





# BLACK PLUGS

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In the early Seventies I learned the joy of plug fishing for pike. I roamed the Dutch polders just outside my village, fishing their canals and drains. These were rather small waters, varying from three to fifteen metres wide and up to about a metre deep. I used shallow diving plugs, no longer than three inches. As the Dutch angling books and magazines of those days would have it, that was about the right size for pike in the polders and the best colour was supposed to be something greenish and pike-like. Still young and inexperienced, I took care to follow that advice. And I caught my modest share of pike, enough to be pleased and convinced that I was on the right track with my piking.

One day my younger brother got hold of a cheap plug, an imitation of a 3-inch Heddon River Runt. It swam just fine and dived not too deep, but it had one serious drawback: it was black. All black, save from a few thin white stripes, like fish bones – the XBW colour, I now know. Again according to the consensus of those days, black was considered a weird, unnatural colour, perhaps suitable in Patagonia or thereabouts, but highly unlikely to catch anything in Holland. Yet my brother, in his innocence, caught his fair share of pike with it – about as much as I did, and sometimes, annoyingly, even more. So one day I secretly borrowed his black plug to try it myself.

Let me say first, that in those days, if I went off for three or four hours of plug fishing, I would be contented if I would catch one or two pike and perhaps a few fine perch along with it. These polder pike were



*An ABU Hi-Lo in the black XBW colour, just like my brother's plug.*

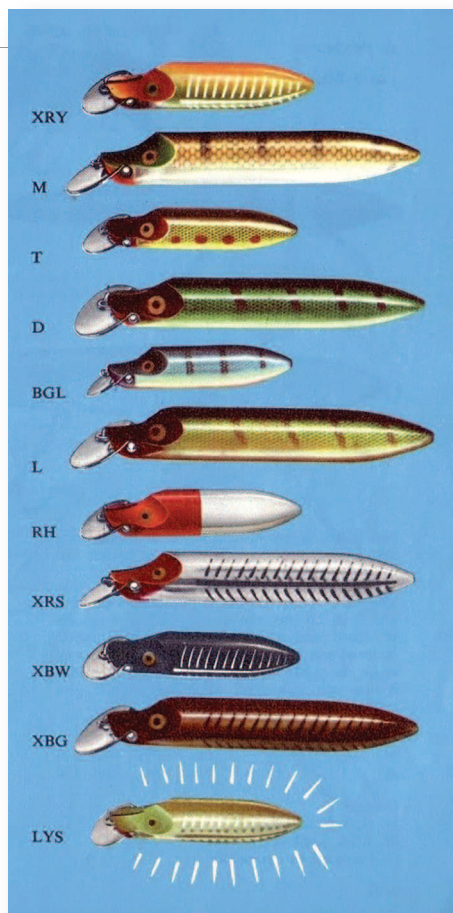
usually about fifty to seventy centimetres long – we Dutch usually measure the length of a fish rather than weighing it, although we are happy to add it was quite heavy or even fat, if it wasn't clearly emaciated. Well, the first time I used that black plug I caught no less than five pike! That must have been sheer luck of course, a fluke. I repeated the same experiment about a week later and caught seven! And . . . lost the plug to some underwater structure. I like to think I compensated my brother for the loss of his cherished black lure, be it perhaps without telling him about the seven pike it had caught. I don't recall. But I do remember I was very impressed with black plugs at the time. However, I never ran across a similar one again. So I made do with the greenish ones I had.

Today, over forty years later, I'm very sceptical about colours. Or perhaps it's better to call it agnostic. I've caught with plugs and other lures in all kinds of colours in all kinds of circumstances without being able to discern a clear pattern. On dark, cloudy days, fishing in murky waters, dark colours would catch very well one day, while the next day, same water, same circumstances, bright colours would do equally well. And with bright days and clear waters it was often the same story. It leaves me puzzled. In fact, over time – meaning almost half a century of fishing – I only seem to become less certain about everything. I do know it's possible to make plugs stand out well. But I still don't know if that's an advantage. Leaving perch alone (because they are capable of anything), I'd say yes, pike and zander

are likely to see a lure that stands out better, but does that also mean they go after such a lure more readily? They might just as well distrust it. And how would I know anything about that? There are so many factors and uncertainties at play. We would need laboratory situations and an even spreading of equally greedy or reluctant fish to make reliable comparisons and draw useful conclusions. And this is impossible in a natural environment. Still, people who, unlike me, will catch pike on lures regularly and in large numbers, and who – and this is even more difficult – succeed in keeping an open mind about how they achieve their successes (and their failures), might be able to see a distinct pattern over the years. As yet, I'm not.

Now first a small excursion into history – don't worry, it's light entertainment. In the early 1950s Göte Borgström, the director of A.B. Urfabriken (later ABU), together with his engineer Åke Murvall, developed a plug with an adjustable diving lip, a plug that could be set to swim at a variety of depths. The plug was patented for Sweden in October 1953. The next year, 1954, Göte Borgström got into contact with the famous American lure company Heddon. This resulted in Göte and his son Lennart visiting the Heddon factory in Dowagiac, Michigan. Heddon was interested in the adjustable diving mechanism and the Borgströms were interested in using the world famous Heddon body shapes for their plugs. The result was a deal between both companies, in which Heddon was allowed to use the patent for the adjustable diving lip





*The colours available for the ABU Hi-Lo plug in 1962.*

which Göte had applied for the USA in October 1954, while ABU got permission to use two Heddon body shapes for their plugs: the long Vamp Spook and the shorter River Runt. The plug that originated out of this deal was the famous ABU Hi-Lo (thus named for its capacity to swim both high and low). ABU also received permission to use the Heddon method of painting the plugs, as well as some of the Heddon colour patterns, like the well-known 'pike scale' finish (colour M, for musky) and . . . the black colour with white fish bones, just like my brother's imitation: the 'black shore' colour (XBW).

