



INSET: AUTHOR'S PHOTO

# “Sculpinating” Trout

ED SHENK

AN OVERSIZED LETORT BROWN TROUT with dime-size spots stalked my fly with the deliberation of a hungry cougar. The streamer wiggled in an up-and-down motion as I inched its dark, flat, sculpin-shaped body closer and closer to where I knelt in the tall grass. I stopped my retrieve; the fly settled to the bottom in a natural manner and the trout closed in. An almost imperceptible twitch of my rod tip moved the fly, triggering a rush from the big brown who engulfed the sculpin with a ferocity that caused me to over-react. As I struck, the fly flew out of the fish's mouth and back over my head. Immediately the enraged brown charged in the direction of the disappearing fly. As a result of its ferocious rush the fish actually slid part way up on the sloping bank, nearly leaving itself high and dry. It floundered there an instant, then re-entered the water.

As the trout started to swim away, I put the fly slightly ahead of him again and he grabbed it. This time I didn't miss the strike; he was firmly hooked. The playing and landing of the big brown was anticlimactic. I had “sculpinated” another trout.

“Sculpinating” is a term I've coined to describe the way I entice trout to strike my own sculpin fly pattern, the Shenk Sculpin. It is a method which fascinates and mesmerizes a trout, causing the fish to pursue and engulf the sculpin as it undulates past.

## Pattern Development

YEARS AGO WHEN I KILLED an occasional big trout it was not unusual to find one or more sculpins in their stomachs when they were cleaned. Often there would be

a partly swallowed sculpin in their throat. As a bait fisherman I caught a lot of trout on real sculpins, but as I turned more to flies and less to live bait, I felt the need for a good sculpin imitation. The muddler was fairly effective, but seemed to lack the movement I felt necessary in a good pattern.

I have always been partial to flies tied with marabou feathers. Marabou, when wet, is in constant motion even on a dead drift. The largest brown I ever landed on the Letort, a fish I nicknamed Old George, came to a silver garland white marabou some years ago.

After my final encounter with Old George, I tinkered with a series of minnow imitating streamers which used fairly long marabou tails. Part of the tying technique for these streamers was the use of the fur-loop (dubbing loop) tying method where the fur is placed crosswise between the threads and the thread twisted into a fur chenille. The body was wound from this chenille, then trimmed to the desired minnow shape. These original patterns were immediately successful and still captivate bass and trout. From these patterns I conceived the idea of trimming the body in a wedge shape, adding a broad, flat deer-hair head and pectoral fins (and a marabou wing on some) to simulate a sculpin.

Results with the new patterns were exciting. At times they appeared to drive the fish into a frenzy, and trout that should know better seemed to abandon all caution and shyness. At about this time, I coined the word “sculpinate” to describe the fishing of these flies and the craziness of some of the trout when they saw the fly.

## Sculpin Tactics

SCULPINS ARE BASICALLY BOTTOM DWELLERS so at least some of the fishing methods simulate this trait. Because of the buoyant deer hair head the fly is weighted, and I also pinch a small split shot on the leader at the eye of

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JOHN RANDOLPH PHOTO





## Sculpinating...

the hook. This, if the fly is tied in the correct proportions, will make it settle to the bottom in a horizontal plane just like the natural sculpin. It should not dive head first.

Techniques for fishing the sculpin can vary from cast to cast. One of my favorite methods, and probably the most deadly, is to fish the Shenk Sculpin upstream, allowing it to sink to the bottom, then bouncing it downstream in short and long hops. With this retrieve the fly darts up from the bottom a foot or so and then slowly descends again. When I slack off the line to allow the descent, I attempt to maintain contact with the fly so that any strike will be transmitted up the line. This is such an unusual presentation that the trout really fall for it. They try to murder the fly. On more than one occasion I have had the trout actually swallow the sculpin.

