Fly Fishing in Japan

by Jim Repine

Trout photos by Jim Repine

FOR CENTURIES, Japan was a tiny island nation shrouded in mystery and determined to remain so. The country tried by every means to avoid foreign corruption, keeping its unique social, cultural, political, and economic customs to itself. Authorities went so far as to forbid building boats capable of sailing to other lands. The fate of alien sailors unfortunate enough to be found on her beaches was rarely pleasant.

Japan's 200-year period before it was forced into international conflict in 1852 was, incidentally, the longest era of peace of any modern country. That year, Admiral Matthew Calbraith Perry, on a pretext of concern for those same seamen, forced Japan at gunpoint to expose itself to United States mercenary interests, and in so doing, to European greed as well. The wisdom of such "diplomacy" I'll leave to the more learned to argue, but the development of fly fishing in such a tiny, little-known corner of the world is a tantalizing tale with surprising questions and puzzles about who taught who what and when.

Masaaki Nishiki—my closest friend in the magic land of Nippon and a highly esteemed historical novelist and noted television personality—and I have been fishing together for more than a quarter century. We have shared remarkable adventures all over Alaska and Japan for long enough to disprove the myth that the sinful die young. It's from him that I learned most of what I know about the history of Japanese fly fishing.

For example, fishing in Japan's lowland rivers and streams with natural bait and hooks fashioned of bone dates back to the fourth century and beyond. Catching native char—*iwana*—was in practice in remote mountain villages as early as the sixteenth century and probably much earlier. And although it's hardly a shock to discover primitive cultures fishing to eat from local streams, these mountain dwellers were doing it with long rods, tapered horsehair lines, and flies—handcrafted floating flies—tied on metal hooks. Were they the first dry-fly purists?

Without benefit of the works of Ernest Schwiebert or Doug Swisher and Carl Richards, the Japanese apparently had little knowledge of what was under the water, such as aquatic insect life. They only knew what they saw. Insects appeared on the surface of the water, and fish ate them. Therefore, if they created an imitation insect over a hook and attached it to a line fastened to a long bamboo wand, they could catch fish.

It rains often on island mountains, and plant and animal life is prolific. There are thus lots of insects and lots of fish. It didn't matter to the success of this food-gathering effort what percentage of the *iwana* diet was ingested beneath the surface. These anglers caught all they wanted without knowing or caring about the degree of a nymph's hackle softness or, for that matter, the effectiveness of night crawlers. The patterns, some still around, were designed after adult insects.

So the picture we get is of a man in clothes of thatched straw, a woven conical hat, a coat, knee pants, and woven san-

dals. He dappled his flies with a simple one-piece bamboo or willow rod of 10 feet or more and a tapered horsehair line of like length fastened to the rod tip. There were no reels.

Methods and equipment so strikingly similar to what was happening in England at the same time (as early as the fifteenth century) seems amazing. How could it be? There is no proof that Marco Polo visited Japan—most scholars feel that he did not—however, he knew of and wrote about the mystical islands. But as renowned a traveler as he was, Señor Polo was only one of several extraordinary tourists in those days. The intercourse of knowledge between East and West was more extensive than generally realized. So who spread the word of methods and equipment to whom? It makes fascinating speculation.

Once the U.S. diplomatic corps arrived, the British weren't far behind. Their primary mission wherever they went was to preserve and extend the empire, but they also seemed bent on insuring that the sun would never set on trout fishing. If Englishmen were required to be somewhere for more than a few months, fly fishing was sure to spring up. As a result, fruits of their evangels are enjoyed to this day in Africa, New Zealand, Australia, India, Patagonia, and Japan.

During the 1930s, John Hunter—half English, half Japanese—had become an influence in important circles of Tokyo's international political and social set. His exact role was shadowy, strongly suggesting intrigue. He founded the Angling Club on Chuzenji Ko, a large alpine lake in the mountains at Nikko. These enchanting environs had long been the private preserve of shoguns and the place where royal family members escaped the summer heat of Tokyo.

