The Myth of the Dry Fly Hero: Its Rise and Fall in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan

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Abstract

In 1886, Frederic Halford's book Floating Flies and How to Dress Them sparked a global shift in fly fishing from sinking flies, wet flies to floating flies, dry flies. The dry fly purist, an angler who fished only dry flies, became a mythic figure, a moneyed, well-educated white man, who banded together with other wealthy white men to form exclusive fishing clubs where only upstream dry fly fishing was allowed. Purists spread the myth of the dry fly hero by publishing books and magazine articles extolling their erudition and expertise as anglers.

For a century the heroic myth of the dry fly purist dominated Michigan and Upper Peninsula trout fishing. Its credibility was bolstered by the hatchery raised trout released annually into Michigan lakes, rivers, and streams. The traits enabling trout to thrive in fish hatcheries were the same traits which made them peculiarly vulnerable to dry fly fishing. Hatchery raised trout preferred to forage on or near the surface; they lacked wariness ignoring the presence of predators; and they remained exposed in the upper reaches of the water column during surface disturbance events.

Over the last few decades, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources changed its stocking policies, propagating and releasing fewer and fewer hatchery trout into Upper Peninsula waters. With fewer hatchery raised trout swimming Michigan trout waters, the mythic dry fly purist is becoming a less effective angler thereby losing his grip on anglers’ imaginations and so his place in fishing literature.

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