

BY KEVIN MORLOCK*

Scanning the gin-clear water from the elevated platform on the stern of my skiff, I see a large shadow cruising near the drop-off from 2 into 12 feet. Carp love shallow flats adjacent to deeper water, when prevailing winds blow in warm surface water that collects against the shore and spreads out from there. The shadow is on a rambling track to move past the boat. With a little luck—and a well-placed fly—I might be into my first fish of the day.

Carp cruise with seeming deliberation that turns suddenly random at times, as they move from one pocket or depression on the flat to the next. Sometimes fish pause and mill before moving on. It's during these brief windows that an angler has a chance to hook up with one of the hardest-fighting, longest-running, still most under-appreciated gamefish in North America.

Carp get more active as the day progresses—sunshine on their shoulders makes them happy. So, while most other fish are hugging bottom, waiting



> Prime-Time Carp



Time & Place: Late morning, early June on Lake Michigan // **Air Temp:** 79°F
// **Main-Lake Surface Water:** 64°F // **Flat Surface Water:** High 60°F, rising to around 80°F
// **Weather:** Clear skies with a slight onshore breeze

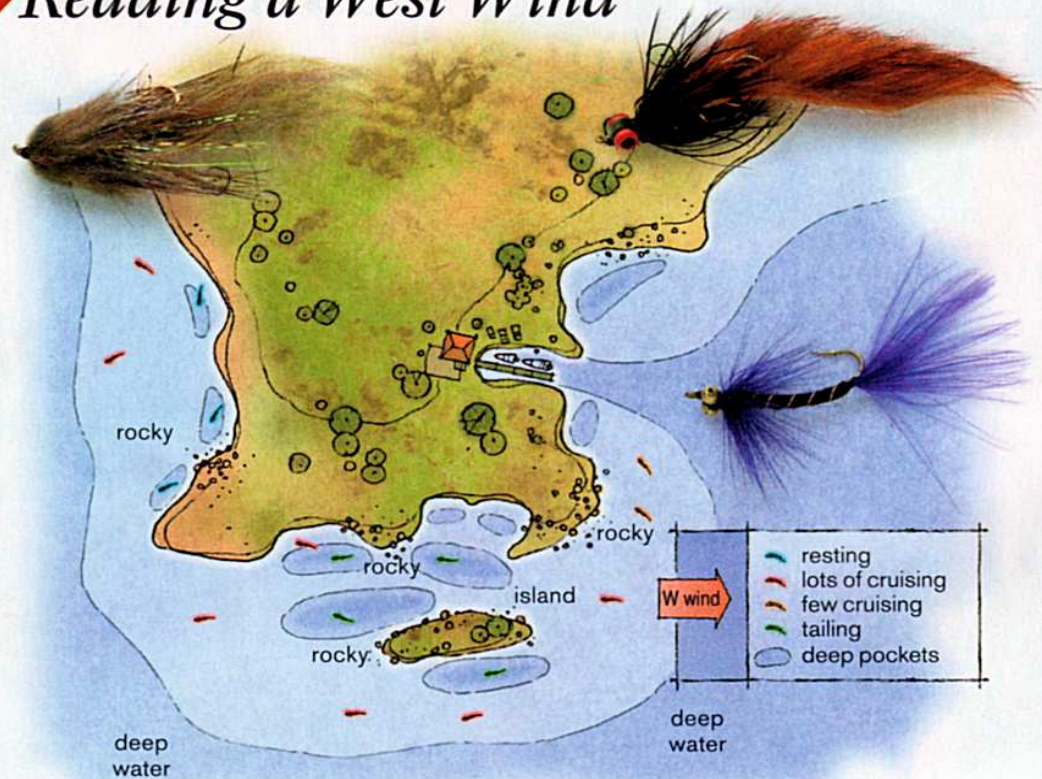
for overcast, heavy wind, or evening shadows, carp are out while the sun crests and you're applying a layer of Australian Gold.

I anchor the skiff on a shallow hump just away from the traveling activity, not unlike a deer hunter positioning just away from an obvious main trail. The key is the deeper pocket along the trail on the flat. That's going to stop the fish and give me a chance.

As the shadow moves closer, I see it's a group of three fish—the smallest about 10 pounds, the largest maybe 20. The two smaller fish are golden while the largest is darker, a richer shade of brown. Just before the carp reach the pocket, I cast a burnt-orange craw bunny to the far side—the water's too flat to risk casting nearer the fish.

