

# THE HAUNTS & FEEDING HABITS OF FISH



by  
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The very best way to learn the art (and science) of fishing is from an experienced mentor, as the subtleties of the discipline can be explained and understood. As a youngster, I caught my first little brown trout at the age of seven with my father, with a hook and line tied to a hazel rod. Unfortunately, these days not many young folks seem to be fortunate enough to have role models to inspire and instruct them. I would encourage any fathers, uncles, big brothers or granddads who have a modicum of knowledge about fishing to pass on their skills to the young folks in their lives. The excitement and rewards of catching a fish can only be bested by sharing the experience.

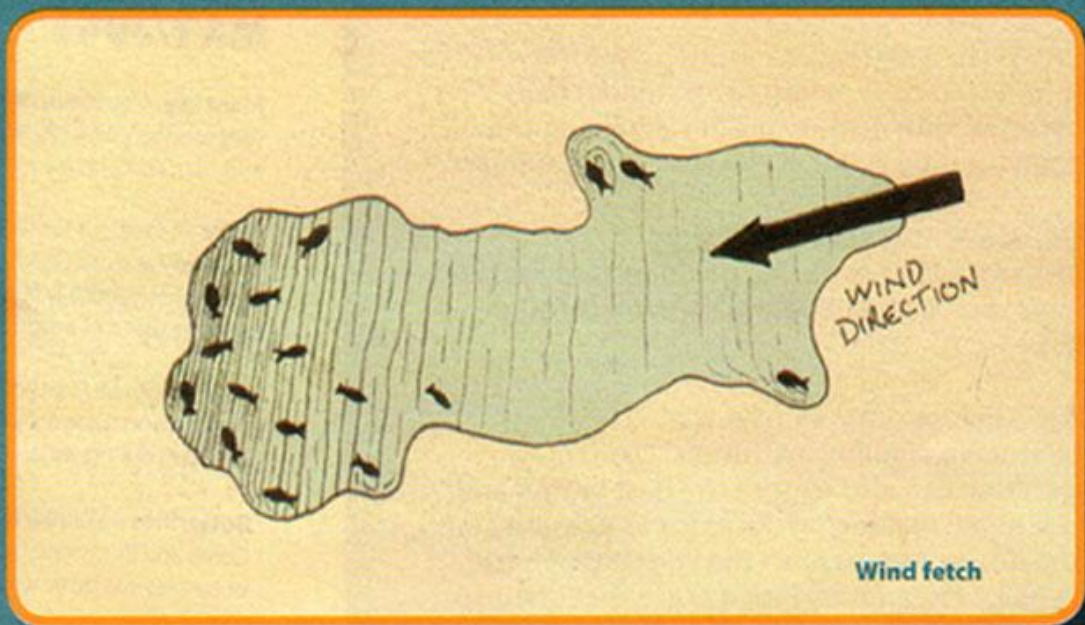
In my opinion, thorough explanation of fishing techniques is generally neglected in survival and bushcraft books, which seems strange, as fish is one of the most obvious and nutritious sources of food to the wilderness traveller. 'Fish First' is the golden rule for anyone attempting to live from the land, as acquiring meat should be of paramount importance. Any fish, from feisty little sticklebacks to predatory pike will provide an excellent source of food, being high in protein, fatty oils and vitamins, all of which are essential to maintain good health. In order to feed yourself effectively you must learn to catch fish in quantity and with maximum success. Instead of wasting time on macho-looking harpoons, if you study and focus on when and where to fish, I guarantee you will be enjoying your fish supper long before the guy perched on the bank with a multi-barbed spear.

## When to Fish

The golden rules are to have your lines out when the fish are actively feeding; this tends to be just before dawn and at twilight. Paying attention to the lunar cycle can also give an advantage, as for three or four days after a full or new moon the

fish will be active and night fishing can yield good results.

Understanding the weather will help you to anticipate the fish's behaviour. It is often said that a good time to fish is during changes in the weather, especially when a storm is brewing. Bad weather is usually associated with low air pressure, which is an area of warm, moist air that is rising, allowing it to expand and cool. Cooler air cannot hold as much water as warmer air so, as the air rises, the water molecules begin to condense and form clouds, which is why an area of low pressure often brings clouds and rain. The dropping air pressure makes the fish feed more actively, and as visual hunters, they move towards the surface of



Wind fetch

the water where there is more light and the possibility of insect food crash-landing due to the blustery weather. Now is the time for fishing close to the surface, using spinners and lures and setting your baited lines in shallower waters.

Periods of high pressure are usually associated with clear summer days and foggy, frosty winter mornings. As the pressure starts to rise, the air begins to sink and warm up, holding more moisture, preventing clouds from forming and usually bringing fair weather. This sudden change in weather usually disturbs the fish's normal feeding patterns and they tend to stop feeding for a day or two and descend to deeper waters.

