

Schubert's Trout

by

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It was a deep pool where the Brook had a ninety-degree elbow fringed by coppiced hazels and some big alders. The man with the waders caked in mud was kneeling in the shallow water on the inside of the bend. Under the shadow of the tall bank, he looked across the pool. A couple of weeks before he had been in this same spot, optimistically pulling up the Himalayan Balsam which was taking over from the nettles, hemlock, burr-reed and other native plants. Pausing from his labour, he had made a mental note that it would be possible to fish the faster water in the riffle at the head of the pool even in low water. In the riffle his cast would have some chance of not being detectable by the ultra-spooky fish to be found here. In any case, as casting was definitely not his strong suit, it was always best to try to load the dice favourably.

Now, on this warm afternoon, he was armed with his rod. The surface of the pool was dark and oily-smooth except where the low summer current entered at the top, leaving a snake of bubbles on the surface. Opposite stood a sheer vertical bank of red earth below the line of fence. Bright red alder roots grew out from this bank under the surface, making great hiding

places for fish, with top cover from predators and plenty of fish-sized holes in the filigree of the root network.

A slanting shaft of sunlight had found its way through the trees. It penetrated a small patch of water in the middle of the pool. Watching quietly, after a few minutes the angler noticed the occasional tiny ripple which didn't look part of the current lazily weaving through the pool.

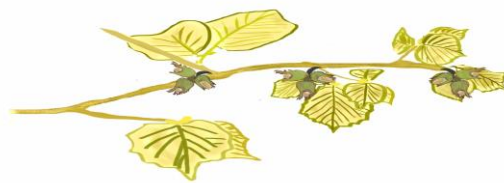
After a while a glimpse of a small trout in the sunbeam confirmed the angler's hope. The fish was nosing around taking something from immediately under the surface film, confidently but not lazily as a bigger fish might. It reminded him of an alert and enthusiastic kid on an Easter egg hunt.

The angler decided to take his chance. He cast as delicately as he could towards the sunlit patch, allowed the fly to drift down and then very gently retrieved. After several casts, with the fish moving jauntily about, it was showing interest in the fly he had chosen but had always turned away at the last moment. As the trout seemed unaware of his presence the angler decided to carry out a scientific investigation to try to find out what the fish was 'on'.

Time after time the fly was changed, cast out, and retrieved. Time after time, the fish flashed across to where the new offering fell, inspected it closely, and then scooted off again. It was a totally absorbing game for the angler, but ultimately one with a negative outcome as he came to the end of his fly selection without enticing the trout to take, while the sun sank lower and the sunbeam shifted on to the far bank. He wondered to himself if the very presentation of a range of different flies had put the trout on its guard, or whether there was, more likely, something about the presentation which was unnatural.

Musing thus whilst he walked back down the Brook on his way home, the angler realised that he had in his head, repeating itself over and over, the key theme of Schubert's 'Trout'. Something about the way that trout was moving about in the water, feeding here and then moving there, had triggered an association subconsciously in his mind. The right hand of the pianist was the movement and action and the thrumming of the trout's constant finning was in the background. Evidently Schubert was a close observer of trout behaviour! The playfulness in the musical phrase led the angler towards an anthropomorphic idea: the trout was laughing at him as it frolicked and fed. He didn't mind, he had had the pleasure of seeing into its life in this enchanted place for a short while, and was, at last, after so many years of only modest and episodic success in his fishing, wise enough to count this a privilege and a pleasure to be stored in his memory and brought out and admired from time to time.

As he drove home, the tune still repeating in his head, the angler stored away the happy memory of his one-to-one experience with this trout: he would henceforth think of it as Schubert's Trout.



For a farmer on land sloping down to a small tributary few miles upstream, the wet autumn hadn't been the end of it. He was very pleased about having made a number of increases of the size of his herd and added new covered buildings to house cattle in the winter; the returns were beginning to look good. His only slight worry was that he was becoming increasingly aware of the fact that this expansion had reduced his effective slurry storage capacity. Not only were there more cattle in total but with time and improvements in breeding and nutrition each animal was bigger, and produced more waste. Although the new buildings had their own under-floor slurry storage, this was designed to overflow to the

original brown water retention pond further down the slope. The cost of a new pond or tank would have reduced his profit margin considerably, and the planners hadn't raised any objections, so he had gone ahead. In any case he had always been able to manage his slurry to date.

As winter set in the rains just kept on coming, wave after wave of heavy downpours. All the cattle had to come in to the sheds early. There they stayed for month after month. The silage ran out early and more feed had to be bought. The slurry tanks were already full and the ground was far too wet to even think about spreading any on the land: worries about runoff aside, it would damage the soil structure and impact on productivity long-term. The pond level just kept on rising...



