

The lowly carp may be our smartest and most challenging freshwater gamefish.



Dave's Popcorn Bug



Furry Foam Bread & Crust Fly



Pellet Fly

JUNK FOOD FLIES FOR CARP

stalking the

GOLDEN GHOST

DAVE WHITLOCK



LET'S CREATE A SUPER-FISH for fly fishing in the 21st Century. It should be smart, selective, strong, fast, almost indestructible, and plentiful in cold, cool, warm, and tropical waters from coast to coast and border to border. This super-fish should never need stocking, must coexist peacefully with other gamefish, feed on flies from top to bottom, and be as colorful as a Snake River cutthroat. Such a mysterious wonder-fish would be as valuable as gold, so we should call it something special; how about the "Golden Ghost?"

What fish could we cross to develop such a magnificent super-hybrid? How about first crossing a bonefish with a permit for speed, strength, wariness, selectivity, and prestige? For durability, let's cross this "per-bone" with a redfish and a cutthroat for brilliant color, ability to live in warm or cold waters, and a distinct willingness to feed from top to bottom on flies that imitate almost every conceivable natural food.

There's still one more ability that this wonderful fish needs to possess: the ability to survive man's pollution.

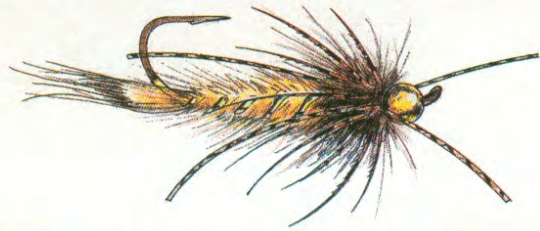
Resistance to acid rain, PCBs, heavy metals, siltation, and oxygen depletion, as well as disease and parasites, would be a distinct advantage. It looks like we'd have to find a stainless-steel fish for the final hybridization. The crazy twist to this fantasy fish idea is that nature has already evolved it for us, and it has lived in the United States for well over 100 years. It's been in Europe and in its native Asia much longer. This incredible fish is the *carp*, and I'm coming out of the closet to tell you that I've been quietly fly fishing for this "golden ghost" for over 50 years.

Dave and Emily Whitlock fish for carp on the flats of Green Bay on Lake Michigan. This golden ghost weighed 38 pounds. George von Schrader (top inset), author of *Carp are Game Fish*, poles his Boston Whaler (bottom inset) along the carp flats to make it easier to approach the spooky carp. Dave Whitlock photos. Jeff Edvalds background photo.

In fact, since I declared myself a carp fly fisher about four years ago, I've been amazed and pleased at how many people have told me about accidental and planned encounters with carp as they fished lakes and streams across North America and Europe.

The first carp I caught on a fly hit a #10 black-and-yellow bream fly I was using on Taft Lake in Oklahoma on June 1, 1946. It fought so hard and so long that it put a permanent bow in my first fly rod, a well-used, 9-foot, 3-piece bamboo that my dad had bought in a pawn shop.

LAKE MICHIGAN'S OLD RELIABLE



DAVE WHITLOCK ILLUSTRATION

Lake Michigan's Old Reliable nymph, a great carp fly, is made with red fox squirrel hair and rubber legs to enhance the fly's movement in the water. The large carp that live on the limestone flats of Lake Michigan travel in pods (bottom) as they feed.



EMILY WHITLOCK PHOTO



DAVE WHITLOCK PHOTO

I never forgave that rod-warping carp, not only because it bent my rod, but because I thought I had a 10-pound bass and it turned out to be a meager 4-pound, golden-sided, "bugle-mouth bass." Even back then, I was ashamed to tell my folks that I'd caught a lowly carp, because I thought they might laugh.

The fact is that fly fishers since the beginning have been fooled by carp into thinking they have hooked a world-record brown trout, walleye, salmon, or smallmouth bass, only to have their elation sink into shame and embarrassment when their "record fish" rolled to the surface to reveal the golden-laced, checkerboard side of a carp.

Over the years, I've gradually become more interested in these remarkable fish. Encounters with them have always been challenging and surprising, like my first hookups on surface flies in the spring of 1957.

While spring squirrel hunting from my canoe along Bayou Creek in Oklahoma, I noticed large fish swirling under overhanging mulberry trees as feeding squirrels and birds dropped the berries into the water. The next weekend I returned with my fly rod and a purple deer-hair mulberry fly I had tied, and I hooked carp from two to nine pounds, right at the surface!

