

A glimpse of the grayling fisher's Holy Grail.

Journey's end

JEREMY LUCAS'S thoughts constantly return to the golden grayling of Poland's San River

PROFILE

Jeremy Lucas has been on a fly-fishing journey for almost 40 years and now specialises in wild trout and grayling fishing. He considers that of all such fishing around Europe and beyond, the San River of south-east Poland is supreme.

Some men have one life. A few have two. About ten years ago, shortly after the Rivers International on the Tweed in September 1994, my first life ended with a family that had drifted away, a job which was completely inconsequential and, like a final blow, a somersaulting car on the M3. After being treated for cuts and small broken bones, I walked away from the disaster of the first life, even after saying goodbye to everyone I still held dear as the car went airborne over the central reservation (I was alone in the car and miraculously no-one else was hurt in the crash) and I knew I had been born into a new life.

At the age I had reached, I also knew many of the mistakes I should avoid making in the second life I had been granted, and though there was much I would leave behind, I held fast to my passion for fly-fishing – the one, solid link between lives – and lost myself in my hunt and passion for wild, cold waters around the world.

Then at last, in May 2005, after two flights culminating in Krakow, Poland, and a four-hour car journey south-east into the beginnings of the Tatra Mountains, I felt a sense of journey's end, as before my humbled gaze the great River San rolled down the valley, in a 120-metre wide channel spilling between beautiful mixed woodland. Finally, it seemed, here lay the grayling fisher's Holy Grail, a place that the Poles and Czechs call El Dorado, for both trout and grayling (and the legendary huchen, or taimen). I felt then exactly as I had felt more than 30 years ago as I caught my first sight of Loch Maree, then probably the finest sea-trout fishery in the British Isles; an excitement and sense of awe. Here I would tread, cast, catch, and absorb. Here I would find deliverance in my fly-fishing second life, as Maree had fulfilled my first.

Chance took me to the San. I had been selected to fish for England in the 2005 European Championships, based at Lesko, a beautiful small town on the river. In the May school half-term, just two weeks before the Championships, I took my family to visit this lovely area and to do some exploratory fishing. Accompanying us was friend and team-mate Baz Reece. The hire car from Krakow was completely stuffed, in truth more with tackle than the paraphernalia that you have to take with two young children in transit. Jennie concerned herself with clothes for the family, while Baz and I concerned ourselves with the obvious.



all around you. Either bank is 50 or 60 metres away. You have fished 'blind' dry fly all the way out, taking half a dozen grayling averaging 30cm, and a trout, and have arrived on the cusp of a blue lagoon. The dry rides over the lip, from shallow to indeterminate depth water, just where it goes turquoise, before 'sip' and the fly has gone. A lift and a grayling whirls as you turn it towards the shallows, away from the immense shoal. If you stand in that place for an hour or so, you might catch 20 more like that. Some quandary; do you move on or do you stay? I guess it's best to wander; there are lots of parts to this paradise.

Spread out on the shallows, sometimes even in ankle-deep water, are singleton grayling, often the larger fish. You tread quietly through this water, picking out the more obviously fish-holding areas, the little scoops, larger boulders, water that is 'held back' slightly from the main flow. Yet the fish might be anywhere, lying in some mysterious vagary of water condition, or just hunting and feeding, passing through. Extraordinarily, you see almost nothing unless the fish are actually rising. Perhaps a gleam as a fish twists to catch a dislodged shrimp or Rhyac

caddis; yet like gilt-hued ghosts the grayling will materialise from nowhere and snatch down your dry, or intercept the nymph as it wafts near their feeding path.

Several of my team-mates remarked on the fact that these grayling do not behave, in subtle ways, to British grayling. Certainly they're appearance is dissimilar, being slimmer in the tail, perhaps broader in the head and shoulders, coloured much more golden, with orange-hued fins and apricot bellies; and trout-like black spots, much more obvious than British fish. At first, because of the colouration and spots, we thought we had hooked a trout, right up to bringing it to hand.

Sometimes the hook/loss ratio is very high, and I have yet satisfactorily to crack this particular problem. In the river at Zagorz, on public 'free' water, during an afternoon when I caught upwards of 50 fish, I started by having a half-hour spell when I was hooking a grayling in rapid water almost every cast, yet I actually brought to hand only two or three during this frustrating period. Wojtek suggested that I was too soft with the fish; that I needed to bring them straight to the net, not giving them time to turn; but when I tried this I invariably pulled

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out of the fish. If I was gentler, allowing the current to carry the fish downstream of me, attempting to coax the fish back up towards me, through the stream, then again I lost most of them. Watching some of the Polish team, complete geniuses with grayling, gave us a clue for curing the problem, though not entirely satisfactory, or conclusive. What they did immediately after hooking the fish, was to hold it gently in the flow while they waded quickly downstream of the fish, lifted it to the surface and netted it from behind. Very little pressure was applied to the hook hold throughout the operation. It certainly worked, but the problem – to us – was in the disturbance of the waded water, often right in among a shoal. They laughed at us when we commented on this disturbance, suggesting that it actually made no difference at all to the feeding fish: it might even be stimulating to the grayling!