The Angling Club was exclusive. Only the royal family and British, American, and Italian foreign officers were invited to join. It was not strictly limited to fly fishing—any sporting method would do—but members were mostly advocates of long rods and feathers. Such notables as Jim Hardy visited the Angling Club, and in 1982 I had the high honor of visiting the man who guided him. Well into his eighties, he showed me two rods Hardy had given him and told me about accompanying the famed angler to the northern island of Hokkaido. Hardy has been quoted as saying the three best fishing locations in the world are British Columbia, New Zealand, and Hokkaido. But the sleeping ghosts of Perry's ships eventually reawakened. The catastrophic tragedy of World War II ended things at Chuzenji Ko for some time.

I first went to Japan in 1955 as a young Marine and spent two of my most pleasant years there. I have a vivid memory of waking one early morning in an ancient mountain inn. I had taken a room for the weekend and was looking out at a gorgeous stream flowing just under my window. Birds were singing to the music of gurgling water. Like an apparition, there suddenly appeared a man dressed in the conical hat and a coat, but he wore jeans that fit into shiny, new rubber boots. He cast (dappled) a fly I couldn't see. (I knew nothing of horsehair lines then, so I don't know whether he was using one.) His rod was a single-piece bamboo affair with no reel. The second cast produced, as best I can recall, an approximately 8-inch fish, which he deftly lifted from the stream and deposited into a small woven reed creel attached to his belt. As quickly as he had come, he vanished.

"Trout fishing?" I wondered. It was the last thing I had expected to find there.

The "trout" I now know was a char, one of the two native species found in Japan's countless streams and rivers. There are also three indigenous species of Pacific salmon: chum, sockeye, and a sixth Pacific salmon—cherry salmon—that doesn't come to the Americas. In lower portions of many watersheds and in some lake systems, cherry salmon have for centuries been landlocked and have taken on typical stream fish characteristics. So Japan's fresh water held three principal salmonid species in plentiful year-round supply.

Salmon runs occurred from south of Tokyo to the northern extremes of Hokkaido and were as prolific as those of northwestern America. Then two things happened. First, in the rush to modernize between Perry's visit and World War II—from about 1900 on—hydroelectric projects brought a great number of dams to almost every body of water that flowed. The results were predictable. Second, the commercial salmon fishery was developed with typical Japanese ingenuity and efficiency.

The most productive runs were trapped in entirety at the mouths of their spawning water, harvested, and artificially propagated on the spot. It was efficient farming, but it soon left the rest of the river or stream almost devoid of life. It should be noted, however, that with no sportfishing constituency and with no one imagining there ever would be one, the only interest in the resource was commercial exploitation. But the seeds of fly fishing planted at Chuzenji Ko had germinated. Although the insanity of war left those seeds dormant for some years, fruition would come.

The postwar Japan I first encountered was a country rapidly "going western." Jeans were in fashion, Elvis was the musical rage, and this period was the last brief respite from the onslaught of contemporary western influences. Whatever was happening in the United States was the "in" thing. Jazz clubs opened. Baseball had been popular for decades, but when interest in tennis exploded in the States, the Japanese all enrolled in tennis schools. Golf followed. And fly fishing reemerged—but with a dramatic difference.

The country's economic recovery, aided in large part by the United States, was a world wonder, and with it grew a gigantic middle class. For the first time in history, folks by the millions had two new things: surplus income and leisure time. Fly fishing would never again be reserved for a tiny handful of the rich and privileged. Estimates of current fly angler numbers vary: Nishiki puts the number at about 100,000; others more than double that figure. All I can say is that the annual Tokyo Tackle Show, covering all forms of sport angling, is billed as the best-attended fishing show in the world, and the last time I was there, it looked that way.