Fans of black colours might think this black was black enough. Not so. Something happened in 1954, the year before the Hi-Lo was brought on the market. Göte Borgström often went fishing with his friend Gunnar Johansson, who supervised the fishing on the famous Mörrum river. Gunnar used to make his own plugs, carving them out of wood and giving them a very distinct but rather ugly black and brown colour by scorching them with a gas-burner, while Göte stuck to his prototype Hi-Lo's in their pretty standard colours. Pretty as they might be, they usually proved less successful than Gunnar's ugly plug. So Göte had a few of his Hi-Lo's painted in the same colour as Gunnar's plug and - hurray - it worked: his results improved considerably! The only thing was, the colour did catch a good deal of fish but it could hardly be expected to catch any anglers, because it looked too dull and dreary to have 'commercial potential'. Therefore the colour was pimped up with a golden hue and a fish bone pattern. When test fishing, Göte found this colour did equally well as Gunnar's dull pattern and consequently it was marketed in 1955 as the XBG colour. It was continued until 1968.



*Abu Hi-Lo plugs of 26 and 18 grammes in the black and gold XBG colour.*



*A prototype ABU Råkan (shrimp) in black, swimming backwards of course.*

*A rare ABU Kynoch in black and tan, very attractive, never catalogued.*

The fish-catching potential of the black Hi-Lo plugs - either all black or nearly so - made ABU decide to try these colours on other lures as well. But it seems this never got any further than the prototype stage, or perhaps production in very low numbers. I know of a black prototype of the Råkan (Shrimp), a lure meant for salmon that was modelled after the American Helin Flatfish plug. ABU also tried a black and tan colour on the Kynoch, a lure that originated in the USA and Canada, was adopted in the UK for salmon fishing in the river Tay and was later, in the 1970s, produced by ABU. But it seems this idea too was soon abandoned, as no black Kynoch ever appeared in the ABU catalogues.

So much for history; back to the present. In the fall of 2014 Dave Pugh published a book called *Lure Fishing - Presentation and Strategy*, an excellent book, in which he reconsiders many things we have always accepted as true, often only for the silly reason that everybody else seemed to agree on them. Dave is not much impressed by lure colours. He finds them relatively unimportant (even though he used white and red paint to adorn his roach-like Super Shad Rap with a nasty flesh wound). But he doesn't express his scepticism without first having investigated various colours and the way they appear under water and stand out in different environments and conditions. This leads him to state that, although the importance of colours is probably only marginal, in most circumstances black is probably a better colour than any. And I've also heard several other leading anglers whispering about black lures being their best kept secret. One of them is my fishing pal Jan Eggers, an authority on lure fishing for pike. But he didn't only whisper it to me, he wrote about lure colours in the autumn 2001 issue of *Lure Angler*, without being secretive about black.

*During a trip to Lough Mask in Ireland, where the pike have seen almost every lure available, fishing was very hard and I decided to use entirely different colours. Trolling a totally black Super Shad Rap fished deep on a thin, 0.17mm FireLine, resulted unexpectedly in 5 nice pike from deep water. That evening the other members of the SNB (the Dutch-Belgium Pike Anglers Club) started painting their lures black as well,*



*Jan Eggers with one of his Lough Mask pike caught on a black Rapala Super Shad Rap.*

*Jan got some black paint used for wooden fences from a local Irish farmer.*

and with success. Next day we not only caught more pike but also big ones like my 118cm pike that weighed 14 kilos. From that moment on I had a lot of confidence in totally black lures and Rapala made some test samples for me. But because I wanted to know if it was only the colour responsible for my improved catches, they also made some totally white plugs so that I could start a testing programme to find out the importance of colours. [ . . . ] One day I would use only the black one, the next day I fished only with a white model. I have been fishing with each colour now for about 40 hours and to my own surprise I have caught in my rather grey and dark coloured home waters 40 % more pike on the black version than on the white ones. Don't ask me why, I don't know, it just happens. But the most interesting point of this testing was that in sunny conditions the black lure was catching more than double the number of pike than the white one.

Browsing through the catalogues of some of the leading lure companies tells me black plugs are hard to find today. The well-known Salmo company has published

an extensive article on lure colours and one of the conclusions is: 'Don't forget about black, which probably is the most contrasting colour regardless of conditions.' Yet they don't produce any black lures (only a very few lures that are part black and part yellow). This all seems to indicate that apparently very few anglers are attracted to black plugs, meaning again that predators rarely get to see them, which in turn may be an advantage for the solitary guy that does use them.

Still, in the end, I'm not yet convinced. It's just as with things like telepathy and dowsing: there seem to be many examples to prove these phenomena are real, but despite all that I'd rather rely on my own analytical thinking, however limited that may be. I need more proof. So as yet I'll remain firmly sceptical about lure colours. I do spray some of my plugs black, occasionally, but I tell myself that's just for testing. ■

*Thanks to Wayne Real (Australia) for the photographs of the ABU plugs taken from lures in his collection. See also his extensive and highly informative ABU website: [www.realsreels.com](http://www.realsreels.com). And thanks to Jan Eggers for the picture of his Lough Mask pike.*