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TECHNICAL TROLLING MUSKIES - DAN CRAVEN / DICK PEARSON: MUSINGS ON METHODS

Fly Rod



River Tiger: This large tiger required three fly changes and numerous casts to eventually hook and land.

Tigers

By Derek Wiley

It sounded like someone had thrown a large rock into the water in front of me, but the large swirl that resulted was not made from some hurled object. On the contrary, a large tiger muskie had confused my modified version of a saltwater fly known as the Bob's Banger with wounded prey and decided that it was feeding time. Fortunately for this tiger, its reckless pursuit of the fly was not accurate and somehow it never made contact with the hook.

When the tiger failed to respond to repeated casts with the Half-n-Half, I became a little worried that I had missed my opportunity at hooking a really nice tiger, an opportunity that does not happen consistently, especially with a fly rod.

I figured it was unlikely that more casts with the Half-n-Half would produce a strike, so I decided again to try another pattern, this time a nine-inch tandem hook deceiver style fly. Because this pattern is

then removed the large fly that was hooked in the side of the jaw, took a couple of quick pictures, and carefully released the fish to fight again. In my opinion, the unpredictable and aggressive nature of the tiger muskie makes it one of the most challenging and exciting freshwater fish species to pursue with a fly rod.

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With my heart pumping at a considerably faster pace, I made several more casts with the same fly but the tiger did not make a second attack. I quickly tied on a small, brown streamer known as a Half-n-Half in the hopes that the tiger would respond to a different fly. Sure enough, on my first cast in the vicinity of the initial strike, as I retrieved the Half-n-Half less than two feet below the water surface, I watched the same fish turn with gills flaring and swipe at the fly, only to again miss it completely.

extremely bulky, on the first cast when I stripped the fly, it did not sink immediately and kind of just twitched on the surface. But not for long. After two strips, the water erupted in a huge swirl, and this time the tiger inhaled the fly. I set the hook with several quick jabs of the rod and immediately the tiger made its first of what would turn out to be several powerful runs. A couple of minutes later, the tiger expended its last bit of energy with an acrobatic jump. As the fish tired I was able to lead it to shore, where I

northern pike and muskellunge (*Esox lucius* * *Esox masquinongy*). This occurrence, however, is rare because northern pike spawn several weeks to a month earlier than muskellunge and generally in shallower habitats. Most tiger muskies caught by anglers are hatchery raised and then introduced by state or local fisheries agencies to provide both prey control and increased opportunities for recreational anglers. In my former home state of Maryland, tiger muskies have been successfully

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introduced into the Potomac River and numerous reservoirs and lakes where they have become a prized game fish.

Fly Fishing Techniques

Tigers generally prey on large fishes, sometimes approaching 40% or more of their total body length, and this feeding behavior has major implications to the fly fisher for two reasons. First, large prey is digested slowly, which means that tigers will spend a considerable amount of time digesting food as opposed to actively feeding. And secondly, large flies are often required to imitate the tiger's sizeable prey.

Unfortunately, for the fly fisher, this typically means casting large, wind-resistant flies to fish that are often



Creek Mouth: In rivers, creek mouths can be excellent places to find tigers during the year. For instance, during mid-summer I observed three large tigers holding inside this creek during high water flows in the mainstem.

not interested in feeding. If you then take into account that tigers are a top predator and, therefore, exist in low numbers in any system where they have been introduced, the odds of taking one on a fly are even lower. So, how can a fly fisher successfully pursue tigers despite these disadvantages? I believe there are three keys to taking tigers on a fly: (1) be on the water when tigers are most likely to be actively feeding, (2)

concentrate fly fishing efforts to the more productive tiger waters and within those waters to areas that can be effectively covered with fly tackle, and (3) use the appropriate gear and equipment.

