The Colorful World of Fly Fishing in Aelian’s *De Natura Animalium*

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1) Aelian, *De Natura Animalium* 15.1 – The Macedonian Fly

...*sophia* δ’ οὖν περίερχονται τοις ἵπποις ὑδροθηρικῇ, δόλον αὐτοῖς ἐπινοήσαντες οὖν. τῷ ἀγκίστρῳ περιβάλλοντων ἐριον φοινικόν, ἤμοσται τῷ ἐφίρο δύο πετα ἀλκεντόνος ὑπὸ τοῖς καλλαίοις περιφότα καὶ κηρῷ τὴν χρόαν προσεικασμένα: ἄργυας δὲ ὁ κάλαμος ἐστὶ, καὶ ἢ ὀρμιά δὲ τοσοῦτον ἔχει τοῦ μήκος, καθᾶσιν οὖν τοῖς δόλον, ἔλκόμενος δὲ ὑπὸ τῆς χρώας ὁ ἰχθύς καὶ ῥεξεμένος ἀντίς ἔρχεται, καὶ θοίνῃ ὑπολαμβάνουν ἐκ τοῦ κάλλους τῆς ὤμους ἔξειν θαυμαστήν, ἢτα μέντοι περιχανών ἐμπαλάσσεται τῷ ἀγκίστρῳ, καὶ πικρᾶς τῆς ἔπινασεως ἀπολέλαυκεν ἠρμημένος.

“...But they [the anglers] circumvent the fish with some fishy wisdom by contriving a certain sort of bait for them. They throw around reddish-purple wool on a hook and attach to the hook two feathers of a Guinea-fowl (taken from under the comb and of a color resembling wax): The rod is six feet long, and the line is of the same length. They then let down this bait, and a fish, drawn to and maddened by the color, meets it head-on, and taking up the charge to possess the astonishing meal from the beauty of its appearance, then closing its jaws, it is impaled by the hook, and now conquered it has enjoyed a bitter feast.”

2) Aelian, *De Natura Animalium* 15.10 – The Balkan Fly

...κάθηται δὲ εἰς ἔπι τῆς προίμης, καὶ ἐνευθὺν τε καὶ ἐκεῖθεν παρασείρους καθῆσαι ὀρμίας: ἤρηνται δὲ τούτων καὶ άλλω, καὶ ἀνισήνπεται πᾶσαι τὰ ἄγκιστρα, καὶ ἐκαστὸν ἄγκιστρον δέλεαρ φέρει Λακαίνης πορφύρας μαλλό κατειλημμένον, καὶ πετρόν μέντοι λάρου ἐκάστω ἄγκιστρῳ προσήρτηται ἥσυχη, ὡςτε διασειεθαι ὑπὸ τοῦ προσπίπτοντος ἀδάτος, τούτων οὖν ἴμερο προσνέουσιν αἱ πιλομοῦδες: μία δὲ ἡ μάλιστα προτένθης ἄκον τὸ στόμα ἐναπερείση, προσίσαι καὶ αἱ λοιπαὶ, καὶ δονείται τὰ ἄγκιστρα ὑπὸ τοῦ αὐτὸν καιρὸν περιπαρέντο τοῖς ἰχθῶι.

“...One man sits on the stern and drops fastened horse-hair lines on either side: other lines have been made ready, hooks are attached to all of them, and each hook carries bait tightly-wrapped with wool of Laconian purple¹ and the feather of a seagull so as to shake gently upon the approaching water. The Tunny swim for the desire of these things, and whenever the pickiest one (the gourmand) applies his mouth to it, the remaining fish approach and the hooks shake at the same time, piercing the fish.”

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¹ The Renaissance scholar Conrad Gessner was the first person to translate Aelian’s fly-fishing stories (and critically analyze them) in Latin. In his famous *Historia Animalium* of 1558, Gessner references Aelian’s fishing stories quite often. In regards to the Tunny scene, Gessner translates Aelian’s purple-colored bait as “ex Purpura Laccaena [Concha]” (lib. IV, pg. 964). His addition of *ex* and the bracketed *Concha* (“mollusk”) tells us that Gessner understood this *Λακαίνης πορφύρα* as having come from the expensive Murex shellfish.
Select Bibliography


