

The Grayling

By Lars-Åke Olsson

I saw my first grayling more than 50 years ago while fishing with my father and grandfather on the Faxälven river near my childhood home in Långsele, Sweden. During the summer we often floated the rapids in my grandfather's flat bottomed boat. Two short rods were positioned in the stern trailing nylon fishing lines in the water behind us. At the end of each line were droppers sporting double-hooked flies that had been tied at the kitchen table. The flies had yarn bodies, sometimes with a gold or silver ribbing, and each was topped with a speckled feather from a mallard's breast. The "hackles" were course nylon threads that flared to the sides. The flies were clumsy, but effective, and every time we fished the rapids we caught a lot of grayling.

The grayling lives in wild pristine waters in wild pristine places. It fights well and has a unique beauty like no other game fish in its category. There are two distinct species of this fish: *Thymallus thymallus*—the grayling found in European waters, and *Thymallus arcticus*—found primarily in Alaskan and Asian waters. Each May, the grayling of Sweden leave the protective depths of the lakes they winter in and migrate to the rivers flowing into and out of these lakes to spawn. The eggs hatch in two to three weeks and the fingerlings grow up to three inches that first summer. It will take four to five years (length of 13-14 inches) before a grayling is mature enough to spawn for the first time. Grayling that survive the hazards of predators, fishers, other fish, and environmental dangers can live in upwards of twenty years and reach hefty weights over six pounds.

When the grayling matures, it loses the silver colouring of its youth. The pectoral fins and the tail acquire shades of burgundy red and purple and the abdomen fins become tiger striped. The body takes on a metallic green hue. The grayling has a unique and exaggerated dorsal fin that arches over the top of its body like a Japanese fan. The colours of the dorsal fin are most beautiful in a combination of red, black, blue, and burgundy, with a large turquoise spot at the rear. Big males have a fin that drapes to the little adipose fin.

The grayling prefers to feed at the bottom of the stream where it uses its protruding upper lip to Hoover caddis larvae, stonefly and mayfly nymphs, but at the same time it keeps an eye out for the surface where it can be tempted to rise six to ten feet or more for a mayfly dun or a dry fly.

The Swiss fly fisher Charles Ritz, who lived in the USA and France and fished for many years in European streams, tells us in his book, *A Fly Fisher's Life*, (1959), that as a sport fish he preferred the grayling over the trout—even the salmon, and he lists the following ten reasons for it:

- The necessity for the precise determination of the area of drift
- The narrowness of the channel of drift in which acceptance is probable
- The length of drift without drag
- The extreme precision with which the fly must be presented
- The necessity for concealing the point of the leader
- The grayling's habit of taking the fly downstream (in retreat) after a quick, swirling rise.
- The fineness of the leader tippet
- The minute size of the flies used
- The sensitivity of nylon leader tapered to .007 in. to the slightest breeze
- The difficulty of the strike owing to the shape of the mouth and the manner of taking the fly

Ritz also considered successful dry-fly-grayling fishermen to be the most skilled fishermen, next the trout fishermen of spring creeks and chalk streams, then thirdly all other trout fishermen.

The English fly fisher and author, John Roberts, in his book, *Fly Fishing for Grayling*, tells us that over the last twenty years there has been a considerable increase of interest in grayling fishing both in the U.K. and in the rest of Europe where grayling are found. The fourfold growth of the grayling Society from about three hundred members in 1982 to twelve hundred in 1999 indicates its wider popularity. One of the reasons today's European fly fishers appreciate the grayling is because it's a wild fish. Fly fishermen today value the preservation of wild streams and rivers because stocked rivers and reservoirs produce a weaker less

appealing catch. In addition, fly fishing success is less about the number or size of fish killed but about the fishing experience. Wild grayling is part of that quality.

Currently, efforts to preserve and protect grayling are being made in the United States on many of its famed rivers and tributaries. The grayling is being seen as “the canary of the stream” since it requires high pH value and water purity in order to survive. When the grayling disappears from its natural habitat, it is a signal that potential danger and decimation of other game fish in those waters are just around the corner.

Being a fly fisherman, it is easy to appreciate the grayling. On a cold and rainy June day, many years after sitting at the elbows of my father and grandfather in that flat bottomed boat on Faxälven, I witnessed one of the impressive mayfly hatches that take place that time of year when the skies are dark with clouds and the temperature drops. The Large-Dark-Olive of Spring, the BWO, and the Yellow May Dun stood on the surface of Idsjöströmmen with shivering wings. Grayling rose around me — being ultra selective and difficult to catch. The size, the shape and the colour of the fly had to be right as well as the presentation. To match the hatch was absolutely necessary. I tied a #14 olive-green Gim River dun, to a 12-foot leader and waited. I watched one particular grayling feeding on dun after dun. When there was a gap in the line of drifting duns, I put my fly two feet above (the grayling doesn't want to move sideways when rising to the surface. It rises in a straight line and if the cast is too short or too long, it won't take). On my tenth cast I succeeded in presenting the fly in the feeding lane without drag and was rewarded with a healthy hard fighting grayling over sixteen inches.