

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

... σοφία δ' οὖν περιέρχονται τοὺς ἰχθῦς ὑδροθηρικῆ, δόλον αὐτοῖς ἐπινοήσαντες οἷον. τῷ ἀγκίστρῳ περιβάλλουσιν ἔριον **φοινικοῦν**, ἥρμοσταί τε τῷ ἐρίῳ δύο πτερὰ ἀλεκτρύονος ὑπὸ τοῖς καλλιαίοις πεφυκότα καὶ κηρῷ τὴν χροῶν προσεικασμένα: ὄργνηας δὲ ὁ κάλαμός ἐστι, καὶ ἡ ὄρμη δὲ τοσοῦτον ἔχει τὸ μῆκος. καθιᾶσιν οὖν τὸν δόλον, **ἐλκόμενος δὲ ὑπὸ τῆς χροῶς ὁ ἰχθῦς καὶ οἰστρώμενος** ἀντίος ἔρχεται, καὶ θοίνην ὑπολαμβάνων ἐκ τοῦ κάλλους τῆς ὄψεως ἔξειν **θαυμαστήν**, εἶτα μέντοι περιχανὼν ἐμπαλάσσεται τῷ ἀγκίστρῳ, καὶ πικρᾶς τῆς ἐστιάσεως ἀπολέλαυκεν ἡρημένος.

“...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 εἷς ἐπὶ τῆς πρύμνης, καὶ ἐντεῦθεν τε καὶ ἐκεῖθεν παρασείρους καθίησιν ὄρμηάς: ἡρτηνται δὲ τούτων καὶ ἄλλαι, καὶ οὐκ ἀπολείπει πάσαις τὰ ἀγκίστρα, καὶ ἕκαστον ἀγκίστρον δέλεαρ φέρει **Λακαίνης πορφύρας** μαλλῶ κατελιημένον, καὶ πτερὸν μέντοι λάρου ἐκάστῳ ἀγκίστρῳ προσήρηται ἡσυχῆ, ὥστε διασειέσθαι ὑπὸ τοῦ προσπίπτοντος ὕδατος. τούτων οὖν **ἡμέρω** προσνέουσιν αἱ πηλαμύδες: μία δὲ **ἡ μάλιστα προτένης** ὅταν τὸ στόμα ἐναπερείσῃ, προσίησιν καὶ αἱ λοιπαί, καὶ δονεῖται τὰ ἀγκίστρα ὑπὸ τὸν αὐτὸν καιρὸν περιπαρέντα τοῖς ἰχθύσιν.

“...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 purple**¹ 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.”



Figure 1 (Left). A mosaic of a fishing scene from the first or second century CE discovered in a private home in the Roman provincial city of Leptis Magna. This is the third mosaic from the Villa of the Nile collection housed in the National Museum of Tripoli.

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 Lacaena [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.



Figure 2 (Above). A fresco discovered in the triclinium of the House of Sirico in Pompeii depicting the physician Japix fixing Aeneas' wound after a battle with the Rutulians. The fresco is true to Vergil's coloring of the hero's purpurea apparel. 49-79 CE.



Figure 3 (Above). A fresco in the Lararium of the House of the Vettii in Pompeii. Depicted in the middle is a youthful genius wearing the purple-bordered toga praetexta. 60-79 CE.

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