Fly Fishing for Carp  
By Jeff Currier

Most trout fly fishers turn up their nose at the thought of pursuing a carp with a fly rod. However, this often-disrespected fish is perhaps the spookiest of all freshwater species, which means that stalking them can be challenging and exciting. Carp also reach huge sizes and fight tremendously hard, can be sight fished like bonefish, and are as difficult to fool into eating a fly as even the most selective trout. Best of all, they are abundant nearly everywhere. The carp is worthy of special attention.

A fly fisher must have the appropriate tackle however. Unlike most freshwater fish, carp commonly reach sizes of 12 pounds and have been known to surpass 50 pounds. The typical 4-weight fly rod for bluegill or 6-weight for smallmouth bass is not adequate, but rather an 8-weight, which has the extra backbone to turn one of these hefty fish off a flat or away from threatening tippet breaking weeds. And as if a carp’s massive size isn’t enough, these fish are burly fighters, capable of backing stealing runs. A reel with a strong smooth drag and capacity for at least 75 yards of 20-pound backing is a must.

Although in many regions carp can be taken year round, the spring is especially good when they congregate in huge schools to spawn. Although just as selective as always, the fact that a single cast will present the fly to many carp at a time increases your chances significantly. Look for muddy areas in shallow water, as well as wakes and even carp trying to jump. They usually can’t because of their immense size. Once you’ve located them, you may have a honey-hole for several weeks. I have seen them mill around such an area for over a month.

I use a floating line, and my first fly choice is a size 10, lightly weighted brown or rust colored Woolly Bugger. This pattern not only resembles a number of carp foods, but also does not splat on the water like a heavier conehead fly or Clouser Deep Minnow, so it is less likely to alarm the carp. The cloudy water presents some advantages too. Carp are easier to approach and are
less likely to see you cast. However, that cast still must be delicate, even in murky water, because these fish are so easily spooked.

No matter how softly your fly lands, because you can’t see through the milky water, it is inevitable that occasionally you will cast on top of fish sending the entire school running in all directions. Don’t panic when this happens. These carp are here for a reason and generally they quickly settle down and return. I leave my fly where it landed for several minutes or until I see a tail or swirl of a carp near it, then I begin to retrieve. The slowest retrieve imaginable works best. I strip in only an inch or so every 10 seconds. Remember, carp eat a lot of vegetation which doesn’t move, and their other food sources, insect larvae or a crayfish, don’t move much until the last second when threatened by a predator.

During summer, when spawning is finished, is the most rewarding time of year to fly fish for carp. This is when sight casting to individuals or small groups nudging along the bottom in 2 feet of water or parting grass on a flooded bank raises the adrenaline of even the snootiest trout angler. Finding them however, requires a bit of experience.

If you fish a particular lake regularly, you may have a spot in mind where you have seen carp before, and staking them out until they arrive is a good method. But carp are roamers, and sometimes a slow, observant walk along the shoreline works best. One of the easiest indications of feeding carp is to spot a cloudy or muddy spot (a mud) in otherwise clear water. Most often, one or two carp are creating the mud while feeding along the bottom. Watch the mud to determine the direction in which the mudding carp are moving. Begin casting slightly ahead of the mud. Remember, there may be unseen carp foraging ahead. Finally, cast right into the mud, let the fly settle, and start slowly stripping. Chances are that one will eat your fly, figuring that it is some type of creature that has been kicked up.

Searching for tailing carp is another method of finding them. Tailing occurs when a carp’s tail sticks out of the water as it feeds off the bottom. A tailing carp is a feeding carp and you should carefully plan your tactic. Determine the direction the fish is heading. Chances are that a good cast that leads the fish slightly will end with a strike. But remember, these tailing fish are in a vulnerable position and don’t think they don’t know it! Remember that there might be another fish feeding nearby that isn’t tailing and that you don’t see. Study the situation. A sloppy cast is enough to send them running. The sight of a tailing carp is an exciting one and can cause even the finest fly fishers to act too hastily.

Carp can also be found feeding on the surface. Aquatic insect hatches can blanket the surface of a lake on a cool summer evening, and hordes of terrestrial beetles, ants, and grasshoppers, along with plant seeds can accumulate on the surface after a windy day. All of these are foods
for carp. As in any feeding carp situation, approach with stealth. Identify the direction in which the feeding carp are moving and lead the fish by at least 10 feet. A long leader will separate the fly from the shadow of the fly line. Although many terrestrial patterns can be effective, the Chernobyl Ant has taken many surface eating carp.

Carp have extremely well developed senses. They are crafty and intelligent fish that scrutinize not only any artificial that you may present, but their natural foods as well. They are commonly found in urbanized areas, places where trout or other warmwater fish are not present. Fly fishers should not consider them junk fish, but rather should take advantage of the great sport they offer with a fly rod.