

The Feeding Landlocked Salmon

It is just breaking dawn. The ice is gone on NH salmon lakes and *Salmo Salar* cruises through the water just below the surface, its one of his prime feeding times of which he has two per day. He's looking for the familiar rainbow smelt, now spawning and his first choice for a good meal. As he moves up and down in the water column his eyes are at their most receptive period of the day, easily helping him see and identifying the smelts in the area, both in close and as far away as water clarity allows.

Salmo's vision is a little blurry in the morning, but he can see color, lines, bars, spots, and circles really good. He distinguishes shape consistently and really is focused on movement. Even the tiniest movements, or flashes, gets his attention. Frequently triggered to strike smelt by these primary characteristics he goes into a feeding frenzy and gorges on as many smelt as he sees.

Soon the sun rises, the light background changes and *Salmo's* eyes begin to change. The four cones in his eyes that detect color start to move to the bottom of his eyeball to be shielded by the dark pigments there and the rods that detect contrast move to the top of his eyeballs becoming more prominent and as darkness falls these will be his prime means of vision. He is cruising deeper now relying on background light and shade contrasts. Recognizing shape, size, and movement supports his instinct to feed heavily, to stock up for those periods when he can't find his preferred meal. Feed, Feed, feed...that is all he is driven by until the spawning period.

As he moves deeper during the day his eyes continue to change, as they do every day, to protect them from bright sun. In the morning the eye cones, used for color, are prominent but becoming less so during the day until the sun starts to set and then the cones and rods slowly start to move in the other direction. During his feeding at night, he sees no color only contrast, even on a bright moonlit night he sees only shapes. And movement. *Salmo* knows how his preferred food moves so he counts mostly on this movement for identification. Even the tiniest movements grab his focus and triggers his instincts.

Down deep now, compared to his morning feeding, pushed there by light and not by the ambient

temperature, all colors have been absorbed by the particles in the water, except the deeper blues and violets. Salmo can distinctly see shades of these colors well to help further identify the prey. Also, something we are still learning about, Salmo is using ultraviolet light to help see the prey. Ultraviolet light we can't see because it is at a frequency that is too small and too fast for us but not for pelagic cold-water fish. UV light can penetrate up to 50' deep. While color seems to be Salmo's primary tool for recognition, and is important to us anglers, I feel that movement, shape and contrast are more important. AKA form and function.

In my never-ending pursuit of trophy Landlocked salmon in NH, I have tied thousands of streamers that have caught thousands of salmon and at the risk of bragging I think I can show more trophy salmon caught on streamers than any other method. I am talking landlocks from 6-10 lbs. The biggest I have record of in recent years is a 10 lb. 4oz female from a NH lake on the tandem streamer, *Squam's Big John*. One of the crown jewels of the NH Landlocked salmon fishery, this lake may have produced more trophies on streamers than any other in recent years. While some may feel slighted that I call this "secret" out knowing these fish are there and catching them is two different things. The lake is great because it is hard to fish and has so many areas of great conditions for these trophies to live.

But any LLS lake can produce trophies and there is another NH lake that consistently produces Landlocked Salmon over 10 lbs., but I won't say where on that one.

Most importantly I want to talk about light and trolling streamers. Chet always taught me that jiggging a streamer made it more effective. He could jig wire line all day every day but I couldn't so I develop a device 35 years ago that would jig a streamer automatically. Another thing all successful streamer trollers know is that if the salmon aren't hitting, go faster. But to get speed and still have the right form, in other words the streamer is not spinning, you need to really pay attention to your materials when tying. Also, tribal knowledge taught us that the colors along the purple part of the spectrum were the best. But there are so many shades in those wavelengths the choices seem unlimited and change from

year to year, yet the purple shades still prove the most effective. Krystal flash has been one of the standard materials in our streamers for 70 years, but I never thought it was a critical part until a few years ago. Even though *Squam's Big John* caught so many fish and has a cerise colored flash underwing I still thought it was because of the contrast in the pattern and just the right shade of purple/lavender/orchid featherwing. Like all streamers it was great for a while but then fish catching success waned some and other patterns like the Ten-Ten, the Newfound Special and the Earl of Sandwich became very good. Finally, after years of contemplating I have reached the position that the most important thing to consistently trigger strikes is shape and movement. Subtle movements. Sometimes minute. Movement that happens from flash material that catches, absorbs, and redirects light. Movement that happens in featherwings that may capture UV rays, perhaps because feathers are made from a protein known as keratin. Keratin is what your fingernails are made from. Scientific research is limited on exactly how salmon use UV light, but our anecdotal or tribal knowledge experiments prove it matters. The Chinese red thread I use on bodies absorbs and omits narrow spectrum high frequency light.

It is now 3 o'clock and Salmo is cruising at 25'-30' deep this afternoon, looking for the right profile and only reacting when he catches movement. Suddenly, about 8' away, he sees a darting motion through the water slightly above him. It outlines well against the sky's background, so he moves closer. Then he sees a bunch of smaller, scale like movements that reminds him of that delicious smelt he prefers. It twists a little, slows slightly and then darts like it has spotted him. He moves very quickly and swims past the side of this potential smelt for a reaction. Or maybe he does this side swipe because he has limited color perception now and relies on absorbing an electrical frequency in his lateral line. His lateral line absorbs the right frequency as he suspected. A quick turn and a side strike, easier to target from the side because he can't focus things real close, but his instincts say it is a smelt. My screaming reel confirms that I have just triggered the instinct of a trophy Landlocked Salmon fooled by my new flashy streamer with layers of lines, eye circles and spots, the Squam's Fancy!