

# Fly Fishing for Danube Salmon (Hucho hucho)

## Hunting the King of the Alpine Rivers

As soon as the cold season starts articles about fly fishing for Danube Salmon pop-up regularly in fly fishing magazines and on the internet. As a result many average fly fishermen and sometimes even beginners surrender to the temptation and want to try to catch a hucho, the largest non-migrating salmonid species in the world by using fly fishing tackle. As in most waters a guide is needed for getting permission to fish for Danube Salmon, they assume that it cannot be that difficult with his help. That's a big mistake!

The [Huchen aka Danube Salmon \(Hucho hucho\)](#) is the largest European freshwater salmonid. He can get about 1.50m in length and a weight of 40kg. In ancient times significantly larger fish had been reported. Historically huchos inhabited mainly the right-sided tributaries of the river Danube but the species was also stocked successfully in Spain and Marokko. Due to its size and the tasty meat, the Danube Salmon was caught with different and in some regions quite brutal methods. Especially during the spawning time they were blinded on their spawning redds and stabbed with pitchforks and other stabbing tools. This has changed with the decline of the species and today huchos enjoy a usually 2-3 months spawning season and recovering time during which fishing for them is forbidden. This helps the fish to gain weight safely after the exhausting spawning activities.

Meanwhile, the attitude of anglers towards these beautiful giants has changed, too. Today most huchos are released after being caught and only very few are killed. A quick picture after the catch serves as an identification tool as the spots on a hucho are unique like fingerprints. So multiple catches of the same fish within the years can be documented and the growth rate and eventually a change of the location in a river are shared among the hucho anglers. It also serves as a proof that careful treatment and a correct release does not harm the fish.



— Aren't they real beauties?

## **The time is the key!**

Huchos are very special in regard to their biting times. If a hucho is not in the right mood a grayling in its preferred size can swim right in front of his mouth and he will show no interest at all. Because of their moody behavior, it is pure luck if you catch a hucho on a streamer during a hucho guiding. It is usually a waste of money and time except if you can come on call. Even if you plan to fly fish for huchos for a whole week you cannot be sure to experience an activity period of this species throughout your stay.

In winter 2017/2018 right after Christmas, I fished three of the best Austrian hucho waters with high stocks of good fish for 9 days in a row. During this time none of the numerous fishermen at these public beats had even got one single take! Only on my departure day, a single specimen hucho was caught on a spinning lure. Nine days without a take! This is hucho fishing! A few weeks before, in one of these rivers, there were about 30 huchos - some of the real giants - caught within a period of one week. Regular catches of huchos are usually only made by locals who live by the river and know "their" huchos well. They usually only fish when the fish are moving.





Perfect hucho weather!

## **The Water Level**

Hucho fishing is dependent on the weather and the water level.

### **Medium water level:**

A medium water level is usually not good as the huchos prey which mainly consists of fish can easily spread all over the river. Huchos are usually not so active during this time. They don't show up at the feeding spots but stay in their "garages" as I use to call their hideouts.

Catching huchos right at their lies is usually not possible with fly gear as only spinning lures can be presented on spot in deep or fast-flowing parts of a river. When they are resting at their lies they are usually not active but might "attack" a lure that passes their head in a very close distance in a defending movement. This means they don't hit it hard and the lure will only be in the hard front part of their mouths. Whereas a few of such "takes" can be stricken with a spinning rod and braided non-stretch lines this is no option for the fly rod.



A promising hucho spot.

### **Rising and sinking water levels:**

If the water level rises prey fish move towards the banks where the current is slower. As long as the water is not too clouded they will feed there and are easy prey for the hucho who can easily detect them with its large eyes. At peak levels or when the water is dirty huchos and their prey are not feeding. Especially in wintertime when depression brings rain that turns into snowfall later the coloured river clears up and the huchos get active again during a short period. This is perfect hucho weather! They stop feeding when their prey starts spreading in the river again. Whereas rising water Levels combined with rising water temperatures increase the huchos activity, rising water levels in combination with dropping temperatures (snowmelt) immediately stop any hucho activity.



