

Cockwill

If you think catching trophy grayling is hard, try talking about them before an audience of experts. Would I have friends in the North...?



Peter Cockwill:
Stillwater expert, guide
and Trout Fisherman
contributor of 35 years

YOU may have picked up on the fact that I have a soft spot for grayling and rather like talking about them. So it might surprise you to learn that when I was asked to speak at the Grayling Society's annual symposium last autumn I travelled up to County Durham with a measure of trepidation.

Why? Because this wonderful group of grayling fanatics are some of the most respected and influential people in this field, whose dedication to my favourite species has brought its profile level with all the other game fish species.

Added to this was the fact that I had never actually met many of these luminaries. By the time I had spent the symposium's morning session listening to Jack Perks talk about his brilliant work in underwater filming and photography, coupled with a marvellous screening of his favourite pieces, I was even more nervous about my own upcoming presentation.

Then came Martyn Lucas with an amazing talk about grayling movements within a river, the effects of predation and a whole host of other fascinating facts.

"... the first slide of his show was a picture of us both at Avington – back when I had colour in my hair. Now that was a long time ago!"

How could I follow these guys? Especially as I had the slot immediately after lunch, commonly referred to as 'the graveyard shift'.

Thank goodness for props. I had brought with me the beautiful model I had made of my Alaskan record grayling, which engendered such interest, and prompted so many photographs, that I felt a little more confident that my ramblings might be acceptable. After a lovely introduction from general secretary, Rod Calbrade, I was away.

Aiming at an illustrated demonstration of the principal difference between European grayling and the Arctic species, I led off with some shots of gorgeous Arctic specimens. That allowed me to talk about my long search through parts of the North-West Territories, and many Alaskan rivers, in an effort to find a truly big one.

Hearing me explain exactly how old a trophy Arctic must be, before dismantling some of the hocus pocus claims for big fish, may have been a revelation for some of my audience.

I explained how my personal saga culminated some 10 years back with the ultimate trophy, and along with a few other fishy stories, the presentation seemed to be well received. When Malcolm Greenhalgh, whose knowledge and writing I have long admired, came up to congratulate me on the presentation it was a special moment for me and very much appreciated.

All sorts of happy coincidences arise at these talks and it was a genuine pleasure to recall that I had often fished with Martyn Lucas when he lived in Surrey and indeed the first slide of his show was a picture of us both at Avington – back when I had colour in my hair. Now that was a long time ago!

My long time mentor in the grayling search, and indeed the dear man who funded my trips, was Lou Hegedus from Colorado and we both became good friends with Fred DeCicco of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. It was Fred who proved how incredibly old an Arctic grayling must be to become a specimen and I knew that he had previously met with Ross Gardiner who is the Grayling Society's Scientific Officer so it was great to sit beside Ross and share some stories of Fred.

If ever you are in a wilderness situation it's Fred you want with you. There's nothing he can't cope with and I have had some wonderful trips with him.

Most of our expeditions, and indeed the ones for the truly big grayling, were to the Nome area of Alaska on the Seward Peninsula and Fred is still hosting trips here via Twin Peaks Adventures, should you want to try for a genuine adventure experience.

Fundraiser

The symposium ended with a dinner and an auction to raise funds for the Grayling Research Trust. I have to say that vice-chairman Pat Stevens deserves a medal for the way he managed to drag money out of people, even if sometimes they weren't exactly aware that they had bid! He was very funny at times and I was so pleased when he got a good price for the item I donated. There won't be many times that people get chance to bid for a carving of a grayling to wear on a neck chain, especially when it's made from walrus ivory and carved by a Yupik native from the Alaskan village of Quinhagak...

Most of those attending the symposium went off to fish local rivers on the Sunday and tremendous work by Stuart Wardle ensured that everyone had a lovely piece of water to fish. No such luck for me: my schedule meant no fishing and a day on the motorways heading south, but it was at least made worthwhile by this special event and I only hope that the day's fishing for those able to partake was as enjoyable as the day that preceded it.

Maybe another year will bring me the chance to fish as well as talk, and with next year's symposium heading to Wales, there's the option of fishing the Dee, which is somewhere I have long wanted to visit. ←

Peter's talk was well received by the grayling enthusiasts.