In my experience, tigers feed most actively during low light periods such as sunrise and sunset or during unstable weather that creates cloudy, windy, or drizzly conditions. Now this is not to say that these are the only times to fly fish for tigers, because I have also experienced some good fishing on calm, sunny days. But, without a doubt, these

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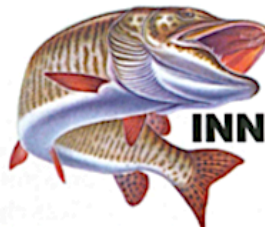


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periods of adverse weather, including several hours before a cold front, have by far been the most productive times for me to take tigers on a fly. During these active feeding times, I concentrate most of my efforts in areas where I have caught fish before or in spots that I know are likely to hold tigers and can be efficiently covered with a fly. In rivers this means concentrating my efforts in several key areas including slow-moving, deep holes with submerged woody debris or rocky structure, eddies that have good habitat and



Tiger Flies: Some of my favorite tiger flies are (top to bottom) standard and modified Bob's Banger, rabbit strip fly, Black Tandem, yellow-perch colored Half-n-Half and Deceiver, dark Half-n-Half, and large baitfish pattern.

are at least several feet deep, downstream of dams, and also at creek mouths. Sucker migrations in the spring often result in tigers

congregating below dams and at creek mouths, which makes these locations excellent places to cast a fly at this time. In lakes or reservoirs, I usually target dropoffs where grass or submerged woody debris is present or in areas where tigers are likely to ambush prey.

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Because I fly fish for tigers mostly by wading or with a small boat powered by an electric motor, I generally am confined to fishing smaller amounts of water, and as a result I tend to fish slowly and methodically. Surprisingly, this has actually worked to my benefit on a number of occasions when I have caught a tiger while fishing back through an area that I previously covered thoroughly. These situations have mostly occurred on a sunny afternoon

when I believe tigers were not actively feeding, but eventually became more aggressive as sunset approached. I now fish areas that are likely to hold fish multiple times during an outing to increase my odds of finding an active tiger.

Tackle

I use a fast action, nine foot, nine or ten weight graphite rod when fly fishing for tigers. Rods in the nine to ten weight range are ideal for cast-

ing large, bulky flies, and also have the strength to deliver a powerful hook set into the hard jaws of a tiger. Reels need to have a smooth drag that will not stick when a tiger makes a quick burst or thrashes on the surface. I prefer a large arbor reel to a conventional sized reel. The increased line recovery of a large arbor reel makes it much easier to stay tight to a fish that makes a run towards the angler and introduces slack into the line.

My current line system includes carrying two reels, one with a floating line and the other with an intermediate line. I generally fish the floating line when using poppers or other surface flies and the intermediate line when I want to fish a little deeper with streamers. For one of the reels I also have a spare spool with a full length sinking line for areas deeper than five or six feet or with moderate current. With this system I can easily change lines by either



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replacing a spool or changing reels. In the past I used a running line and shooting head system but became frustrated with loop connections getting caught in the guides. With this new system I no longer have this problem.

For leaders, I use a simple loop to loop connection tapered from thirty pound test down to seventeen or fourteen pound test tippet. Tigers have extremely sharp teeth that make it essential to use either a hard mono or wire guard to prevent bite offs. I have found nylon-coated wire from Berkley to be extremely effective at providing bite protection. A loop connection between the fly and wire can be created by wrapping the wire over itself and then burning it with a lighter. In clear, calm water conditions I feel hard mono is a better choice because wire guards can turn tigers off. Hard mono, which is made by several manufacturers including Mason, is a little difficult to work with but extremely resistant to a tiger's sharp teeth. I have as much faith in hard mono as I do in wire because of the number of occasions where I have had tigers completely inhale a fly but only inflict minor frays to the hard mono bite guard.



Reservoir Tiger: Unstable weather can really turn on sluggish tigers such as this fish that hammered my modified Bob's Banger right before a thunderstorm.

all black bucktail and saddle hackle. The color is ideal for stained waters, and the free-swimming trailer portion of the fly seems to be very enticing to tigers. The fly is best retrieved erratically with several quick strips followed by a short pause. During the pause in the retrieve, the fly's bulk keeps it suspended in the water column longer than sparsely tied flies, which I believe is the key to its effectiveness.

