beliefs current among fishermen that weather conditions seriously affect the scores. True, a cold, stormy, wet day will prevent surface-feeding fish from rising to the feathers, particularly if the water is comparatively shallow, when it is quickly chilled by a falling temperature of the air. But an east or north wind has never, to my knowledge, affected scores which no difference in temperature of the water took place, yet from the time of old Juliana Benner's (1486) to the present day an east wind was, and is, held by many fishermen to be a trenchant factor in preventing fish from biting. Many correspondents agree with me, but others are firm believers in the old doctrine.

It is not an unusual occurrence to hear salt-water fishermen say that such and such winds will bring the fish in through inlets or passes from the ocean or from the lower or upper parts of the estuaries. They surely forget that salt-water fish feed at certain stages of the tide, mainly on the flood, and that the wind has nothing to do with their feeding, except possibly at a few widely separated localities where shallows prevail and the tides are weak. When a strong wind prevails for several days from a certain direction, these flats are covered with water and the fish frequent them to feed.

A few years ago Mr. Waldron Bates, of Boston, wrote me that his favorite and most successful fishing hours were those when a fog prevailed, and this is a reminder of the most fruitful fly-fishing for black bass that my memory re-calls. The wind was from the east, the air misty and humid, the water about four feet deep, time two hours, and the location the Schuylkill River about

thirty miles above the city of Philadelphia. Wading waist deep, when casting, twenty-eight small-mouthed red-eyed black bass were killed on a six-ounce rod. The fish were rising freely in front, on both sides, and frequently their splash was heard from behind, when, if the flies were quickly cast and the distance calculation accurate, a two-pounder would be caught, now and then, that was not seen, but only heard to rise; of course the feathers were allowed to sink at once in the surface swirl made by the fish. So much for an east wind on that eventful day.

It seems to be the consensus of opinion among anglers that trout will commence to rise at the moment the rain drops begin to splatter on the surface of the pool or rift, no matter from what quarter the wind may be blowing, but many believe that they will not feed during a thunder storm. It is, however, established that they are not alarmed at low, rolling volumes of thunder, but when it becomes intermittent with sudden "claps," these fish retire to the deepest holes that can be reached by them. This peculiar habit can be easily understood and explained. When the thunder is low and deep, but regular in intonation, the atmosphere is not agitated with vibrations sufficiently strong enough to affect the surface of the water; on the other hand sudden and loud thunder claps produce concussions that alarm the fish, causing them to scurry to a place of safety.

In the matter of direction of the wind producing favorable or unfavorable results in trout fishings, it should be remembered that when an angler is wading down a wooded trout stream, a strong wind changes its direction to almost all the points of the compass, whirling around the bends of the stream, dashing through tree-intervals and circling in eddies, tempered or strengthened at every few hundred feet of the brook. A sharp, chilling east wind in the early days of the open season is hardly a factor in lowering the temperature of the water, from which, in a tardy spring, the snow water has hardly run out and the chill of winter still remains. Later on, when the foliage is in its fulness of greenery and the stream in its normal fishing condition, it will require several days of constant northern gales to lower the temperature of a trout brook, particularly if it is dashing, dancing or rippling its devious course over pebbles, boulders, fallen and half-sunken trunks and other obstructions.

But be this all as it may, one indisputable fact remains, that fish will not bite unless they are hungry, and their regular periods of satiety and hunger are unknown. Some feed at night and repose during a portion of the day, at least it seems so in fresh waters. In salt waters they are still more irregular; some species feed at the full of the tide, others at half tide, and many at extreme low water, and so on and so on.