Any fish is fun to catch on a fly rod, but when a big carp takes a fly, it's more fun than *any other freshwater fish*. Why? Carp are more like the elite saltwater flats fish—bonefish, permit, redfish, and cubara snapper. They are faster than a trout, stronger than a permit, and have more staying power than a smallmouth bass.

After all my years of searching, four years ago I discovered a paradise of carp fishing, and I can't keep quiet any longer.

I have been fortunate to fly fish some of the world's best fisheries, but I rank the trips I've taken for the last four summers to the limestone flats of Lake Michigan, fly fishing for tailing "golden ghosts," high on my top-ten list.

Green Bay Carp Flats

IF YOU LIKE SALTWATER flats fishing for bonefish, permit, or redfish, you'll love the Great Lakes flats "golden ghosts." The flats are just as beautiful, much more accessible, and they resemble salt-

water flats. There are more fish, no crowds, and the fish are as hard to fool and land as the big saltwater flats fish.

As we fish these flats, my wife Emily and I constantly remark how much it feels like we are bonefishing. In the diverse Great Lakes fisheries of salmon, steelhead, trout, char, pike, walleye, perch, sunfish, bass, and alewife, the carp has found its own unique niche, evolving into a superb gamefish. In my experiences no better carp fishery exists, although there are many across the country and all provide unexplored opportunities for fly fishers.

Great Lakes carp have found a niche that does not encroach on other gamefish. Vast areas of shallow shorelines are nearly devoid, except for carp, of daytime foraging fish and fishermen. The carp average between 8 and 16 pounds, and many reach 30 pounds or more.



DAVE WHITLOCK PHOTOS

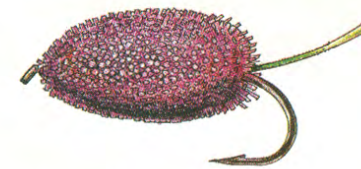


Emily Whitlock lands a hefty carp. The fish have soft mouths that hold the fly well. They feed throughout the water column on a variety of foods, including aquatic insects, leeches, worms, minnows, crayfish, terrestrials, berries, and seeds.

The shorelines and flats are scarce on vegetation, so the carp forage primarily on shellfish, aquatic insects, leeches, crayfish, worms, and small minnows. This menu makes them a gold mine for fly fishers.

I was introduced to this fishery by George von Schrader, the author of *Carp Are Game Fish*, a splendid book about his lifetime of research and exploration of carp fishing around the Great Lakes. I became friends with George when he lived in Mountain Home, Arkansas, where we canoed and fished for smallmouth together in our favorite Ozark stream, Crooked Creek. For years George invited me to join him on his annual two-month summer carp-fishing vacation on Wisconsin's Door Peninsula. My first two-day trip with George exceeded all my expectations.

George poles his Boston Whaler and wades over his favorite "golden ghosts" flats, so excited that he ignores nearby fishing for pike, salmon, steelhead, and smallmouth. That's easy to understand if you fish with him. He opened my



Whitlock's Mulberry Carp Bug

CARP BUG

CARP NATURAL HISTORY

CARP WERE INTRODUCED to North America from Europe in the early 1800s and were considered the answer to providing our population with a high-quality source of protein. For many years the plan was successful as immigrants, accustomed to eating carp in their European homelands, gladly included them in their diets.

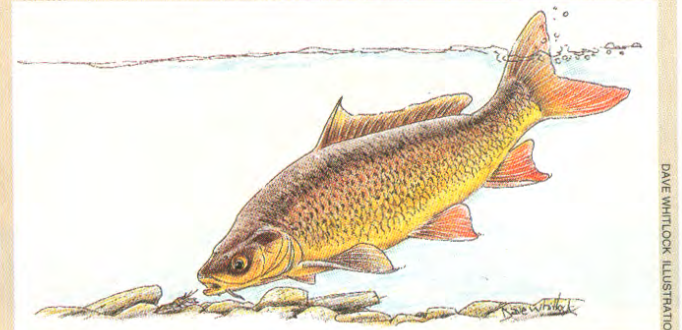
Then carp became the victim of bad press as their populations spread across the continent. They over-populated many lakes and large rivers and began out-competing the native, over-harvested populations of popular gamefish.

Because carp thrived in our most polluted waters, we acquired the idea that they are filthy, bad-tasting, uninvited foreigners. We condemned them to death by gassing, bow-and-arrow hunting, netting, dewatering, and poisoning.