As the fish reach the pocket, I hop the craw bunny a few feet and let it settle. My grip tightens as the smallest fish turns toward the fly. Take it easy. The white mouth opens and the fly disappears. Wait. At the hint of pressure, I sink the hook and press the butt of the 8-weight into my gut. The water in the depression explodes. The fish and its comrades rocket off the flat—rod bent to the cork handle, drag singing a sweet tune, 100 feet of

➤ Reading a West Wind



line sizzling off into the deep, dark-blue waters.

Ten minutes and a sore forearm later, I pull the hook from my first carp of the day. In the next hours, I'll land 5 more fish from this pocket. This is some of the most exciting fishing in freshwater.

When to Go

Throughout the Great Lakes region, carp frequent shallow water from April through September. Spring is unpredictable, with fish moving in and out of the shallows as water temperature changes with each weather pattern. The unpredictability of spring keeps carp tight-lipped at times. Cooling water in fall also means undependable fish in the shallows. So, prime time is June through mid-August, when carp on the flats are as predictable as Monday morning mail.

Good Things Happen at 70

Water temperature is the key element in site-fishing for Great Lakes carp. When water temperature reaches 70°F or above, carp move onto shallow flats.

Monitor the temperature in the shallows where the carp want to hold, not the main-lake temperature. It's common for water temperatures to be in the high 50°F or low 60°F range on the main lake, while they reach the mid- to high 70°F range in the shallows.

Carp move into the shallows because they like the warmth, to feed, and to spawn. In the morning it's common to see fish move up on a flat and then immediately return to deeper water. As the day

➤ Reading an East Wind



Prime-Time Carp



progresses and the water warms to that magic 70°F mark, fish cruise more slowly, often pausing for minutes to mill, especially in deeper pockets on a flat.

At times fish also lay up and sun in the warmest pockets or against the shoreline. It's not unusual to find dozens to hundreds of fish lazing around in these areas on a nice afternoon. Cloudy, rainy weather sends the fish deep, until conditions change.

Choosing a Location

Bays with warm water at times hold so many fish that beginning carp anglers, upon first seeing the moving black mass, assume they're in for a back-breaking day of angling bliss. They often end the day disappointed. Fish in back bays often are only interested in soaking up warmth. They can also be very spooky.

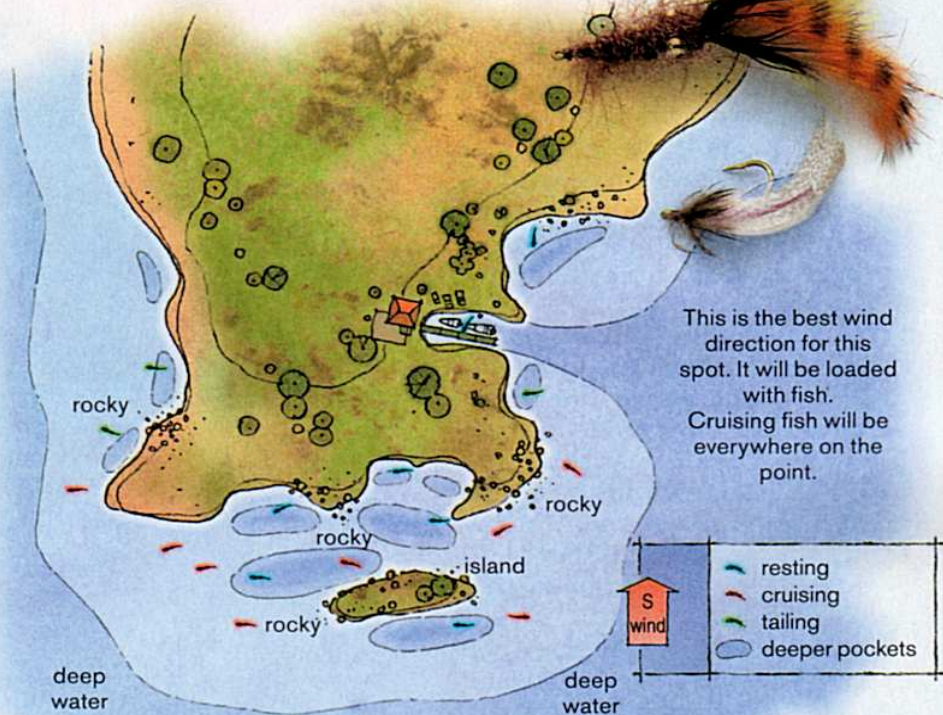
By comparison, prominent main-lake points offer protection, and the adjacent protected areas seem to be better feeding places for the carp. I look for points with pockets that offer food, warmth, and quick access to deep water. On the Great Lakes, such points may encompass several miles of water.

These large points gather warm water with various wind directions. If the wind's from the west it blows warm surface water onto west-facing shores. Fish quickly move there. And if the wind switches, the fish move again. Small islands can also be good. They always have an onshore wind on at least one portion of the island.