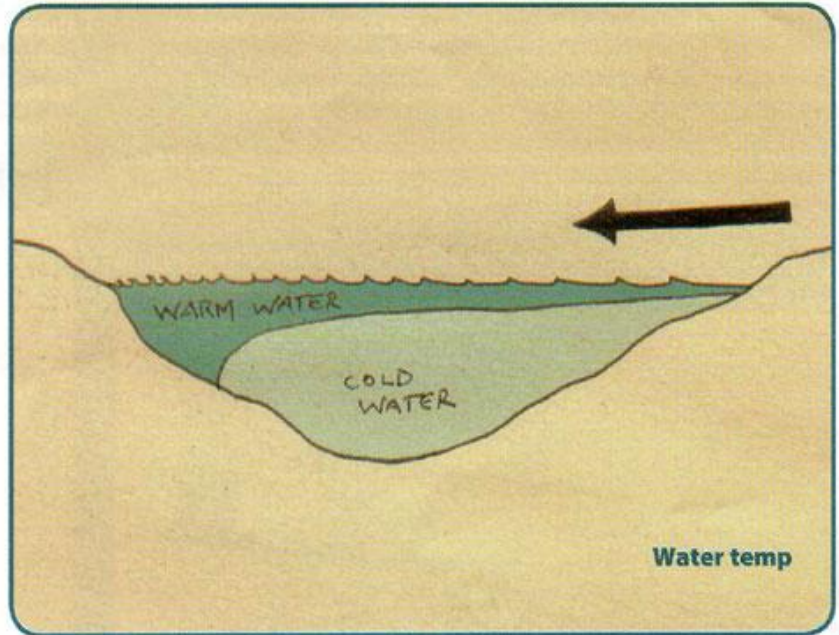
During the summer months, when the water is warm and lacking in oxygen, the fish will be very lethargic and reluctant to feed, so set your lines close to the bottom with wriggling live bait.

**Stable air pressure is usually associated with high cumulus cloud with sunny spells or steady drizzle. These are good times to go fishing, as the fish will have settled into their steady, predictable feeding patterns.**

With regards to the wind, there is an old saying that "When the wind is in the south, it blows the bait into the fish's mouth. When the wind is in the north, the prudent man does not go forth. When the wind is in the west, the fishing is at its best." Wind disturbing the surface of the water will provide extra oxygen, making the aquatic life more active and stimulating the fish to feed. A steady wind in one direction for a few days will 'fetch' all the surface food to the lee shore that the wind is blowing towards. If you watch the herons fishing, they will be on the lee shore and you should be there, too.

For fishing in salt water, the period after a storm is ideal, as the rough seas will have stirred up the seabed and many species of fish will come inshore to feed on the lugworms and other tasty morsels that have been disturbed. Classically overcast days are the best for sea fishing.

The best way to avoid being eaten is to hide. Fish like areas of 'cover', such as weed beds and submerged trees; they also like physical 'structure' – the sub-aqua topography, the features that they use for safe havens, such as rocky ravines and the cracks and crevices in a rock feature. These are also the best places for predatory fish to lie in wait to ambush their prey.