Mel Krieger has been warmly received in Japan, as has Steve Rayjeff and many other U.S. fly-fishing notables. I met and chatted with the current Jim Hardy there, and over the years I've written and published a hundred or so fishing articles for various Japanese magazines. Yet the westerner best known and respected—the man who played the most significant role in helping to reawaken Japan's interest in fly fishing after the war—was, and still is, Leon Chandler, vice president of the Cortland Line Company and one of the world's most influential fly fisherman.

Chandler—who had fought the Japanese during the war—made several visits to Japan in the years following World War II giving seminars, appearing at shows, and generally encouraging local anglers. Today his name is spoken with reverence from one end of the island nation to the other. In fact, this soft-spoken man, who for half a century has influenced fly fishing around the world, still occasionally returns to Nippon, thirty years after his first visits. As he helped nurture things along, he has had the deeply satisfying experience of seeing the sport grow there. Tackle manufacturers large and small have evolved and now not only turn out world-class-quality products, but a good number of innovative ones as well. For example, Diawa became the largest fishing tackle producer in the world. They now have a top-of-the-line rod collection that compares well with anything I've seen. Marryat reels enjoy wide American acceptance, and much of the best leader material and hooks are now made in Japan. And there are many other successful Japanese manufacturers.

Yet where—in a nation with the land mass of California and a population half that of the United States—could there be any place left to fish? Japan is assumed to be a country of endless factories, farmers cultivating rice on whatever small patches of land are left. This must be the common impression, because it's a question I always get.

All three main islands, south to north—Kyushu, Honshu, and Hokkaido—are steeply mountainous. Less than a third of the land is level enough for industrial or urban expansion. The vast majority of people on Honshu, the largest island, live in an area from megalopolitan Tokyo south along the Pacific coast to Osaka, the country's second largest city. In the north there are still a good number of farms and woodlands. The Japan Alps—a high, wild mountain range bisecting the island north to south—are among the most rugged hills in the world.

Hokkaido, roughly the size of Ireland, has almost three million people. About half of them live in or close to Sapporo, leaving the southern portion largely devoted to modern dairy farms, with the upper half surprisingly pristine. Kyushu also has a generous amount of open space.

The same coalition of consumers, manufacturers, and related services that give anglers' organizations elsewhere enough economic clout to get political attention are at work in Japan today. Japan Fly Fishers and other organizations are working hard at environmental restoration. Meanwhile, it has become common to find well-turned-out, skilled Japanese fly fishers on rivers and streams in Montana, Maine, Alaska, Canada, New Zealand, and even Patagonia.

This is not to say that there isn't some excellent fishing remaining on all three islands. Nishiki and others have taken me to some of my most memorable fishing there, especially on northern Honshu and Hokkaido. And over the last three decades, most popular sport fish have been introduced. Rainbow, brown, lake, and brook trout are all found in an interesting variety of water, from small mountain streams and major rivers to ponds and large lakes. Bass, large- and smallmouth, have become very popular and do very well.

But don't go to Japan expecting the ego satiations of Alaska's overly plentiful large and easy fish. It's not like that. For me, in fact, the native species are the prime attraction. With them, you will always earn your catches. The fish are intricately marked char, prolific but seldom more than 12 inches in length. They exact their own prices: time-consuming research, long involved trips north, rugged mountain hikes, and at times near-perfect execution of difficult techniques with long spiderweb leaders and no. 24 patterns.

Can Japan's rivers, lakes, and streams someday be restored to their original quality and attract worldwide interest in practicing our lovely sport there? It is just as relevant to ask if the Penobscot and countless other eastern rivers can be restored to anything close to their once-remarkable states. Can anything pertaining to environmental quality be truly preserved—much less restored—in Japan, the United States, or anywhere else, as long as we continue crowding 90 million new human beings each year onto a rather small planet? A nation that in the short space of time between world wars I and II took itself from isolated feudalism to the highest levels of industrialized strength, influence, and power might have a shot at it. If significant restoration of a nation's sport fishery is possible, it's as likely to happen in Japan as any place I've been.