When the waters flow on San, they really flow, and colour horribly, completely changing the fishing. The water picks up pace, and you see colour and debris in the water, and simultaneously the grayling, then the trout, stop feeding. Coloured conditions do not necessarily coincide with heavy rain; in fact mud in the river might be anything up to 24 hours following rain. Also, even if it has been calm and dry down in the San valley, there might well have been torrential rain up in the mountains. Much of the upland rainfall can be held back by the lakes and dams, but sooner or later it is released and the inevitable happens. We fished through it, out of necessity, and in anything but the most heavy colour, there is always the chance of fish, particularly trout.

But it gets dangerous out there. I became trapped on the far bank on one occasion, having been near the bank when the water suddenly rose

Below: a San grayling and brown trout. San grayling look dissimilar to those found in the UK and, in fact, because of the colouration and spots, the England team repeatedly thought it had hooked a trout right up to bringing it to hand.





We two almost wept with anticipation as we caught our first glimpses of the great river.

Expectations were high as we made our first, tentative, waded footfalls into the clear waters. 'Crystal' water was how several of our soon-to-become Polish friends referred to the river when it was in perfect fishing order. And perfection it was as we cast our two-fly teams (Polish National Rule: maximum two flies), fishing a mix of 'blind' and to rising fish. And there, on one of life's real cusps, I fell in love with the river, as amber-finned grayling snatched at the dead-drifted Nymphs and stopped the line. I hit them, as I would on Eden or Dee or Tweed, and then I learnt to just lift into them, to feel the first cork-screwing swirls, before I held them in the flow and brought them to hand. Baz and I were helped to ease into the subtleties of particularly the grayling fishing on San by Wojtek Gibinski, an outstanding fishing guide with excellent English, without whom we would have found it much more time-consuming to engage this fishing.

I can hardly describe fairly the truly astonishing fishing on this river system flowing down from the Tatras. In the mountains, close to the Slovakian and Ukranian borders, the catchment is colossal. It consists of vast, rolling peaks and valleys of mixed deciduous and coniferous forest, still the haunt of roving wolf packs and the European brown bear. The money from the European Union has not yet encroached too deeply into this area, which remains relatively undeveloped, certainly unspoilt. Even as far downstream as Lesko, Zagorz and Sanok, and the huge Mychkowche dam, the fields are still small, mostly worked by hand and horse. Although there are already many new houses, they, like the old, stand on large plots of land which are real working gardens, much as rural

A grayling in the clean, crystal clear water of the San. The author fell in love with the river and hopes the Poles can keep it like this.

Above right: the main river can be waded bank to bank

— 'It is possible to catch upwards of ten fish from one of these scoops'

and the massive, predatory huchen, but for me – and, I think, many others – it is the grayling that has caught our imaginations.

Unless there has been heavy rainfall or a big release of water from the dam, the main river can be waded bank to bank in most places. We

found ourselves wandering perhaps up to half a mile from where we had entered the river, exploring the myriad of micro-environments as we fished, entirely catch-and-release. There are deep scoops among the glide water, and also areas where the bed rock is exposed, often in huge slabs cleaved with dark, deep trenches. The scoops and the trenches are of uncertain depth, completely unwadeable, and are treacherous. Fine in clear water conditions, because you can see them, but when the water colours you have to exercise caution, ideally by using a wading stick (which I don't) to explore the depth in front of you. Many of the scoops are gouged from gravel and rimmed with water moss and Ranunculus. We called them 'blue lagoons' and found that they were usually and obviously packed with two-year and three-year group grayling. It is possible to catch upwards of ten fish from one of these scoops, with perhaps a big grayling or trout among them.

Picture this: you're wading up to your knees, with good water visibility

Right: The author fishing the no-kill sector of the San near Lacski ...




... and with a beautiful grayling. The water below the Mychkowche dam has a relatively constant year-round temperature – perfect for the European grayling.

into a torrent. Italian and Irish team members were both swept off their feet, on different days. I had one total immersion after stepping off the rim of a 'blue lagoon' disguised by coloured water. Frightening this, rather than embarrassing. When the shock of water at 6°C hits you (in air temperatures in excess of 3°C), and you're a long way from shore ...

