



Trout from the high fells

Andrew Flitcroft fishes for wild brownies along a path less travelled around Cow Green Reservoir in the North Pennines

PHOTOGRAPHY: ROB DENSON

THEY SAY THERE is a time and a place for everything. With fly-fishing that perfect time is usually while drifting a loch in a rolling wave under a leaden sky or a soft, dull day on a salmon river that's falling after a spate. When the TV weatherman points to highs of 25 deg C, a cloudless sky and the slightest whiff of a breeze we fly-fishers huff, throw down our rods and attend to less meaningful tasks. But on this occasion, 25 deg C and a near flat calm were perfect – or so we were told. After numerous postponements this was just what we needed for our jaunt to the North Pennines.

Richard and I bit the bullet and headed off up the A1, taking the usual left turn at Scotch Corner. To us, the A66 to Penrith is the gateway to fly-fishing heaven on the Solway rivers, and without fail the excitement builds as we head west. We often judge our fate by eyeing the water levels in the River Greta below the road. But this time our journey along it was short-lived. We took a right turn to Barnard Castle, scoffed bacon-and-egg baps in Middleton-in-Teesdale, and studied the swollen, dark-toffee-coloured River Tees around High Force. The temptation of the Tees would be greater another time: we climbed higher, through hill fog, over rushing burns, cattle grids and past wet sheep until we reached the car park at Cow Green Reservoir.

Rob Denson, whose aim was to capture the proceedings in glorious technicolor, was mid-brew. It was his Cow Green initiation, too, but between us we'd gathered a little wisdom from friends and judging by the conditions, we'd timed our visit perfectly. With tea and walnut cake finished, a teasing ripple prompted us to set up floating lines and casts of small black flies.

Cow Green is England's highest reservoir, 480m above sea level. The site is an AONB (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty), part of which is a National Nature Reserve, a home to rare alpine plants. To the east, between the former boathouse and the dam, Widdybank Fell is managed by Natural England and is out of bounds to anglers and walkers.

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To the north, Moor House Nature Reserve with its acid grassland, moorland and blanket bog stretches to the distant ridgeline of Little Dun Fell, Cross Fell and the golf ball-shaped air-traffic control station on Great Dunn Fell, the highest fell in the Pennines (848m).

It is an imposing landscape, yet while the dark peaty waters of the reservoir offer little in the way of

ABOVE
Andrew and Richard set off for a day's fishing (and hiking) around Cow Green Reservoir in Teesdale.



ABOVE
Insects are stirred from the heather as Richard and Andrew make tracks.

ABOVE RIGHT
Fish the points and bays where terrestrials are trapped in calmer water.



ABOVE
Richard got off to the better start with a static black and red Hopper and foam Beetle combination.

insect life, the grassland, bog and moor support a feast of terrestrials, which the trout rely on. The catch logbook found behind the green door of the former boathouse reveals the successful patterns and the likely size of the trout. Entries from the previous day included ten-strong baskets of wild brownies up to 12 in, caught on Black & Peacock Spiders and Clan Chiefs. Cow Green trout are truly wild: descendants of those that swam the burns before the reservoir was built. But they are not big: a 1 lb fish is a great fish, while 6 in-10 in fish are the norm.

Rob had been tipped off that the bigger ones may be found on the west shore at the opposite side of the reservoir, and at the main inlet, which was somewhere to the north. It didn't look too far given the favourable weather, so we prepared for the trek in

shirts instead of fleeces and wellies instead of waders, carrying packs with water, sun-cream and more cake.

The north end of the reservoir was out of sight, but we could see the dam so that's where we headed along the tarmac road through Widdybank Fell. Curlew piped and red grouse were flushed from the heather, which was alive with fly. There were small buzzers, daddy long-legs, flying ants and some odd-looking creatures that I suspect only a keen-eyed entomologist could identify. What looked like big buzzers turned out to be heather flies with dangling red-and-black legs. We'd been told they might appear, but we hadn't expected so many.

It was en route that Rob told me about his bad knee and the brace that would be fitted in hospital the next day. As we rounded the dam and headed north, we stepped along the shoreline. The going was good-to-soft on the gravel patches, squelching in the mud and lumpy among the rocks. We took to the natural bank to make haste. Here we traipsed through wet bog, peat and heather, but the yomp was broken by frequent spells of rising trout. They came in spurts – some small dimples, others splashy, and the odd one that brought us to a halt.

We found them willing for the first few casts. After that, they'd become increasingly difficult and eventually go down. Make the first few casts count and move on. Richard took fish on a black Hopper and a foam Beetle fished on a two-fly cast, while I'd changed to a dry-fly after missing a handful of takes on a retrieved Bibio and Zulu combination. I slowed things down and started to connect. A change to a

Ginked-up claret Sedgehog with little or no retrieve then took most of my share of the Pennines' finest scrappers, all within 20 ft of the bank. It paid to stand back from the water's edge, but grit from the fly-line soon made it into my reel. If you have a line tray, take it with you.

Fish could be found anywhere, but the points, bays and calm margins where fly congregated were the most productive areas. Richard was the first to catch a better-than-average fish of around 12 in, a trout typical of a hill loch – lean and mean, yet with a cloak of great beauty.