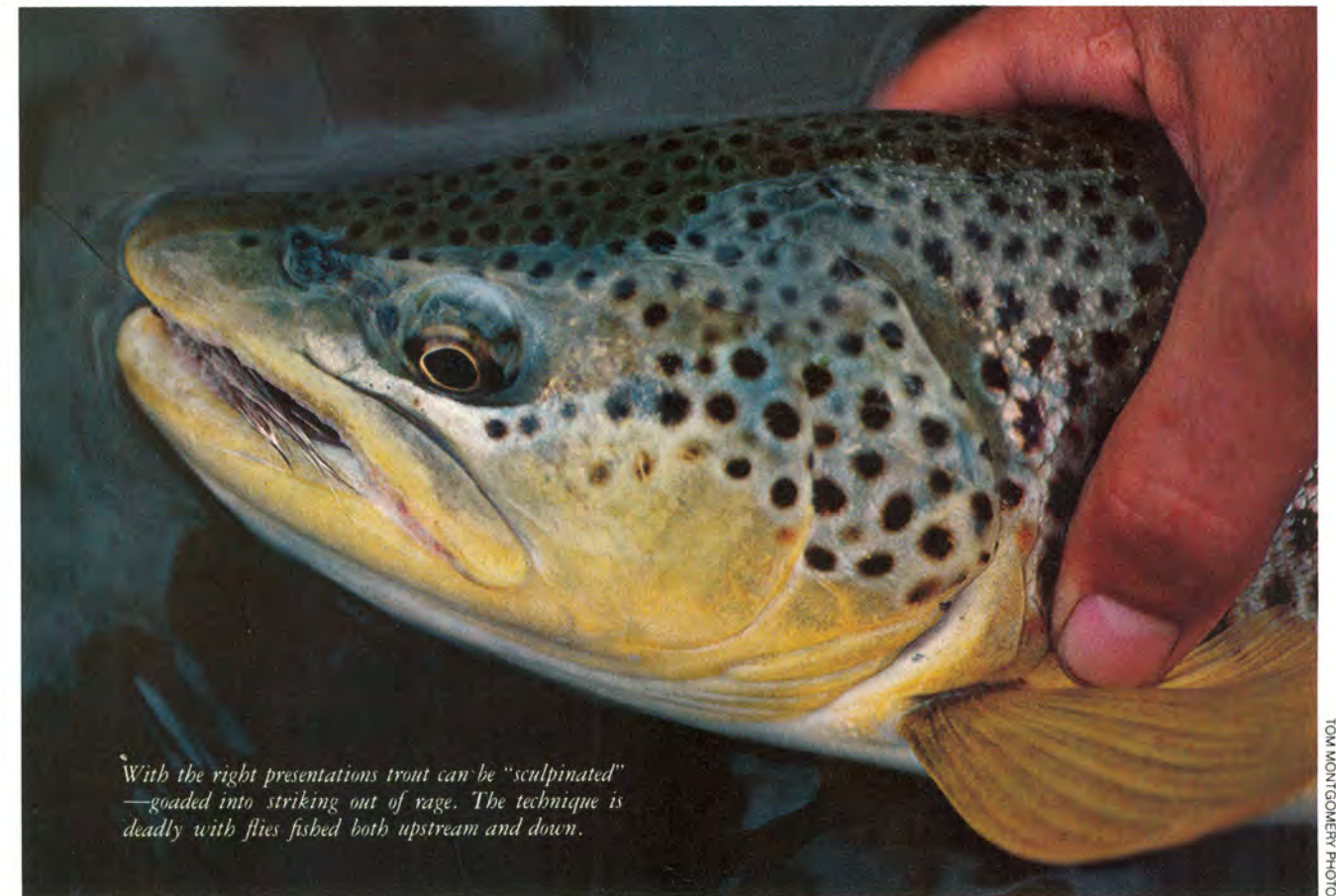
A variation of this retrieve is done preferably in an area where there is a silt or marl bottom. In this presentation, the off-the-bottom twitch is very slight so the fly makes a feeble move, but shoots up a small, visible puff of mud. This fools even the most cautious fish. I have used this method successfully when fish were not rising or visible. I recall one day when I was fishing a tiny meadow stream under a bright midday sun and it was a case of fishing the suspected hiding spots. Some areas had very little cover, so I worked any spot that even looked half-way fishy. On one cast I dropped the fly at the underwater entrance to a muskrat den. Ever so slightly I pumped the rod tip; the fly rose from the silty bottom in a tiny puff of mud. Before it had a chance to settle again there was a blast of mud and water from the den and I was hanging on to nearly four pounds of infuriated brown trout. Minutes later I released the fish. The fly was nearly out of sight in the maw of the big fish. Luckily, the barbless hook was removed without harming the fish. I caught the same fish weeks later when I fished this meadow again.

I use a cross stream cast when I am attempting to place the fly slightly upstream from my quarry. As the fly hits the water I tense for a quick strike. If there is no fast hit, I swim the fly back toward me with the marabou tail doing its darnedest to wiggle up a strike. I like to drop the fly right next to the bank, up against a log, or roots, or up under the brush. Accuracy is extremely important. Dropping the fly exactly where it should be is one of the little secrets of success. This is edge fishing at its finest, whether the edge is as just described, or where two water currents join.