Carp can also thrive in waters where we have over-fished their natural enemies. Bass, trout, pike, walleye, sunfish, salmon, and catfish (young and adult) relish young carp minnows. But, where their natural enemies are over-harvested, carp tend to over-populate and damage fisheries habitat.

Lakes and rivers that have excellent populations of these more popular predator gamefish, seldom experience carp over-population. In fact, clear waters where there are relatively few but very large carp (Lake Michigan, Flaming Gorge Lake, Bull Shoals Lake, and Yellow Tail Reservoir) are also noted for their good management of bass, trout, stripers, salmon, and pike.

In Europe and Asia, carp and their family members are enthusiastically and reverently sought by sportfishers and gourmets. Some individual large carp are so respected in Europe that they have names and reputations and are considered too valuable to catch just once.



DAVE WHITLOCK ILLUSTRATION

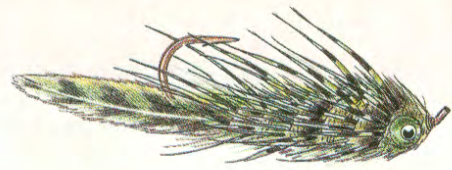
Carp fishermen in England do not kill carp catches, and there are such famous carp that the noted coarse fishers of Asia and Europe compete to catch them. They receive honors and awards when they succeed in capturing a particular carp, which is then carefully and lovingly released. Individual carp are valued at many thousands of dollars.

In the U.S., carp have often been mistakenly maligned as dull muck-suckers. But studies have shown them to be a highly evolved organism topping the scale of fish intelligence. They are flexible eaters and capture live foods from the top to the bottom of the water in which they live.

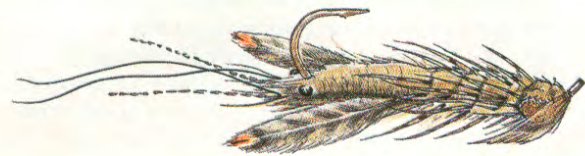
Carp mouths are not located on the bottom of their heads, like the mouths of suckers. They are positioned and shaped much like bonefish, redfish, and permit mouths. The more I observe carp, the more impressed I am at how alert, sensitive, gentle, intelligent, and affectionate they are. And when feeding in the same areas as trout, walleye, and bass, carp require more precise and cautious fly-fishing strategy to catch.

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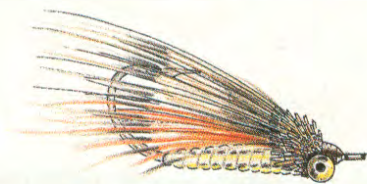
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WHITLOCK NEARNUFF SCULPIN



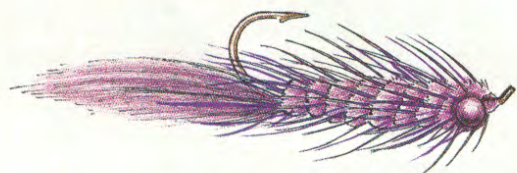
WHITLOCK NEARNUFF CRAYFISH



CRAZY CHARLEY MUDDLER



WHITLOCK CHAMOIS LEECH



GEORGE'S PURPLE CARP BUGGER



WHITLOCK'S BRIGHT SPOT CARPENTER ANT

A GALLERY OF CARP FLIES

CARP WILL EAT ANY fly that a trout will eat, if it matches a natural food item of the fish. Nymphs, fast-sinking bottom flies like lead-eyed crayfish, and slow, deep-swimming leech flies are the most consistent producers.

Most of my carp catches outside the Great Lakes have been on small, dark- or light-colored, fur-dubbed nymphs in sizes #8 to #16. Nymphs, Woolly Buggers, and marabou leeches seem to be the designs that most fly fishers prefer. I have no doubt that the fish will readily take most bonefish flies and microjigs.

If I had to choose one fly for carp in the Great Lakes, I'd take my Red Fox Squirrel-hair Nymph (#4 to #14). I've had especially good results with the gold-bead, rubber-leg version. It simulates a lot of the carp's favorite foods. In a #6, it's my most reliable carp fly for the Lake Michigan monsters.

Surface Flies. Carp feed on abundant floating foods—seeds, fruits, tree buds—by cruising in a zigzag path, mouths up, vacuuming the items. They also gobble midges, ants, mayfly spinners, spent caddis, and moths.

Late one August, I was driving from Freeport, Maine, to Livingston, Montana, when I reached the shores of northern Lake Michigan. I stopped to wade and fly fish at a state park for a break from the long drive. I hoped to catch a smallmouth or two or even a northern pike.