Even after such a wet autumn, it had been an exceptionally wet winter. Under the surface of the Brook, in the coloured water, life was in suspense. The Brook had been at flood level for weeks on end. Although driven by instinct to spawn during a brief period of drier weather in early January, the eggs the trout had laid and fertilised in the redds had been washed away soon afterwards. Throughout the long dark winter days and nights Schubert's trout had done what the other fish around here did when exhausted after the spawning- find a sheltered hole under the alder roots, right in under the bank, and shelter there whilst the torrents raged past, hoping for an opportunity to feed when the floods were over. He had been doing this for weeks on end. Energy conservation was the only way to survive.

Then, one day, just as it was getting dark, Schubert's trout began to sense something unfamiliar in the water. At first it was a mild irritation in his mouth and gills. Then the water became even darker. It blocked out the twilight above. The irritation increased and became an intense burning. He tried to escape by moving but everywhere he tried was the same; his movements became involuntary, jerky and random. All he wanted to do was to get away from the burning, but it just kept getting worse. He could feel it building up inside his body now. He became frantic to escape, gagging and disoriented. Twice his out-of-control movement pushed him out into the powerful main current. Both times he only just managed to get back in to a hole under the bank to avoid being swept away in the engulfing poison.

In the still water under the bank the burning was not quite so bad. He stayed there and gradually felt the water begin to flush out his gills. The bitter taste subsided. Time passed slowly as he held tight under the overhang, gills working overtime. It was night now. His whole body, completely spent from fighting the dark burning water, went into shutdown as midnight came. No conscious attempt at survival remained. Nothing was left. From now on it was all down to his instincts and automatic reflexes. They had been programmed into his DNA over thousands of millennia, but in all those millennia there had never been anything like this....

At first it was just a faint lightening of the surface above. Then, as dawn crept across the valley, the little trout's senses recovered. He realised he could breathe normally although his gills felt sore and swollen. As he slowly became aware once more of his surroundings he noticed that there were two larger trout caught motionless in the root network nearby. A little later another big fish floated past above him, upside down, then another and another. The still-strong current was carrying them downstream fast.

He began slowly to explore the water outside his root-bound shelter. The fast current was fresh on his flanks and, though after the bitter water that had pervaded his world a few hours earlier he could taste nothing, he now felt the free flow of life-giving oxygen resurrecting his body and restoring his senses. Instinct drove him back under the overhang where he could conserve his failing energy and recover.



In the angler's home office not far from the Brook, the phone rang. "There's been a pollution incident on the Brook... A lot of cattle slurry coming down.. The Environment Agency are there taking samples.....the ford is three feet high with foam... dead fish coming down..." "Oh bugger." A pause whilst the angler tried to think clearly what to do. "Not much point in getting down there now if the EA are already there, as it's dark already. They'll be sampling whatever it is." "We've got volunteers working down on the Brook from nine tomorrow, so we'll have a good look then." Ever since they decided fifteen years ago to stop stocking, go over to catch-and-release and do what they could to help the wild fish population to thrive they had worried about something like this. The project had turned out to be a huge success, but the angler and his friends all knew that the pressures on the Brook were there, and that the slow build-up of the trout population could easily and rapidly be reversed if a major pollution happened. Just a few months before, a leak from a warehouse a few miles upstream had set all the alarm bells ringing, but that had turned out not to be a problem for this part of the Brook. The angler went to bed hoping against hope that this would turn out the same way.

Next morning Alun's face said it all. "Bad news, I'm afraid. There are some dead fish caught in roots and floating down. We've collected a few on the bench over there." Six good-sized fish lay there, stiff but still beautiful. As the morning progressed the six volunteers found more, lots more. They surveyed up and down the Brook and found dead fish everywhere they looked. Their mood developed into something more than sombre, closer to despair. They worked on in silence. None of them had experienced anything like this before. Even Sarah, the experienced fisheries scientist from the EA who came along to find out what they had found, was dismayed. She had followed the pollution trail upstream until she had found a cattle slurry tank a few miles upstream on a small tributary which had burst. "It was a tsunami of slurry", "very high ammonia level, but the oxygen was OK" "could be 100% fish kill, have to wait and see".

The dispirited group carried on collecting evidence in the form of photos and counts of dead fish, and then went home. The angler began to wonder if they had been misguided in trying to do something positive for the Brook. Their efforts seemed to have all been undone so quickly. His thoughts were as moonless and black as that cold winter night.



The angler and his colleagues spent hours discussing how to proceed. How could they get a measure of the extent of the damage? It would be useful even to find out if there were any or no fish there at all, but the EA wouldn't be able to electro-fish it until the water level returned to normal. We concluded that we should put ourselves to work as soon as the season opened to see whether there were still any trout in the Brook. But this was over a month off.