As we made our way north the size and number of fish increased. The number of bays increased, too. Point after point, fish after fish and hour after hour ticked by.

The north end of the reservoir was still out of sight as we reached what we thought was the halfway mark. It was 4 pm and five hours of walking over mud and moor in scorching heat was taking its toll. The rests were getting more frequent.

Richard – a keen hill walker – tried to distract us from rising fish, concerned that we may not make it back to the car before dark. I sensed the urgency in his voice so we made tracks, past rising trout, over more streams and more heather and bog, while catching the odd trout on the hoof. Then the wind dropped and the inevitable happened. Midges! I'd just come back from the mosquito-infested Kola Peninsula, and I tell you that I would rather run

naked across the Russian tundra covered in jam than be attacked by these beasties, which despite all efforts (DEET repellent and a midge net) were incessant.

Rob was becoming frustrated: "What's the point of midges? They have no purpose in life. The fish don't eat them."

A few yards further on, again he said, "What's the point in them?"

I had to admit they seemed to have been sent to annoy us.

I have reached the age where I need reading glasses and without them tying on a fly is a thankless task. Imagine trying to do it with hands and net black with midges. Why is it that in such situations you can't find your spectacles, despite

knowing you used them only minutes ago? Staying still wasn't an option, so I broke into a walk, and then a trot – still trying to get the leader through the eye of my fly. The midges eventually broke me: I bit off the leader, wound in and legged it after Richard and Rob who had leapfrogged ahead of me.

I've only walked a few hills in my time and I remember that feeling of reaching a ridge only to find another, and then another, to climb. Our walk around Cow Green was the same. Each bay we fished and conquered led to another climb and descent into another bay. And another. Like John Mills in *Ice Cold in Alex*, we dreamt of ice-cold beer and soldiered on until, over the umpteenth ridge, we sensed an end.

“As we made our way north the size and number of fish increased”



Typical Cow Green patterns, all with a black theme (left to right): foam Beetle, Sedgehog, Hopper, Seal's Fur Pennell and Invicta variant.



WILD TROUT IN THE PENNINES

Richard braves a midge-infested inlet where the upper Tees tumbles into the reservoir.



A good Cow Green trout taken on a Claret Sedgehog retrieved slowly. To avoid hooking too many small brownies try fishing a bigger fly (a 12 rather than a 14 or 16), which the small fish will find more difficult to take.



One on a Beetle. The trout's colouring varies considerably.

A victory! Of sorts. There in front of us was the inlet we had been searching for. And we would have fished this hotspot, had it not been for the low sun and another midge attack, this time on Richard and Rob, who had momentarily stopped to capture a cast on camera.

We looked for a crossing point. But this was no small inlet - this was a river, the upper Tees, in fact, which recent rain had blackened and lifted. We made tentative attempts, but its peatiness masked its depth. We were wearing only wellingtons and following a slip by Richard, who fell on rocks and his rod (mercifully, not broken), we were forced upstream in the wrong direction. We eventually found a shallower section to cross, but this added half an hour to our journey. If the upper Tees were in spate we would have been in trouble.

The cars were still an hour away, so we left the reservoir and its magical bays and headed off-piste in search of a high road we'd spotted earlier in the day. By now we were shattered, beaten and no longer together - we prayed the next brow would reveal tarmac. We fell on it suddenly at a break in the heather. We were out of water, cake and words, but the going was at last firm and within half an hour we were stripping off sweat-soaked clothes and sitting in the comfort of our cars.

I think we were guilty of being over-ambitious rather than under-prepared. Walking around Cow Green had taken almost ten hours, with a fair bit of it walking rather than fishing. Tackling the whole reservoir is probably not a good idea for most fishers. You will have to ford the river and if it's in spate that won't be possible; it's too dangerous. Had any of us turned an ankle on the south shore, if alone, we might have needed rescue and there is almost no phone signal. So my advice: keep to the north shore, unless young, experienced, fit and/or fishing with others, and pick a clear, mild day with a breeze to keep the midges at bay. You'll then witness the shadows of clouds chasing across the beautiful hilltops, hear the haunting curlew, and enjoy some wonderful dry-fly and wet-fly fishing for some stunning wild-as-wild-can-be brown trout.

Not bad for less than a tenner. **T&S**



The small burns that empty into Cow Green offer cooling relief on a hot day's trek.

Tickets and advice

Season: March 22-September 30.
Tickets: Day permits (full, £9; concessionary £7) are available to buy from Grassholme visitor centre only. Call 01833 641 121 (lines are open Monday to Friday, 9 am until 5 pm). Permits can also be bought in advance using your debit or credit card by calling the same number. Tickets also available through Fishpal on 01573 470 612; www.fishpal.com/England/Stillwaters/CowGreen. There is a 12-fish catch limit and fish under 10 in must be returned.
Facilities: There are no public toilets at Cow Green and we had no mobile phone signal. You must sign in at the former boathouse below the car park on arrival and sign out on departure, giving details of your catch. Adverse weather can create safety hazards, especially early and late in the season. If in doubt, please contact Grassholme Visitor Centre before leaving home. In such conditions, fishing will take place at the discretion of the duty ranger.