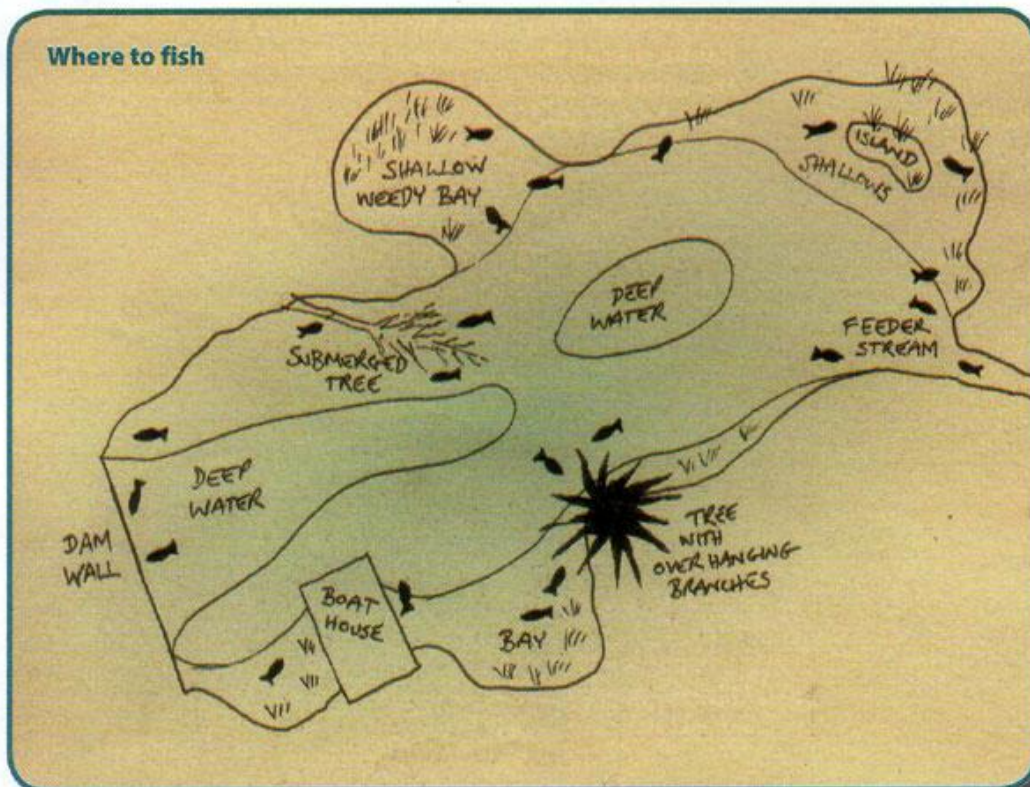


## Where to Fish

"The secret to fishing lies in the three Ss – Structure, Structure, and Structure." Tim Smith

To successfully find fish, you have to understand their needs; in its simplest terms, they need to successfully grow to maturity in order to breed, and to do this they need to feed frequently, and in turn not be eaten themselves.

As cold blooded creatures, fish also need an optimum temperature and enough oxygen dissolved in the water to be active enough to feed. Therefore, it is a good idea to look in the oxygenated water at the base of small rapids, pools, eddies and depressions in the riverbed where drifting food will collect. Fish like these hollows, as they not only collect food, but also give shelter from the current. Other good locations include in the lee of rocks, around fallen trees, beneath undercut banks, around reed beds and under overhanging vegetation.



In springtime, fish can usually be found in the shallows, where the water temperature is warmest and the new plant growth is adding oxygen to the water. As summer sunshine heats the water, distinct temperature layers begin to form, with the warmest most oxygen-rich layer at the surface and the cooler oxygen-deficient water at the bottom. The light, temperature and oxygen content of each layer will appeal to different species; for example, brown trout will enjoy snapping insects off the surface whilst his cold-water-loving cousin, the char, will be found at the bottom. As autumn approaches, the fish will move back to the shallower waters to take advantage of the last of the food-rich oxygenated water as most of the aquatic plants begin to wither, heralding the coming of winter and the cooling of the surface water, when the fish will return to the

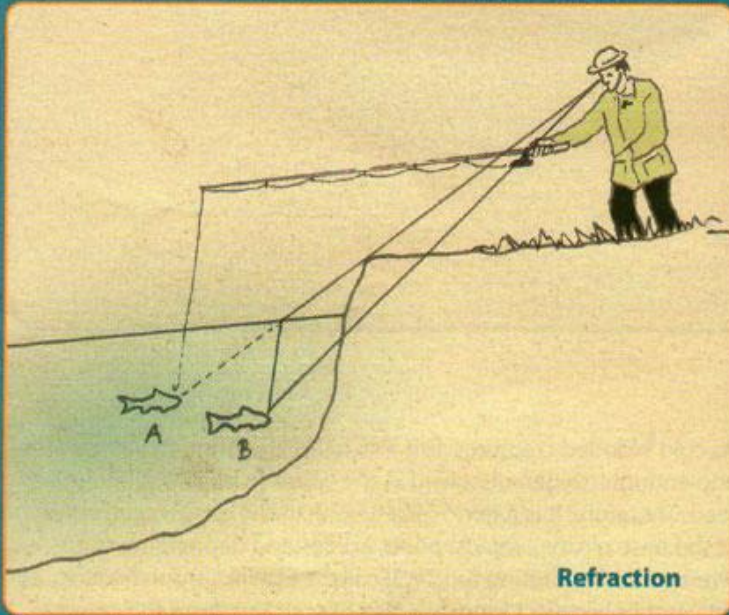
warmer, deeper water, frequently found around stream inputs.

## Approaching the Water

When approaching the water, the number one rule is 'don't frighten the fish!' See it as aquatic hunting, using stealth and staying out of sight. Wear drab, mute earth tones. Use cover, either in front of you or behind you. Don't make any sudden movements. Use the sun where possible and always fish with the sun in your face to avoid casting shadows on the water.