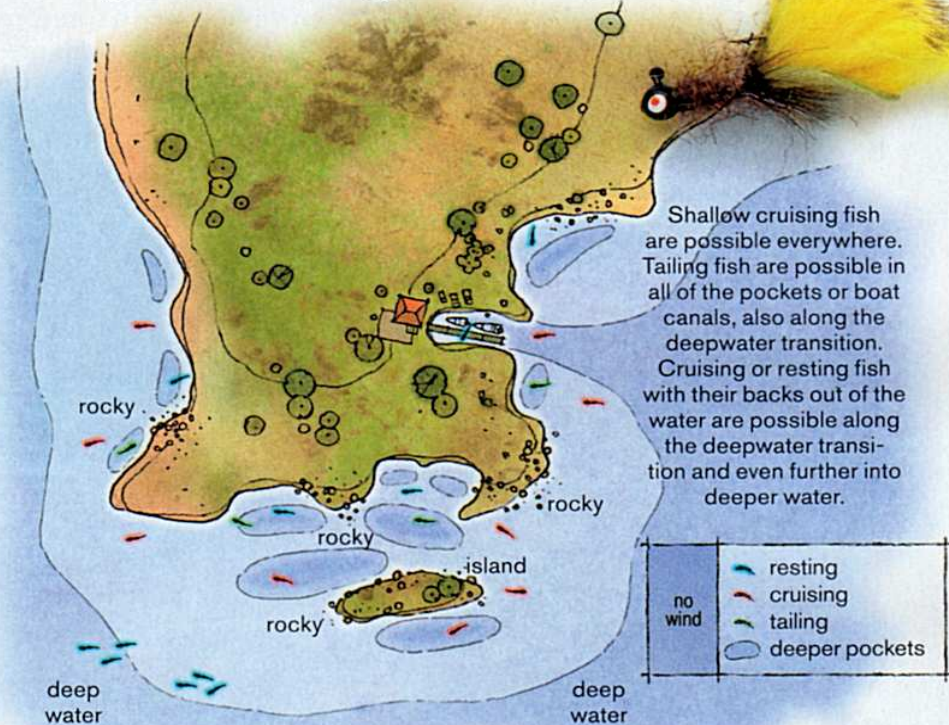
Don't Fish for Spawners

Spawning carp are tough to catch, but you usually don't have to fish for them. In the northern Great Lakes, various pods of fish are spawning from late May into July. When you see carp traveling in a tight group with lots of splashing, that's spawning

➤ Reading a South Wind



➤ Early Morning or No Wind



behavior. Eventually, the female lays eggs and males fertilize them. I don't mind fishing in an area that has spawners, because non-spawning fish usually are nearby and can be aggressive feeders.

Think Before You Cast

Once you locate fish, you need an attack plan. Determine the general

travel direction of some of the fish. Note travel routes and any spots where fish tend to pause. Then find an ambush spot within casting distance of these spots or along the travel route.

In picking an ambush spot, keep in mind a favorable wind for casting and also the sun angle—so as not to cast your shadow toward the

fish. Lastly, plan the best route to your ambush spot. Carp are sensitive to movement and sound. I use a large U-shaped route to avoid disturbing fish.

Hunting, Not Herding

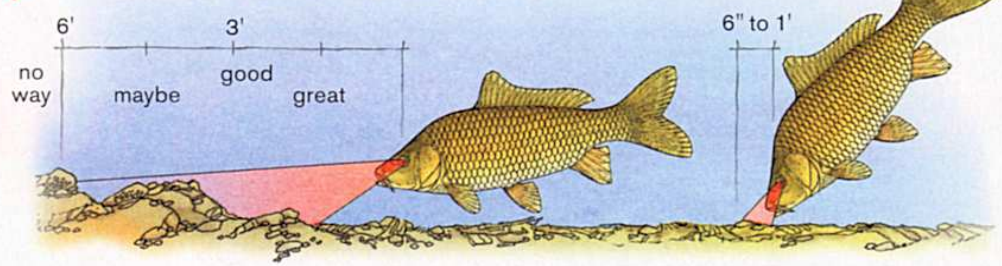
Once you've moved quietly into position, remember that it doesn't work to push (to follow) fish. From a distance, anglers with flyrods often look like they're herding fish with bullwhips. You're hunting, not herding. Move stealthily into positions that give the fish a chance to get close to you.

Getting Their Attention

The thinking goes that as carp evolved into opportunistic omnivores in dirty water, great vision wasn't that important. Apparently carp only see really well up close, although they're certainly sensitive to and wary of movements within the larger scope of their surroundings.