Banger and other surface flies are especially effective during clear water conditions when tigers can really inspect and may ultimately refuse a subsurface fly. On several occasions I have had tigers follow and refuse a streamer during the retrieve, but strike the fly when I brought it to the surface and twitched it after retrieving it to within several feet of the rod tip. I believe that on these occasions the action of the fly on the surface was the only way to get these fish to

Rods in the nine to ten weight range are ideal for casting large, bulky flies, and also have the strength to deliver a powerful hook set into the hard jaws of a tiger. Reels need to have a smooth drag that will not stick when a tiger makes a quick burst or thrashes on the surface.

Flies

Because fly fishing for muskies has yet to gain widespread popularity, few muskie fly patterns are currently available to fly fishers who do not tie their own flies. For this reason, I have spent several years experimenting with a variety of saltwater and home-made patterns with good success. One very productive pattern has been a fly I have termed the Black Tandem, a nine-inch tandem hook deceiver style fly that I tie with

Another productive pattern for me has been a saltwater Bob's Banger that I modified with an epoxy lip made of sheep's fleece. Instead of the typical popping sound that this surface fly is known for, the lip also adds a sideways swimming motion along with a more subtle pop that really seems to trigger aggressive strikes. I have had fish aggressively strike at this fly multiple times when using a quick, erratic retrieve. In my experience, the modified Bob's

strike. Other patterns that have worked quite well for me are Half-n-Halves in dark and perch colors and black rabbit strip flies.

Aquarium Observations

For nearly one year I raised several young tiger muskies (6 - 10 inches) in large aquaria for work-related purposes for an educational outreach display of some freshwater fishes occurring in Maryland. During this time, I made some

...trailer hooks are a good idea, especially for large flies where a tiger is more likely to miss a single hook. Second, in heavy cover, it is important to keep the fly in the strike zone as long as possible and to make multiple casts into good looking areas to ensure that if a tiger was there, it had a chance to strike the fly.

observations concerning feeding behavior of these tiger muskies on baitfish that I believe can assist in the pursuit of the species with fly tackle. First, even when fed small fish, tigers sometimes grabbed the prey by the tail and held it for up to several minutes until the prey stopped struggling and they were able to manipulate the entire fish into their mouth. Second, when a tiger spotted prey in heavy cover such as in aquatic plants or behind a rock, it would watch the prey, but would usually not strike until it had maneuvered its body into the best position for an attack. And third, as you saw in the beginning of this article, not all attacks were successful. So what does this mean for the fly fisher? Well, for starters, trailer

hooks are a good idea, especially for large flies where a tiger is more likely to miss a single hook. Second, in heavy cover, it is important to keep the fly in the strike zone as long as possible and to make multiple casts into good looking areas to ensure that if a tiger was there, it had a chance to strike the fly. And finally, expect some fish to miss the fly, especially during fast, erratic retrieves. In these situations, a fly change, or for that matter, multiple fly changes, could result in a hookup.

Tiger muskies are one of the most challenging freshwater game fish to take on a fly because they are elusive, unpredictable, and they rarely provide the consistent action typical

of the more traditional fly rod species. Fly fishing for tigers requires casting heavyweight rods with large, wind resistant flies for lengthy periods of time, a difficult task that may or may not result in success. So why go through all this effort? Well, for me it is the thrill and excitement of chasing a fish that is extremely powerful, often times makes acrobatic jumps immediately after being hooked, and can reach lengths of over 40 inches that keeps me motivated despite times when I go several trips or more without landing a fish. Besides, taking a tiger muskie on a fly is something that very few anglers attempt and even fewer are successful at. For me, the rewards are unmatched. ☑

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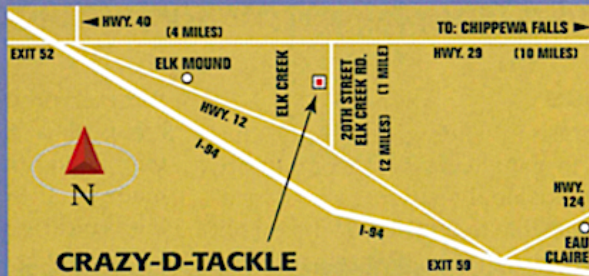
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