As I waded, I saw big noses poke up everywhere in the little bay—big carp surface-feeding on big reddish-brown mayfly spinners! I hooked four of them, but they were so strong and long-winded that I lost them when my reel emptied. I'll never forget how they humbled me.

It's important that you present your floating fly softly

eyes to how special carp are. I once asked him why he wanted to let the world discover and invade his beloved fishing. He smiled and said he wanted carp to finally gain the respect they were due. I can agree with that.

From June to September, the fish move each morning onto the flats in pods or schools, scattering into singles, pairs, or small pods to search for nymphs, leeches, and crayfish in from one to four feet of clear water. They cruise and feed upwind, like bonefish feeding into a tidal flow.

We approach and present the fly to them as though they are tailing or cruising bonefish or permit. When a carp eats the fly and you hook up, it's into your backing so fast that you are taken off-guard. The powerful fish rocket down the long flats or occasionally disappears over the horizon into the deep blue water at the edge of the flats.

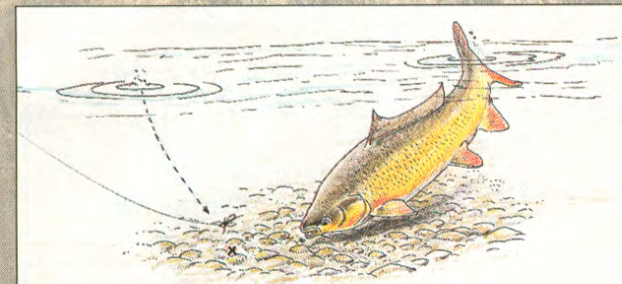
They never stop, and 50, 100, 200, 300 yards of backing melts off the reel as you run, pole, or motor after them. After two or three backing-stretching runs, they subject you to *another* 15 to 30 minutes of close-in Jack Cravalle-like fighting.

After my second trip with George, I realized that I'd seen the end of my backing more in one week than in all the rest of my life's fishing experience. Often while I fought a big one, it joined several other fish and they cruised over the horizon and down the coast with my line and backing. What a place!

Acute Senses

CARP ARE ACUTELY AWARE of their surroundings thanks to highly developed senses of sight, hearing, touch, and smell. They uncannily seem to "feel danger" when you stalk them.

and close to the path of the rising carp, similar to fishing gulpers on Western trout lakes. In waters adjacent to parks and boat docks, you can take carp on surface imitations of fish pellets, popcorn, or pieces of bread.



Approach and present flies to carp as though they are tailing or cruising bonefish or permit searching for food on shallow flats. Cast so the fly lands in front of the fish.

A few years ago, I conducted a fly-fishing school for Gander Mountain in Madison, Wisconsin. We used a park lagoon for our casting practice. There were large carp everywhere in it, and they repeatedly took the students' hookless white or yellow poly-yarn practice flies, which must have imitated bread or popcorn. I visited the lagoon as I drove out of town after the school. The first fish I rose was a 16-pound golden beauty. What fun I had for several hours, with my poly-popcorn fly.

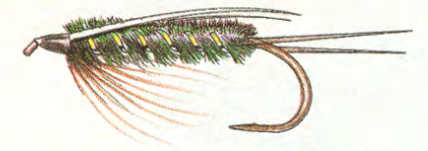
Trout, bass, and most other fish have two hearing methods. Carp have three: an inner ear, an extremely sensitive lateral line sensor, and a webertarian apparatus (several small bones and ligaments that connect the carp's inner ear to its swim bladder). This sensory arrangement allows them to detect sound vibrations in a lower and wider range than other fish.

If you've experienced big, spooky, smart bonefish, you understand what you are up against when sighting, approaching, and casting to feeding, cruising, or sunning carp. One minute there can be fish everywhere, then the next they have vanished. When I spot a good fish, I know I have only seconds to get one or two casts before it ghosts away. Also, a hooked or injured carp emits an odor that signals other carp in the area to take cover.

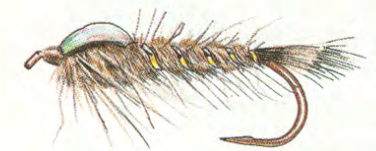
Moving toward carp in a flats boat, float tube, or when wading gives you less time to cast than when you stand quietly and let them come to you. They communicate with each other about locating food and detecting danger. Your image moving toward them, a flash from your line, or a noisy presentation can trigger first one fish, then several, then the whole school, to vacate the area. I prefer to find one fish to work to, rather than many sets of those sharp eyes, ears, and noses. A windy surface helps me, as carp move and feed into the wind like bonefish moving into the tide.