Knowing where to cast the fly is an art in itself. I try to drop the fly into areas that *should be* hiding, resting or feeding spots for trout. I realize that this covers numerous possibilities, but it is this variety which provides the sport's intrigue. Understandably, I sometimes do better on my home streams where day-to-day fishing has revealed some of these hiding spots to me. Trout are creatures of habit, and if undisturbed in their daily routine, will feed at the same location day after day. They will also retreat to their same hiding spot unless disturbed by a larger fish, a predator or some other nuisance.

As I fish through a certain piece of water I may spook a fish which has been holding in a particular spot. With a poor memory like mine, I might repeat the same mistake on a second visit, but I usually don't make the mistake a third time. That third time I'm ready, and generally get a fly to a fish if he is in an approachable position (approachable in the sense that I can cast without spooking him in some way).

Old George is a perfect example of what I mean by habit. I had fished for Old George so many times I knew everything about him, except how to land him. This monster brown moved out of its home pool just before dark each night and swam downstream to feed. At exactly 5:45 A.M. the fish would head for the home pool. This went on morning after morning. To make a long story



*With the right presentations trout can be "sculpinated"—goaded into striking out of rage. The technique is deadly with flies fished both upstream and down.*

TOM MONTGOMERY PHOTO

### Shenk Sculpin Series (Old Ugly)

#### Black Ugly

TAIL: Black marabou.

BODY: Black fur, tied as a fur chenille and trimmed to a wedge shape.

WING: (Optional) Black marabou if used. I prefer this pattern without wing.

FINS: Tips of the black deer hair used for the head. Tip ends untrimmed.

HEAD: Black deer hair, trimmed broad and flat.

#### Dun Ugly

TAIL: Marabou plume dyed brownish blue dun.

BODY: Cream fox fur chenille, trimmed to wedge shape.

WING: Marabou plume dyed brownish blue dun.

FINS: Tips of the tan and black deer hair used for the head. Do not trim the tips.

HEAD: Natural tan, black, and dun deer hair tied to give a striped effect (Black under tan, then dun), trimmed broad, flat and rounded.

Note: Vary this one by omitting the wing and marking the top side of the body with dun and black waterproof marking pens.

#### Tan Ugly

TAIL: Marabou plume dyed brown-olive or tan.

BODY: Dark cream or ginger colored fox fur chenille, trimmed to wedge shape.

WING: (Optional) Brown-olive marabou. Otherwise mark up body with brown and olive marking pens.

FINS: Black and tan deer hair tips. Butt ends will be part of the head.

HEAD: Striped effect of tan, black and brown deer hair (in order, back to front).

There are other color combinations too numerous to mention. You are limited only by your imagination. Go forth and sculpinate a trout.

short, I finally landed Old George after numerous failures and many, many hours of fishing. That fish was over 27 inches long and weighed 8-1/2 pounds and I earned him, believe me.

If at all possible I like to work in close, and fish with a very short line. It is always enjoyable if I can at times watch the fly and observe the fish as it takes. Close in fishing, no matter which fly you are using, calls for stealth. No heavy tromping, no careless wading. I try to approach the fish with the sun at my back, as long as I'm not putting my shadow where it can be seen by the trout.

There is another technique that is useful and it's one I use quite often. It could be called the "crayfish twitch," since I attempt to simulate the action of a fleeing crayfish. This is quite a retrieve, with a jerky movement of the rod tip while trying to keep the fly in a confined area. It resembles moving like heck without getting anywhere. Best way to learn this retrieve is to watch a real crayfish in its jerky flight to safety. In streams with lots of crayfish, it doesn't hurt to simulate their actions. I have had trout follow the fly in a "ho hum" manner until the fly starts to dance like a crayfish. Then the "ho hum" attitude changes quickly and I watch for a very fast strike.

Still another technique I use calls for steady nerves. At times trout, and specifically large ones, are intrigued enough with the fly to follow it, but they pace themselves so they never quite close the gap between themselves and their prey. I stop my retrieve at this point, permitting the fly to descend in a natural manner. Curiosity will

generally cause the fish to swim closer, sometimes literally nose to nose with the fly. Just before the trout touches the fly I pull it out of reach. Sometimes the entire procedure must be repeated two or three times before the fish gets so excited he will try to inhale the sculpin, but nearly always this tactic will guarantee a strike which is sometimes savage. I generally over-react in this situation, but that is one of the things that makes fishing so much fun. It is easy to strike too hard, and with a very short line something will surely give. Generally it will be a broken leader, but could be a smashed pet rod.

