

THE GENTRIFIED LIFE OF PONDS

words
and
drawings
KATIE
CUDDON

WANDSWORTH

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It's not uncommon for the ponds of our London parks to be encircled by keen fishermen at certain times of the year. Each with his own low-slung chair, thermos and pot of fishy appetisers. Some even set up green camouflaged tents, pitched discreetly between benches, from which they can hunt overnight. The rest of us laugh and seem unable to understand the attraction of sitting by a pool of water small enough to converse across and barely ten feet from the edge of the South Circular (the Clapham Common fishers seem a particularly dedicated group). And surely they catch the same sorry fish repeatedly; whose mouth must now be one of the most heavily pierced in all of London.

We laugh. But it's far from a hilarious pastime. We must be missing something.

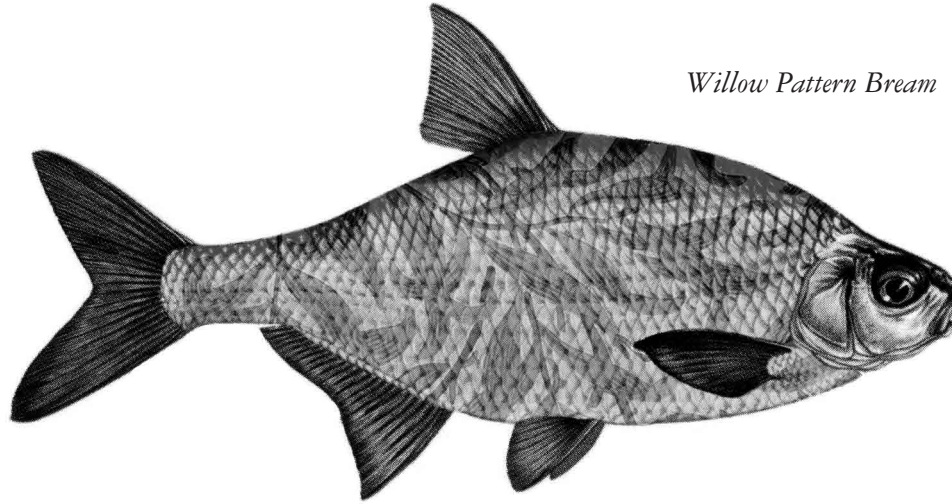
And indeed we are.

It is not the act of trying to catch the fish that transports these fishermen into rural sublimity. There is no denying of their physical whereabouts; the city noise and high-rise housing that surrounds the condensed green is an accepted backdrop. The thick brown water topped with highly charged scum brings novelty to the sport, but the real incentive lies in the particularity of these metropolitan fish, and in what they have over time evolved to offer the weary and jaded eyes of urban inmates.

As we are all aware, the waters of these city ponds are saturated with grime, and visibility below their surface is almost nil. However, this does not mean that the ponds' life forms have also become steeped in the dark brown ingredients of their environment. While it is true that plant life sits green above the water level and sticky brown below, and that our London ducks are tattooed with the water line, some fish have evolved to compensate for their dim dwellings, and have been

discovered to have unique – in some cases exquisite – scales that make their tropical friends appear vulgar and commercial.

There is one particular fish found in Clapham Common's north side pond that wears a beautiful and intricate floral patterning. But the extraordinary thing about this covering is that it is, apparently, identical to that of a William Morris design: the Willow Pattern. The silvery scales replace the cream background, and the green is slightly metallic, but the forms of the vines, the leaves and their spacing, are indistinguishable from Morris's. Likewise, in Hampstead, there is a fish which has been found to wear the Artichoke Pattern. There has been no serious study of these city fish, so comparisons with Morris's designs are based purely on the guide of the eye, but difference appears to be minimal, and is generally found only in the colouring; the linear formations are the same. Hugh Edwards, a Hampstead Heath fisherman, borrowed a neighbour's artichoke-covered cushion in order to carry out an empirical collation, taking photos of the two alongside each other. The similarity is uncanny.



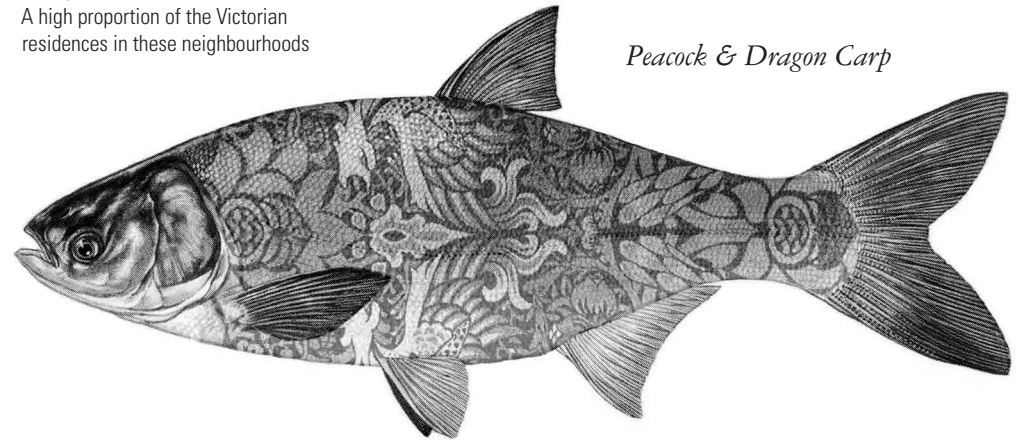
Willow Pattern Bream

Scientists and social historians have speculated on the nature of these fish, but opinions are varied and, needless to say, opposing. While some scientists dismiss the findings as coincidence, or a trick of the light – some even suggest the poor vertebrates have been tattooed, as or by an April fool – Jonathan Edwards, cultural historian and avid angler, draws attention to the significance of the designs being by William Morris, given the geographical location of the fish. He highlights the social make-up of the two areas, and their residential status. A high proportion of the Victorian residences in these neighbourhoods

will house the designs of William Morris in one form or another. Some may have Blue Wandle wallpaper, or armchairs covered in the Artichoke Pattern. Others may simply have a biscuit tin with a simplified version of The Woodpecker. The motifs and their variations have become ubiquitous within the homes of the middle-classes; the Arcadian bliss they represent wholly embraced. The unexpected incidence, in nearby ponds, of nature imitating nurture, invites endless speculation on our

environment's development and transformation. Will the spiders of the East End start deconstructing their formal webs in favour of a more infiltrative installation modelled on the pursuits of the artists surrounding them? We already have evidence that the song of central London birds has increased dramatically in volume in order to compete with traffic. And the singing continues through the night, as does the city noise. Visual emulation seems a logical development, as indeed does Nature's inevitable simulation of artifice in a world where the natural is now a tailored state.

But the question still remains: how did the fish come to pick up the uniform of their neighbourhoods? How did they evolve to represent their cultural environment as opposed to their physical? It is certainly the first example of evolution following a cerebral course, which will no doubt agitate scientists. But, leaving aside any disciplined study, what we will surely begin to see emerge, as a result of this new direction within evolution, is a subculture of simulation and mimicry, a mirror of our cultivated tastes; and, perhaps finally, a truly natural representation of artifice.



Peacock & Dragon Carp