It's a temptation on windy days to cast downwind to feeding or cruising carp, but they pick up your image or scent much faster than if you cast to them from the side or behind them. They are as sensitive to your presence

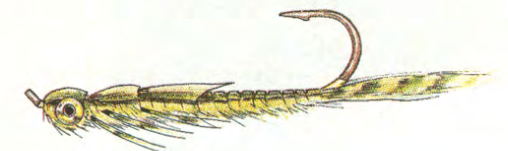
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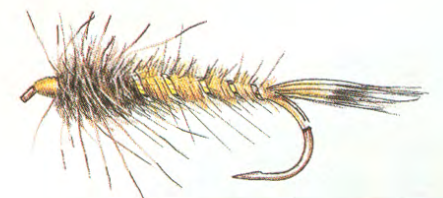
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GOLDEN GHOST . . .

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 as a 10-pound New Zealand brown, especially when you are up-current or upwind of them.

Why Fly Fishers Fail

ALTHOUGH ABUNDANT IN MANY waters we fish, carp are rarely caught on flies. Why? Because most casts made to them are blind; the cast often frightens the fish or fails to present the fly at the right feeding depth, position, speed, and action at which the carp are feeding. Even if a carp takes the fly, it can usually reject the fly before the angler detects the take.

Carp Fly Design

THE GOLDEN GHOST provides angling's toughest challenge—catching a selective, large, hard-fighting fish. Flies with up-riding hooks or those equipped with mono-strand or loop snag guards are essential. The fly should be slowly swum, crawled, jigged, or allowed to rest on bottom structures. It should move smoothly, so that if it catches bottom, soft line pulls can easily free it.

I streamline the fly just behind the hook eye so it will not snag easily. Carp have super-sensitive mouths. They hold soft-bodied flies with flexible appendages longer, giving you more time to detect the take. Most bonefish flies make ideal carp flies.

Carp Stealthing. The most consistently effective method for taking carp on flies is to sight fish for them. You see them and cast to them, but don't let them see, hear, or smell you in the process—a technique best described as "carp stealthing."

Carp are tunnel-vision feeders that don't often veer off to investigate and capture foods. (Blind casting, even in the best areas, with the right fly might get you one fish per season.)

You should place your fly accurately and quietly close to a feeding carp's nose and carefully animate it. If a carp hears or sees your fly line, it will switch into its self-preservation mode, cease feeding, and begin a cautious retreat. Blind casting, noisy presentations, and quick or noisy foot or boat approaches will alarm the carp.

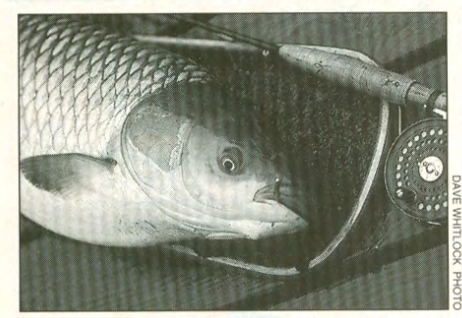
To be successful, quietly get as close as you can to make your *first shot* as accurate as possible to the feeding end of the fish. Each cast after the first diminishes your success percentage by at least 50 percent.

Stay low. Standing tall in a flats boat may allow you to see, but because you can't get as close to the fish, your casts probably won't be as accurate. You'll also loom like the Goodyear blimp in the carps' cone of surface vision. You should wear low-contrast clothing and use side-arm, low-velocity presentations. Try to make your cast when the carp seem most focused on actively feeding or when they are distracted by other passing carp.

Since most carp foods live near bottom structures, flies designed to make a soft entry but sink rapidly are the most consistent producers. Casting quickly before your target fish changes direction is of utmost importance.

Strike Detection

A CARP'S MOUTH IS HIGHLY evolved for inhaling food off bottom. It sorts out unwanted particles, then crushes the food in its throat crushers and swallows. A carp eats a fly by softly sucking it into its mouth, moving very little. The take is difficult to detect unless it's on the surface, or you see your fly disappear into the fish's mouth, or (in flowing-water nymphing) the strike indicator pauses.



Grass carp are similar in fin and body shape to trout or salmon.

To detect the unseen stillwater take, make sure your rod is low and your line is tight to the leader and fly. Watch for the carp's hesitation as it captures a swimming fly, or look for its head-down, tail-up movement when it takes a bottom-resting fly, much like a redfish or bonefish take. When you see this movement, slowly make a line pull to feel if there is extra resistance to the fly. If there is, begin increasing the pull pressure; then set the hook with a quick rod stroke.

