





Trout's Siberian Siblings

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Have you heard about **lenok**, the **Asiatic version of our trout?** For us fly-fisherman, these salmonoids are much more than an unwanted by-catch when **fishing for taimen.**

AS I FLOAT down the river Anyui in the Russian Far East in a rubber boat, I enjoy long dead drifts of my dry fly. Casting at an angle ahead of the boat, it is possible to let the fly drift for several hundreds of meters without mending, because the broad river bends only slightly on its course through the hills and the surrounding virgin forest. To know that I am alone here with about 150 native tree species, but also with a few hundred

Siberian tigers that have found their last refuge in this remote corner of Asia, adds a special thrill to the experience.

The fishing proves to be a dry fly fisherman's dream. Connected to the end of the leader is a Lenkovka, hook size 4. It is a Russian fly-pattern that looks like a palmer with a foam body and imitates the intense hatch of huge stoneflies. After some kilometres without incident, the line tightens and the pull of a fish bends my rod so deeply that the little rubber boat

is turned upriver. Has that fly really tricked a Siberian taimen to rise and take an insect pattern from the surface? Frantically, I have to clasp the cork handle in my mouth so that I can row the boat to the shore where I plan to beach the big, and as yet unknown, fish. It is not easy to keep a straight line, but I succeed; a few minutes later I have the beauty in my hands. It turns out not to be a small taimen, but a large blunt-nosed lenok of about 3 kg. Happily, I marvel at the quarry, its brawny proportions and big black dots.

The evolution of brown trout, *Salmo trutta*, is a success story. It

populates rivers, lakes and shores across the European continent and developed numerous forms, from Northern Africa in the south to the Ural Mountains in the east. But further east, different salmonids hold the line next to grayling and taimen – or in scientific terms, they occupy trout's ecological niche. These are lenoks.

In 3/2012, I presented a little-known salmonid – *Parahucho*, the sea-run taimen. But a second interesting group of salmonids exists that might be unknown to many readers. *Brachymystax*, the almost unpronounceable genus that



comprises fish called lenoks or Asiatic trout. To be precise, two lenok species can be distinguished; the so-called sharp-nosed lenok (*Brachymystax lenok*) with an inferior mouth, and the blunt-nosed lenok (*Brachymystax savinovi*), that features a trout-like, terminal mouth.

Until a few years ago the question of whether these two forms are ecotypes, subspecies of one species or a pair of true species, was highly controversial. At least, artificial hybrids between them can be produced, that are viable and fertile. Recent molecular biological studies



Lenok-habitat in the Republic Tuva.



Distribution of sharp-nosed lenok (blue), blunt-nosed lenok (red) and an unknown form (green).

support the view that they should be regarded as separate species.

The widespread sharp-nosed lenok populates vast parts of Siberia, from the Rivers Ob and Enisei to the Russian Far East. In contrast, the blunt-nosed lenok lives in the southern parts of the Far East and the Lena in Yakutia. In most rivers of Mongolia, only sharp-nosed lenok occur, but the north-eastern part of the huge country forms the headwaters of the mighty Amur River and hosts both of the species. In some rivers in China and Korea, lenoks occur as well but it is not entirely clear



Big blunt-nosed lenok from Anyui river.

which lenok species they belong to.

At first glance, these fish resemble brown trout. They have big adipose fins, small scales, and a golden to reddish brown base colour decorated with black dots. As in many salmonids, dark parr-marks are typical for juvenile lenoks as well. Adult sharp-nosed lenoks feature pretty, red to purple blotches on their flanks, whereas the coloration of the second species with their bigger black dots resembles brown trout even more.

Some fishermen state that the mouth of a lenok looks like a grayling's mouth, but I cannot follow

this view; at least, in the sharp-nosed form. The mouth is subterminal and the snout is pointed, but the large jaws reach far behind the eye. When a lenok opens its mouth, it is huge and enables it to swallow big prey fish or rodents. The view that lenok are an archetype of trout, or even the missing link between trout and grayling, is also wrong. They are indeed primitive salmonids, but more closely related to taimen and chars than to trout. Accordingly, lenok don't spawn in autumn or winter as brown trout do, but in spring like taimen.