Carp need to scrutinize their immediate surroundings in order to feed effectively. When presenting your offering, I think of a hula-hoop-sized area in front of cruising fish, and a dinnerplate for head-down tailing fish. That's where the offering has to be, although that doesn't mean you attempt to cast and land the offering right there. Again, we're hunting. Anticipate where the fish is going to be as it moves. Get the fly there just before the fish arrives.

Cruisers & Tailers



Once fish are close to a presentation, movement is important to attract their attention. As a fish approaches, move your fly or jig quickly in a pop, pop, pop sequence. Let it settle, and then repeat. They eat a fly as it pauses. Jigs often get taken as the jig reaches the apex of a hop. At times they take jigs once they settle to the bottom.

Big, Bold and Aggressive

Start fishing with the big stuff. If they like it, you're off to a great day and haven't wasted time with smaller flies, jigs, or techniques that are harder for carp to notice. Go smaller and slow your retrieves only when carp are reacting negatively to larger, bolder presentations.

Sight-Fishing

As well as being exciting, sight-fishing allows quick assessments of what fish are doing, how they're reacting, and what you might do to compensate. When I make a good presentation to an undisturbed fish,

it's going to react positively, negatively, or indifferently.

If the reaction seems to be negative, I switch to something smaller, in a different color with less or no flash. If I get turns and follows—positive reactions—but no takes, I make minor adjustments in color, size, and fly type. I also expect to have to experiment with retrieve style.

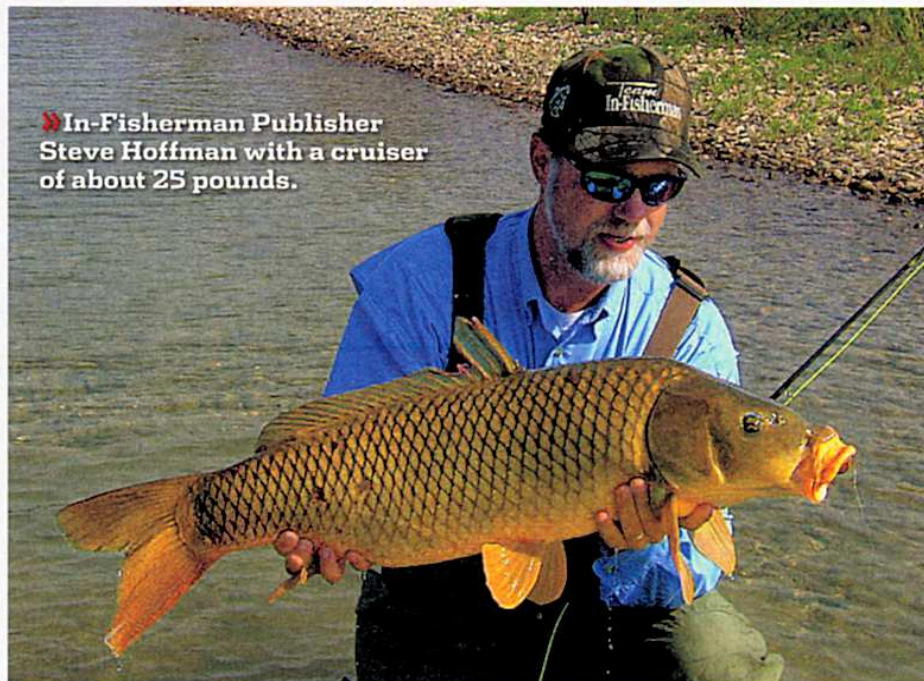
When to Find New Fish

It's tough to leave an area that has lots of fish, but I have a rule I call "carp-ball." I pitch my fly or jig to three different fish. If I don't get a positive reaction from one of the three, I switch to something else. If I try this with three different offerings and still haven't had a positive reaction, I get in the boat and start scouting for another group of fish.

It's common to find groups of fish that just aren't eating. There's no point wasting half a day on those fish when there may be active fish around the next point.

That's the essence of sight-fishing for carp. I also guide for steelhead and salmon, yet carp are every bit the challenging sportfish that those two established phenoms are. The option to see big fish before you catch them just makes the sport all the more exciting and challenging. The best days also are nice days to be on the water—times when most other fish wouldn't be active.

I fall in line with In-Fisherman staff members who are interested in everything that swims, especially those fish that are overlooked as a matter of nonsense by large groups of anglers, who just don't recognize beastly beauty when it swims before them. ■



» In-Fisherman Publisher Steve Hoffman with a cruiser of about 25 pounds.

*Kevin Morlock is a writer and fishing guide from Michigan (indigoguideservice.com) who has often appeared with our staff on In-Fisherman Television.