Yet, while the San and its tributaries like the Howchewska and the Solinka, may not be for the faint-hearted, I claim that it would not be possible for any dedicated river fly-fisher, to be able to resist its succulent challenge. Hit it when the conditions are high, coloured water, or there is a bitterly cold downstreamer, and the challenge might be overwhelming, and certainly unwelcoming; but engage that river system in good, clear and warm conditions and you will know that there is still paradise on this Earth, in this life.

I think now that on this extraordinary fly-fishing journey, I perceive at last a destination, even if not a final one. Or could it be more a defining moment in a fishing life? I had thought this of the Eden in Cumbria, where I live, until catastrophic drainage of the wetland and the accompanying poisons of modern agriculture have all but robbed England of this last great river heritage. Now, perhaps, I know that Eden has been more a waypoint in the journey, not an end to it – both sad and comforting – and when I ponder on the places, and times, that have so enriched the journey it is the wonderful, awesome San which has stolen my deepest affection. Those times in the spring of 2005, first with my family, then our England team, and both times with our great guide Wojtek Gibinski, are where my thoughts constantly return. And I know that however many times I go back, it will be those treasured memories of tentative exploration and discovery in the San around which my future fly-fishing journey will revolve. While my first life was so dominated by the legendary sea trout of Loch Maree – now extinct – so my second life is pivoted around the golden grayling of the San's 'crystal' waters.

'Czech Nymphing was outperformed by a longer range Nymph technique'



- Travelling time from Rzeszow to the San is one and a half hours. Choice of accommodation varies from a 'basic' (perfectly adequate) lodge, with housekeeper, to an esoteric retreat in the National Park, and even self-catering if required. Guides are included in the package. The San is vast by British standards, and it would take the unguided many weeks even to metaphorically scratch its surface.
- Information on accommodation, transit to and from airport (Rzeszow), and fishing permits can be found by visiting www.fly.fish.pl.
- Prices of flights depend on when they are booked. If booked around three months in advance they can be as little as £60 return, inclusive of taxes. However, if last-minute or during the peak time of the summer holidays (not the best time to fish the San) they can be about £250 return inclusive.
- Flights can be arranged by Wojtek Gibinski – 00 (48) 502 300 170 or visit www.fly.fish.pl – or by the author – 01768 352995 or visit www.wilderness-flyfishing.co.uk.

Poles point the way

Another curiosity which struck us was the way 'classical' Czech Nymphing, upstream and under the rod tip, was hugely outperformed by a longer range Nymph technique. Here we were on the home of Eastern European grayling fishing, yet the traditional approach was obsolete. Even before we saw the Poles exercising their great skill, we found ourselves casting further, working upstream with a longer line than is usual in Britain, throwing in two or even three line mends, extending the dead-drift path of the flies, and employing several inducing lifts, the final one being a sweep and hold almost directly downstream – a particularly successful point of hooking a fish.

The Eastern European masters still refer to this method as Short-Nymphing, though it certainly seemed to the British anglers to be what we would consider a more medium-range technique. We noticed also that the Poles were not casting so much upstream as directly across, thus hardly dead-drifting the flies at all, rather than swinging and sweeping immediately after casting. They were generally not using heavy nymphs, though very slimly-dressed patterns, so were not fishing very deep. Their rods were held high throughout the retrieve phase, rather like the 'high sticking' method, using the bow of what I think was a low AFTM rating line as a 'swing-tip' type of indicator. Fantastically subtle, this: I watched as a Polish master raked through the awesome

San Section 5 practice water, taking almost 50 trout and grayling, with simply mind-blowing efficiency, in under two hours. In that period I managed 20, which was more than any other team-member of the competing nations could catch in that time. Get this in perspective; I was catching on duo (dry fly on dropper – small nymph on point), a brilliantly effective method when the San grayling are feeding (which is most of the time when the water is clear), while the practising members of other National teams were working the water, mostly with Czech Nymph style; yet the Poles were calmly taking the river apart, so far and away more ruthlessly and effectively than anyone else. I vowed then, to myself, my team-mates and my team manager, Paul Page, that I would find out exactly what it was the Poles are doing on this sort of water.

I recall one Polish team member telling me that with dry fly, the England team were feared, or at least we could hold our own with the best in the world, but with this 'Short Nymphing' we had a great deal to learn. Then, Wojtek said, "You England guys are 20 levels above most, but the Eastern Europeans are still way ahead of you in Nymph fishing." We did not understand, and even now, months later, we are only just beginning to learn some of what we have been lacking; but what a wonderful challenge this is for the future of British river fishing.