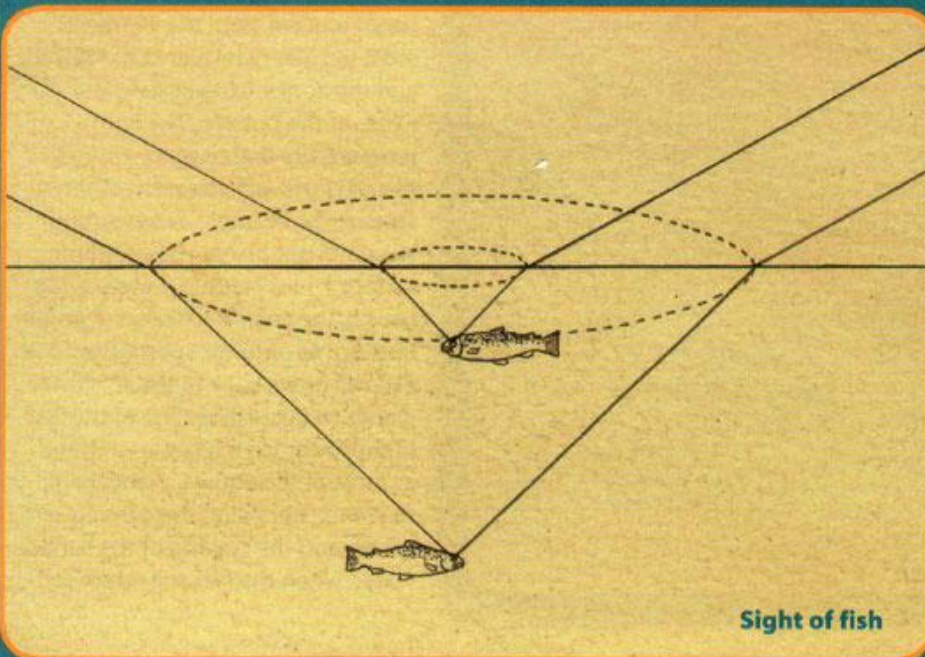
Always take image refraction into account, so when approaching the water, remember that the deeper a fish is lying, the greater its field of view.

Keep as still as you can; keep low and move quietly. Keeping low

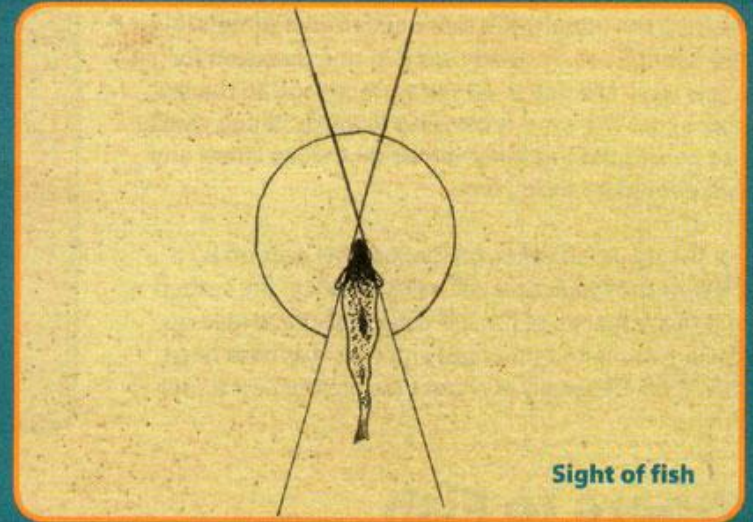


is imperative, as water refraction works in reverse for you. A fish that you can see hanging in the water close to the bank (A) will be much closer than you think, possibly even below your 'actual' line of sight, hanging below the bank (B), so adjust your casts accordingly.

All fish have a lateral line that runs the length of their body; it is made up of nerve-endings that are extremely sensitive



to water vibrations, caused by movement and sound; in a weird way it is like an ear. Therefore, if you are moving in a stream, try to avoid clattering stones and pebbles. Firm sandy substrates and solid rock are best underwater surfaces to move on, avoiding pebbly bottoms. To make the most of a fish's blind-spot, always approach from downstream; fish will hang in the water with their heads facing upstream, allowing the oxygenated water to run over their gills. This upstream approach makes use of their 'blind spot' and stops any silt and debris you dislodge from alerting any fish as it will float away downstream.



Teaching through the written word presents certain difficulties and much subtlety is lost, but regardless, reading detailed instructions and studying clear illustrations is probably the next best way to learn, and then to apply the skills and learn even more by making mistakes. Failure is an excellent tutor, but best of all is Mother Nature, who teaches her students to be quiet, patient, observant and questioning.

**Ask yourself: Why is that heron standing there today? Why has he chosen that exact spot for his fishing? Which way is the wind blowing? Is it cloudy? Where are the shadows being cast? And so on ...**