## **Low water:**

Under low water conditions the huchos can hunt successfully without losing much energy as the current is slow and the prey fish concentrate at certain spots again. For the fly fisher low water conditions make it easier to spot the huchos and to reach their feeding spots without getting too much pressure on the line. The fly can be fished slower but the big eyes of the huchos catch every single unnecessary movement of the fly fisherman. This means fishing public water under crystal clear low water conditions is very difficult in regard of the presentation. This is in my opinion the main reason why night fishing under low water conditions was so popular in the past. It still is, but nowadays only very few rivers can be fished at night. So you should at least try the Hours with less light. Dawn is usually better than dusk as the temperatures are higher. The cold mornings after a freezing night are usually not the best choice.

In smaller rivers upstream streamer fishing or nymph fishing can help to master such situations, too. In any case be sure to not get in the field of vision of a hucho. He will not necessarily disappear but he will probably not take anymore.

Can you see the two large huchos?

An experienced hucho angler looks for active fish where shallow parts meet the edges of deep runs. Drop-offs, inlets but even better outlets of pools are also targeted. These are the spots where huchos hunt preferably. A huchos lie and his feeding spot are not identical. Depending on the size of the fish and the hucho density there can be several hundred meters or even more in between the two.

Due to high fishing pressure, some hucho waters are despite their hucho density extremely difficult to fish under low water conditions. Among them is the Sava Bohinjka in Slovenia. One needs to be very experienced to be successful there with the fly. At the Sava, a significant number of fish are caught on spinning gear as it is much easier to approach a hucho with spinning tackle. Most of the fish are caught during dusk and dawn when the fishermen are less visible to the large predators. In some hucho waters, it is allowed to fish at night or at least up to midnight and in a few on the southern Balkans also in summer. In the Alps, the hucho season usually starts in Nov/Dec and ends between the end of January and the end of February dependent on the river. There are some exceptions from that rule though.

If the water level and sight depth stay the same for a longer period, the influence of the moon becomes

more important. Around the new moon but also near the full moon the chances to hook a hucho are usually better but the real game-changer in regard to hookups is the weather (air pressure).

## **Hucho Fishing is Hard Work!**

Except in open waters with large gravel banks with a lot of space for overhead casting and in rivers in which smaller streamers are working well fly fishing for huchos is tough, very tough. Moving at or in the water sometimes in icy conditions and deep snow is a real challenge for the body and mind. Little mistakes, carelessness, or flippancy can have fatal consequences especially if you fish on your own. Fishing high line classes and heavy tackle is very demanding. You have to be well prepared to be able to cast large hucho flies with the weight of the fly line. Some hours in the gym prior to the start of the season is not an amiss as without training you can easily overload your wrist or elbow which can lead to a tennis elbow or tendinitis but first of all to sloppy casts. If a large hucho streamer and especially a weighted one hits your rod, even the best rod will need to be replaced.

## **Casting Hucho Streamers**

The most important of all casts for a hucho fisher is the roll cast be it to fish spots without backspace or to roll the streamer out of the water to finally present it with an overhead cast. Depending on the weight and size of the streamer switch casts can be used, too. If streamers between 5-10 g of weight or long T-tips in combination with large joint streamers are used an interrupt of the energy transfer will make it impossible to switch any more. You will recognize this immediately. Such line/streamer combinations can only be cast with a roll cast, a hybrid roll cast (which means that you roll cast and shoot a few meters of line), or an overhead cast.

## **The Limits of Fly Fishing**

At fast and deep stretches of hucho rivers fly fishing is not possible. You would need to fish very heavy streamers that cannot be cast by using the fly line as a casting weight anymore. I totally agree with Austrian fly fishing legend Sepp Prager, who loved to spin fish for hucho from time to time. If it is not possible anymore to fish a streamer by using the weight of the fly line, spin fishing remains the only fair and meaningful angling method. Spin fishing for hucho is of course easier than fly fishing as you can cast from spots a fly fisher cannot cast at all and you do not need to get so close to the fish. Besides that, you can skip the time for learning how to fly cast, Despite that spin fishing for huchos is not so easy as otherwise, every spin fisher would catch a hucho. This is not the case.

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**Alibi Fly Fishers**