My tactics and techniques do vary from pool to pool and sometimes from cast to cast. There are locations where, because of overhead cover, the best way for the fly to be seen by the trout is for me to swim the imitation downstream tail first. I will maintain a tight line and ease the sculpin down under the obstruction which may be a low bridge, protruding roots or overhanging banks. The idea is to drop the fly quietly in the water, lowered or drifted downstream on a tight line, and try to drift it back at the same speed as the current. If there is no strike on the drift back, allow the fly to hang in the current momentarily before it is twitched back toward you. Allow it to dart forward (upstream) for a foot or so, then drop it back again. Repeat a few times and then proceed on. Usually a strike will come almost immediately, so don't waste too much time in one spot.

Another thing worth mentioning is the method of  
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## Sculpinating...

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approach and retreat. It is only common sense to be as quiet as possible when approaching a suspected trout lair, but what happens when a promising lie fails to produce a fish? I ease away from the area as quietly as I approached it. I don't want to do too much stomping around after a good fish has seen the fly and fly is retrieved. Think about it!

## Equipment

TO SOME OF MY FRIENDS I'm a short rod "nut," and I'll admit I do have a preference for the shorter rods. Most of my serious sculpin fishing is done with a wispy 6-1/2-foot graphite rod, but I have used shorter fiberglass rods and occasionally get the sculpin urge when I have one of my pet bamboo rods out for a sortie. But, I prefer graphite rods. The ones I use handle both 3-weight and 4-weight lines and this is what I choose for most of my short-cast fishing.

Many times during a fishing day I shift from nymph, to dry fly, to sculpin and back again. I generally use a 4X tippet for the sculpin, and tie on 5X for the others. If I cut back to 3X or 2X for the sculpin I have more tippets and knots to tie before I can use the smaller nymph or dry patterns. If I am after a particularly large fish, I will make an exception and fish the heavier 2X material. I want my tippets to be 24 to 30 inches long. When the tippets drop an inch or so below the two-foot mark, I replace them. A longer tippet has more stretch, which cushions the shock of the strike a little better than a short one.

## Casting

ANY ATTEMPT TO CAST a well weighted Shenk Sculpin with the same casting cadence as a regular dry or wet fly will cause trouble. The secret to casting these rascals is to make a soft cast, allowing the fly to straighten the line behind before coming forward with a somewhat slow sweep of the rod. Hours of tossing live, soft crayfish and other goodies back in my younger days while fishing for smallmouth bass gave me the needed timing for tossing the sculpin around. It is difficult to describe, but easy to show. Unless I'm really reaching for a fish, I prefer to have the rod tip fairly high when the fly hits the water.

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## Tying Instructions

I HAVE TIED the Shenk Sculpin using a number of hook sizes and styles and have caught fish on all of them. I like the Mustad 9671 (2XL) in #4, #6 and #8; the Mustad 9672 (3XL) in #6, #8, #10, and the Mustad 9674 (4XL, ringed eye) in #6, #8, #10 and #12. If I had to pick one size only I would choose pick a #8, 3XL (9672). I prefer my tying thread (monocord) to complement the general color of the fly (black thread for the black sculpin, gray thread for the dun sculpin and so on).

Tying the Shenk Sculpin is straightforward. After the hook is securely placed in the vise, I attach the thread about one-third of the way between the eye and bend of the hook and wind the thread back toward the bend.

At this point, if I am going to weight the body with lead wire I wrap about 10 turns at the mid-point of the hook shank. The lead wire is then covered with thread.

The next steps are to tie in the marabou tail and form the fur body. I prefer using the tip of an entire marabou feather for the tail, and try to have the marabou no longer than the overall length of the hook. After the marabou is tied in I choose my body fur material. I cut a clump of rabbit, muskrat or fox and then form a long dubbing loop with my tying thread. The fur is positioned crosswise between the thread loops and spread evenly. Clip a pair of hackle pliers on to the doubled end of the loop and twist the thread to form a fur chenille. Wrap this fur evenly toward the eye of the hook. I want to have the body about -2/3 the length of the hook shank. The other front third of the shank will be reserved for the head. The thick fur body is trimmed flat on the bottom, and a taper trim is done to the top so the body is essentially wedge shaped.

If a wing is to be used tie in the marabou and trim the butt end.

The large pectoral fins, so predominant on a sculpin are suggested by tying clumps of deer hair on either side of the hook, just ahead of the body. The tip ends represent the fins. Allow the butt of the hair to flare. Add more hollow deer hair to the hook shank to fill it up to the eye of the hook. Whip finish the thread and trim the deer hair head into a broad, rounded shape, flat on the bottom.

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