Carp have the best-textured and -shaped mouth, jaws, and lips for hook penetration and holding of any fish I've encountered. Their mouth tissues are rubbery-soft but stretchy-tough. They seldom pause or shake their heads to cause slack line during the battle. They are easy to hook and seldom come unhooked during the fight.

Tackle Guidelines

I'VE CAUGHT CARP on nearly every type of fly tackle, but here are a few guidelines on what you'll need.

Rods. Graphite or glass, 6-weight for 3- to 8-pound carp. Carp fight too hard and long to make bamboo practical. A small extension butt helps. I use 7- and 8-weight rods for the Lake Michigan fish, but I go as small as 3- to 5-weight for smaller fish that might be eating small nymphs, spinners, or midges.

Reels. Use a single-action reel that holds at least 100 yards of 20-pound backing, the more the better. I recommend a large-arbor reel (Loop II or III) for the fastest, less tiring backing recovery.

Fly line. Use a weight-forward floating line or a weight-forward Scientific Anglers Stillwater line.

Leaders. I prefer 9- to 12-foot, knotless tapered leaders, and from 1X to 3X nylon or fluorocarbon tippets. Fluorocarbon resists abrasions and cuts better than monofilament.

Choose your fly tackle weight based on the size of the flies you are going to cast, how far you will cast, how much wind you expect to encounter, and the size of fish you expect to hook. Since carp are difficult to grasp, it's important to have a net handy (a big one).

Grass Carp

GRASS CARP HAVE A MORE pleasing mouth shape and are similar in fin and body shape to trout or salmon. Only sterile fish are legal to stock in ponds and lakes. They are voracious vegetarians, used to control excess aquatic vegetation. When correctly introduced, they are an inexpensive, environmentally-friendly, solution to chemicals. They grow rapidly, reaching from 40 to 50 pounds and are considered excellent eating.

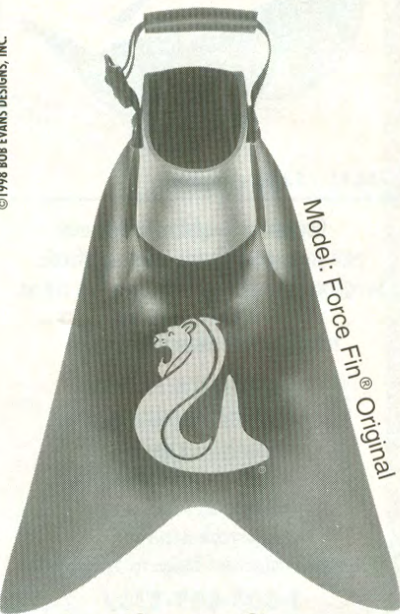
Flies that imitate their favorite plant foods are most effective. However, I've occasionally caught larger grass carp on streamers, nymphs, and dries. In their book *Carp on a Fly*, Barry Reynolds, Brad Befus, and John Berryman report on their success catching grass carp on nymphs and Crud Flies.

A good way to put the fish into a feeding mood is to chum the area with grass clippings or catfish pellets. I recently stocked about 20 grass carp in my fly-fishing school pond to control the weeds. When I finally learned to hook them, they proved to be as fast and as powerful as they are selective. I lost about ten fish from power-run break-offs before I landed my first one, a wonderful 38-inch fish.

Locating Carp

YOU'LL MOST LIKELY FIND CARP living only minutes from your home in park
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FLY



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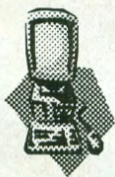
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GOLDEN GHOST . . .

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ponds, golf course ponds, farm ponds, and small and large streams and lakes. For the best quality of this fly fishing, here's what to look for in these waters:

1. Clear water: Fly fishing for carp is a visual sport.
2. Extensive areas of shallow, still, or slow-moving water: Feeding carp are easiest to present flies to in areas of from one to four feet of still or slow-moving waters.
3. Plentiful invertebrates: Waters with food chains that support good populations of panfish, bass, catfish, and trout are also ideal for carp.
4. Water temperatures of from 65 to 85 degrees F.: Carp feed most aggressively at these temperatures. In most of North America, this is usually between May and September.
5. Sunny midmorning to late-afternoon hours: This period is the best time to locate and see feeding carp. Use polarized glasses and be very quiet.
6. Fly-fishing guides: Many guides know of excellent carp areas, but you usually have to ask.

