

## The Pragmatist & the Purist – Bass Fishing in the UK

Firstly let us consider the terms titling this piece.

Pragmatism, "a philosophical movement that includes those who claim that an ideology or proposition is true if it works satisfactorily". *Do what you need to catch fish.*  
Seems sensible to me.

Purism, "scrupulous or exaggerated observance of, or insistence on traditional rules or structures, especially in language or style". So in fly fishing the terms "traditional rules and style" apply. *Do one thing because it has more worth, stick at it even if it isn't the best method.* Although of course sometimes it is, and anyhow, of course you enjoy it more.

Purism is a variable concept; it depends from which perspective you look. Now, I'll wager most people reading this are trout men. Indeed I, if asked, might well use the term to describe myself. To the trout man, purism defines a very specific modus operandi. That of a dry fly, fished to a sighted fish, ideally presented upstream, a method which I certainly count as my preferred way of fishing.

But the trout man's purism is a very different concept to that of the saltwater man. Nevertheless purism of a sort exists even in the world of the saltwater angler. In saltwater, you might possibly be casting to a sighted fish, although in the English Channel or the North Sea I really wouldn't suggest waiting until you see a fish before casting. You also pretty much certainly won't have a dry fly on the end of your 10 or 15lb tippet, well not if you want to catch anything anyhow.

I have put thousands of hours in coarse fishing; I've thrown a spinner many times, I have even dug lugworms once or twice. I have now settled on fishing with the fly, more or less whatever I fish for and wherever I fish. Misguided I may be but I have been called stubborn before now.

Just fishing with a fly rod at all in UK waters is the salt water man's purism. ~The saltwater fly man cannot be as picky as the trout man. The "fly" to the salt water man represents not the specific species of Ephemeroptera or Trichoptera, but more that of a non-specific bait fish or some crustacean or some such. Most UK sea anglers would probably count a spin or lure fisherman a purist and if you are fly fishing, they are more likely to just think you are cracked, certainly not a purist of any kind.



These lengthy ramblings serve as a somewhat obfuscated introduction to a trip to Cornwall to fish for Sea Bass where I faced a choice between the two terms previously mentioned.

The 2012 trout season was coming to a close and I made my annual trip to the English south coast for a Bass fishing trip. I have tried a few places over the last 7 or 8 years but I have now settled on Southern Cornwall, guided by Austen Goldsmith. After idyllic golden memories of holidays with family now gone in Cornwall, it has turned into as much of a pilgrimage to my long lost childhood as it is a fishing trip. This year my coarse fishing partner of decades past, the inscrutable APR was to join me. I am in the midst of a resolute campaign to get him hooked on fly fishing; despite knowing that he will have me in his shade within a few seasons should he pull himself away from his beloved River Trent and his stick floats and apply himself to it.

Our host Austen is a great fly fisherman, but certainly not a purist. He likes his clients to catch fish in the way they want, but more even than that he wants his clients to catch fish. His enthusiasm is infectious and I have yet to have a day that wasn't both enjoyable and fruitful out of well over a dozen days on the water with him. APR was to pragmatically fish with a spinning rod, using various water level lures and techniques. As ever I would persist with the purist's version of saltwater fishing and stick with the fly rod.



We motored slowly out of Mylor, a picturesque well to do part of Cornwall's Falmouth Harbour. It was a little bit early for comfort on a cloudless autumn morning and there was a real chill in the still air. The sun was still not over the headland in front of us as we negotiated our way through the yachts and motor launches of the great and good.

We stopped to fish within sight of the impressive St Mawes Castle, one of a pair of coastal fortresses together with Pendennis Castle, built to protect Henry VIII's England from invasion by Catholic France and Spain.

The water was like a millpond, reflecting the brightening sky. The air was still and quiet and the hordes of sailing boats were yet to fill up the Fal Estuary. We threw poppers to try and draw a predatory Bass to the surface, I had a big swirl in the first few casts at my surface lure, but no take and after 20 minutes more we moved on passing St Anthony's Lighthouse on the headland moving north east. We motored slowly into a small cove, it looked so fishy. The water was without a ripple and gin clear. We could clearly see the demarcation between the rocky weeded areas scattered intermittently over a light sandy bottom. I was at the front of the boat, poised to cast, this was good enough for sight fishing. There were unfortunately not any fish there, but we could have sight fished for them if they were.

We moved north along the coast, on the third cove I switched to a sinking line with a three inch clouser, a cast over some broken ground and immediately a Bass hit my fly and the rod jerked viciously, within a few minutes the fish was at the boat. A perfect fish but only about 2lb, the strength of a sea fish is always a big surprise to a trout man, especially a small river wild trout man with a 7 weight outfit.

We moved along the shore, trying inshore coves and jutting outcrops, different depths, retrieves and flies. I covered a lot of water, I was relentless, but to no avail. A tough day for the fly man was unveiling. APR meanwhile continued inevitably to pick up the odd fish.



After a welcome lunch, which for me was more about resting than eating, we moved a little further offshore. Again Austen felt the best chance was on the surface, APR effortlessly threw out a floating lure, I with an increasingly agricultural style hurled a size 2 popper into the distance and retrieved the wine cork sized "fly" in every conceivable manner, fast, slow, long, short and variations thereof. APR fished away expertly with the spinning rod, a bass falling to him every twenty or so minutes, I sneered grumpily, shrugged and continued pure and true to the fly, fishless. This was my fourth day and the line was fairly flying out despite the wine-cork sized popper, so I was sort of enjoying myself despite the supercilious grins.

At last after taking a five minute breather from my increasingly ragged casting, I stood back leaning against the centre console. APR's rod again bent into a nice bass, his smirk as he nonchalantly played the fish, rubbed salt into the open wounds of my dented ego. This was all

beginning to grate a little bit when on the very next cast, within 6" of my retrieve starting a big swirl materialised right behind my popper. I stopped retrieving and just stared at the fly. After 3 hours of no action I was hypnotised by the actions of fishing and my mind was blank. I remember looking at Austen blankly and him looking back confused at my inaction. I think I had actually forgotten what I was even doing. I snapped out of it and one fast strip and the bass was straight on, after a brief struggle I landed a perfect 4lb fish. I could take a seat and enjoy the view for a while.

It was getting towards the end of the day and the tide was getting slack. Austen moved us further out to an area where the tide would be moving and a known "mark". The problem was that we were in 60 – 80 feet of water. At this stage the fly fisher really begins to suffer, in fact it begins to be more than a little bit of a joke. Of course I tried. Heavy sinking line, big clouser with heavy eyes, the only way to get the fly down was to just dump the line at the side of the boat; I knew it was both wrong and hopeless from the start. I gave in after 15 minutes.

APR continued catching the odd bass and even caught a couple of cod, the biggest at 14lb which looked like 40 if it was an ounce when you saw the size of its head. But of course the head is more or less half of a cod, which coincidentally was what APR's head was in distinct danger of beginning to resemble. The sooner this was over the better.

I shall spare you the details but in addition to just mere fish, APR somehow contrived to hook, land and release unharmed two furious screaming seagulls in a single cast. I'm not even making this up, spare me the day he picks up the fly rod.

The day ended and I had typically stuck with the way of the purist. Which to be fair will, more often than not, certainly in numbers anyhow, out-fish the lure. But not today, it seems that this was the day for the pragmatic angler and doing what you need, not necessarily what you want. But of course we all know it's not the catching that matters.

MR 10.03.2013

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