A few days later Rob came on the line. "I was at a meeting yesterday and the EA were there. To cut a long story short I've persuaded them to let us fish the Brook using bait next Saturday, to see if we can establish the presence of fish." The following Saturday saw six anglers fishing the now slightly less high water. As we assembled Huw met us, having completed his section early. Our best nymph fisherman, he hadn't touched a thing. Feeling very unsure of himself as he hadn't bait-fished since he was a kid, the angler dangled a maggot in the first of the pools as he went upstream. Nothing. He moved upstream from one pool to the next, each triggering memories of happier days when just the sight of a rising fish was enough reward for the efforts over the years. The absence of any sign of life seemed to confirm Huw's bad news. The angler's fishing efforts became slapdash and desultory.

Driven on only by the need to be able to say he had completed his task but feeling in his bones that it was hopeless, that there was nothing left alive, the angler clambered up on the top of a high bank to take a look upstream of the long horseshoe bend ahead. Just above the bend was the pool where Schubert's trout had made fun of him the previous July. With weary, jaundiced eyes he scanned the surface out of long habit. Suddenly, his scan fixed abruptly on a spot near the head of the pool. "Hang on a minute!" he muttered to himself. He blinked and wondered if he was seeing things. "Was that a tiny movement at the head of the pool?" He told himself to stop being silly, but couldn't help looking again. "My God, a definite rise! And another!"

His heart in his mouth, he ducked down and slid back down the red mud of a three-metre bank. He entered the water as quietly as he could about twenty yards below the rising fish. Using the high bank as cover he crept up to a casting position. There he paused and thought about how best to capture this prize. It seemed obvious that chucking a maggot at it would be the best way to scare it off. Noticing that there were large dark olives hatching, he carefully tied on a suitable parachute fly. His first cast was short and off to the left of the fish, so he let it drift down and waited for the fish to show again. Then he made his second cast, more accurate this time. The fly drifted down over the fish. The fish rose and took the fly with gusto.

A few seconds later he was looking at a beautifully marked small wild trout which had somehow survived the passage of over 100,000 gallons of slurry down the Brook. The angler carefully removed the fly, took a photo as evidence, and gently let the fish swim off back into the pool. In that moment all of his despair and bitterness were washed away in wonder at the survival of this small fish. Somehow, despite the combined effects of man's shortcomings, the pressure of over-population and extremes of weather, this little Brook had hung on to its life - this time. In his head the joyful, playful trout Schubert had captured in

music began again to dance in the water as it moved here for a morsel and then darted off in a different direction.



Schubert's trout had taught the angler much. If he had been glad to have been interacting with him in the happy summer sunshine, he was ecstatic to re-make his acquaintance after the sea of slurry had threatened to extinguish the life of the Brook. As he marvelled at the power of recovery of the Brook, he came to understand in a more personal way how that power cannot safely be assumed or taken for granted. The Brook's ability to survive was completely dependent on the everyday interactions of all the different life forms in the water and along the banks. If those interactions remained robust and healthy, power of recovery would remain high. But should they be weakened by repeated or catastrophic pollution events, or continuous diffuse pollution, recovery potential too would become progressively weaker.

This time, in this part of the Brook, the effect of the pollution had been survivable. Those who cared for the upstream sections of the Brook had not been so lucky: there the concentration of ammonia had been even higher, and the flow less. There, it would take longer for the trout to come back, but at least there would be fish further down that could move up and re-populate. Fortunately the trout is a great pioneer, always on the lookout for new territories.

His photo of Schubert's trout became for the angler a symbol of survival against the odds: many fish perished, but some survived to re-establish a full population. Long may Schubert's song re-echo around the pools of this little, unremarkable but yet remarkable, Brook!

Footnote by "the angler".

This story had a happy ending. One pollution incident was survived, but the trend towards ever greater productivity and the extremes of climate make it certain that others will follow. The statistics for cattle slurry pollution incidents are showing an upturn after years of steady reductions. Despite the regulations many farms do not meet the required standards for storage capacity and structural and environmental integrity; 25% of farms have no slurry storage at all. Two summers after this episode the Brook was healthy and held more trout than ever, but sadly (and, perhaps mistakenly, because of this happy outcome) the regulator had failed to initiate any action against the polluter. After a further year minimal action was taken resulting in a modest donation to the local Rivers Trust. The frequency of slurry pollution incidents will continue to increase given the number of farms with cattle along the catchment and the increasing frequency of 'extreme' weather. Especially so, if farms (even, as in this case, farms which are owned by large-scale operators with environmental credentials and up-market branding) are not all willing to invest in adequate storage nor effectively penalised when they fail to observe the existing regulations and pollute waterways. The event described above was one amongst many warnings of worse to come,

but is as yet unheeded. Our rivers, brooks, streams, burns, lakes, lochs and loughs deserve better. So do the inhabitants (human and other) of these overcrowded islands.