Recommended Reading

Carp Are Game Fish, by George Von Schrader. P. O. Box 156, Fish Creek, WI 52412.

Carp on a Fly, by B. Reynolds, B. Befus, J. Berryman; forward by Dave Whitlock. Johnson Books, 1880 South 57th Court, Boulder, CO 80301.

Carp in North America, The American Fisheries Society, 5410 Grosvenor Lane, Suite 110, Bethesda, MD 20814.

The World According to Carp, by Richard Guindson. Andrews and McMeel, Publishers, 4520 Main Street, Kansas City, MO 64111.

Eating Carp

THEY ARE EXCELLENT EATING, especially those caught in clear, cool or cold waters. They must be properly dressed and cared for to preserve their meat flavor and texture. They can be smoked, fried, broiled, baked, jerked, or canned. The American Fisheries Society book *Carp in North America* has excellent methods for cleaning and cooking them.

Because carp tend to be long-lived and feed on bottom organisms, they can be unsafe to eat because of PBC and heavy-metal contaminants in badly polluted waters. Check with your state wildlife agencies to find out where carp are safe to eat.

DAVE WHITLOCK is a FLY FISHERMAN Editor-at-Large and author of several fly-fishing books. He lives in Norfolk, Arkansas.



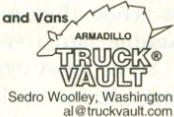
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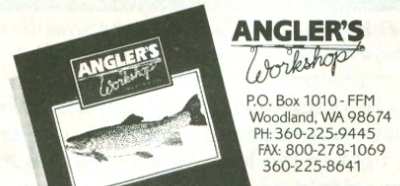
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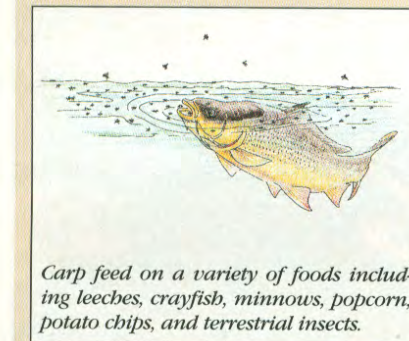
CARP NATURAL HISTORY . . .

Continued from page 69

Carp Lifestyle

THEY ARE OMNIVOROUS FEEDERS that focus on both inanimate foods and animate foods living on or near the bottom. But they feed on top when there is an abundance of aquatic or terrestrial insects on the surface, or various plant seeds, fruits, or flowers. I've even observed them reaching above the surface to pluck off tasty morsels.

Their favorite natural foods are aquatic insects, leeches, crayfish, aquatic worms, snails, small minnows, and the small berries and green seedpods of such trees as mulberry, elm, cottonwood, and maple. Like teenagers, they eat junk foods: popcorn, bread, potato chips, jelly beans, and breakfast cereals. And they gobble dough balls, corn chips, and trout or catfish pellets.



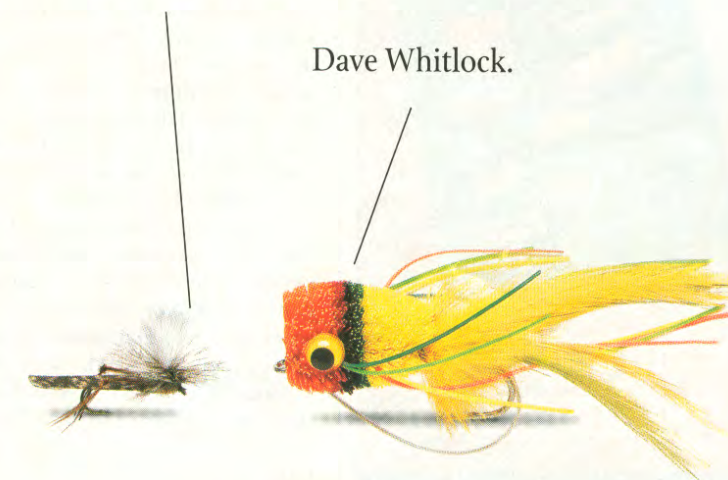
Carp feed on a variety of foods including leeches, crayfish, minnows, popcorn, potato chips, and terrestrial insects.

Carp spawn from late spring to early summer, when water temperatures reach 63 degrees F. along shallow, sandy, mud-bottom shorelines, especially those filled with grass or weeds. The female is chased, with splashy commotion, by smaller males, as she scatters about a million eggs along the shallows. The eggs stick to bottom structures and hatch in about a week. The spawning riot attracts anglers and bow hunters, but it's a poor time to expect good fly fishing.