The fact that blunt-nosed lenok mostly occur together with the sharp-nosed species, is extraordinary. I don't know of a second case of two salmonid species with such similar ecological requirements that naturally co-exist. Because they haven't ruled themselves out or evolved in different directions according to the competitive exclusion principle, one might assume that the evolution of the lenoks is still in full operation. There are minor differences in seasonal migration patterns and distribution limits in some river systems. In



Fishing for lenok in the headwaters of the Enisei River.



The beauty that made me think it was a taimen.



Successful patterns: Deer hair mouse, palmer, chernobyl hopper, silver jig and stonefly nymph.

this regard, it is remarkable that – unlike brown trout in Europe – lenok do not populate cool, fast flowing streams at their highest headwaters. Instead, interestingly, various species of grayling exist upriver of the uppermost occurrences of lenok.

It is just as well that only minor differences concerning habitat choice and feeding habits of the two species can be found. Both feed highly opportunistically showing little disdain for any particular food source: aquatic and terrestrial insects, especially caddis and





stoneflies, grasshoppers, dragonflies and their larvae. Fish and rodents are also part of their diet. Fortunately, lenok respond strongly to lures on the water surface. Therefore, depending on the prevalent available natural food, they can be caught on foam hoppers, deer hair mice, and last but not least, dry flies. The curiosity of small lenoks changes to a pronounced predatory behaviour with larger specimens. Strikes at surprisingly large lures, for example the huge flies used to catch Siberian taimen, are more the rule than the exception.

In many rivers, lenok are larger than the typical trout – individuals around 45 to 55 centimetres are nothing to rave about. As in trout, the maximum size that lenok reach varies strongly between rivers. In many cases it is around 60 - 65 centimetres, but exceptionally big individuals up to a meter in length and weighting eight kilograms can be found.

If you hook a large lenok, it will at first pull hard and shake in the depths. But these fish hardly fight with longer sprints and their resistance – as in brown trout – will



Not a steelhead river in B.C., but a lenok river in southern Siberia, close to the Mongolian border.

not last very long. That said, their size and their remarkable affinity to rise and take a fly make them a very rewarding target for us fly-fishermen. They definitely don't deserve to be known merely as an unwelcome by-catch while fishing for Siberian taimen.

But I understand this reaction – it happened to me as well. It is September 2009, and we are on a long float trip in the Sayan range in southern Siberia. Several days of horse riding, challenging whitewater, snow-capped mountains and vast



This river in remote Yakutia holds only two resident salmonid species – arctic grayling and sharp-nosed lenok.

woods in autumnal colours isolated us far from any human settlement. Interrupted by very fierce rapids, the river invites us to fish long and deep pools. We head for these promising places to fish for Siberian taimen; unfortunately without success.

We approach a large pool formed behind a rocky island. My buddy will fish the inlet with his single-handed rod, and I plan to scan the broader back half of the pool with my spey rod. My second cast results in a strong jerk. My first euphoric thought was that this has to be a



At first sight the pointed snout of sharp-nosed lenok resembles the European grayling's mouth.



good-sized taimen; there is no other option considering the huge size 4/0 streamer I have on the end of my line. The fish seems to confirm that pleasant anticipation and uses the strong current for a fierce escape downstream. Several minutes later I

catch a glimpse of the long-awaited taimen; but instead of the typical red flanks, I spot the characteristic purple blotches of a sharp-nosed lenok. For a second, I am not sure if I should be pleased or annoyed not to have a Siberian taimen on the line, even if

it would have been a small one. But that's nonsense, such a big lenok, a lunker at a length of 64 cm, is the more rewarding catch. ■