Carp have a warmwater metabolism (they prefer water from 60 to 85 degrees F.), but they easily adapt to stream and lake coldwater trout habitats. In coldwater areas, they favor warmer water—shallow dark-bottom areas, protected bays, sloughs, flats, and backwaters. They also lie suspended just inches under calm, sunlit surfaces, snoozing and sunbathing after feeding. Surprisingly, they can survive in water from 32 to 106 degrees F. and at oxygen levels that are fatal to trout and bass.

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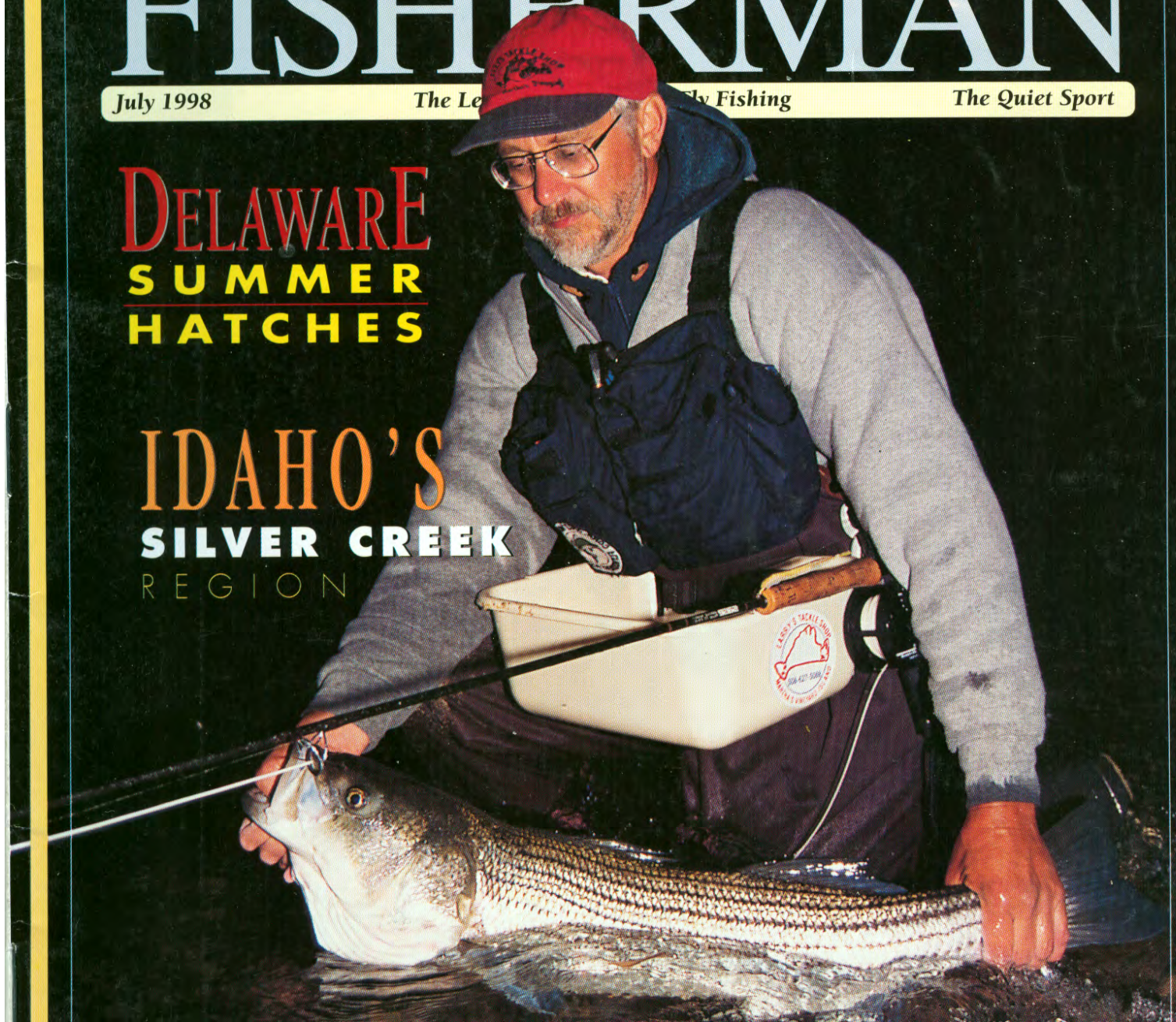
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