

Fly selection, no matter what you are angling for, is important. The sum of this and good presentation is success. But where does one begin and how do you simplify it to make sense?

Part One: Matching the Hatch

It has almost become a bad cliché among trout anglers but matching the hatch is a huge part of what makes for success in trout fishing. Knowing what is going on in terms of bug activity is important but recognizing when and where to use certain patterns within each emergence is even more important. From the bottom to the surface, we have to be in touch with what is happening and be able to react to change as the fish shift from one stage to the next.

Trial and Error

Many years ago I watched a video that first showed me the use of a hand held seine net for the purpose of collecting insect samples. Naturally, I made one and went on an insect collecting rampage. Every piece of water that I fished was first sampled and then fished based on my findings. I did gain a better understanding of trout flies but I can't say that I caught more fish. Clearly I was missing something: I knew what was in the substrate as shifting and scuffing the rocks up stream of the net gave me more than enough to analyze, and I could identify the insects. I had all of these patterns in my boxes so it should have been academic. That's when the light went on. The net samples told me what was in the substrate but I needed to know what was in the drift. In other words, my samples told me nothing of what the fish may be keyed in on.

I tried sampling the water between the bottom and the surface but it proved more difficult than I thought and the time required wasn't worth the effort. By placing the seine in the current seams most likely to collect insects, I did get some modest samples but never felt they gave me any great advantage or fast tracked my decision as to what to start with. So I was back at the beginning.

Realizing I was making things far more difficult than need be, I started a trial and error approach. This method should be practiced on both new and familiar water during periods when there is no evidence of what the trout are doing. In familiar water, I'll start with a pattern that I know *should* be in the drift. For example, if I'm fishing the last week in May on my home water, I already know from previous experience that Hendricksons will be on the back end of their annual hatch period and Grey Foxes will be on the front end. With no flies on the surface, an obvious starting point would be a nymph of one of these two insects. From here, and failing this, try varying the presentation before changing flies. I won't change the pattern dramatically at first but will stick to variations of my nymphs until I have ruled out that they are not working. Keep in mind that trout always eat, even if you see no movement, they are down there. After I've eliminated the obvious Mayflies, my next move will be to change to a caddis pupa and I will repeat the process. At this point, I may be on my fifth or sixth fly but I am keeping to natural patterns, those that represent what I believe to be in the drift. If you're still being shut out, it's time for a more drastic measure. I don't fish a lot of attractor patterns and admittedly, I get hung up on matching the hatch with a tendency to over analyze my inability to catch fish on tough days. I

don't, however, discount their effectiveness. Try a prince or a zug bug at this point. It may just be the change that is needed. If two fly rigs are legal, you can cut your search time in half.

On unfamiliar water, that you have no knowledge of in terms of forage, a substrate sample will help you find a starting point. In the sample, some of the nymphs will be more active than others. This can be an indication of what is most likely to be hatching. It would be a good idea to begin with something representing those bugs and move on from there. Remember though, the sample does not necessarily represent what is in the drift so be prepared to change flies.

Another detail to keep in mind is that one fish doesn't make a pattern. It won't be uncommon to take a couple of fish during the frequent changes but until hits become consistent, continue to explore. I recall a day several seasons ago when I was getting frustrated to the point of giving in. The only reason I remained focused was because I could see several big trout nymphing in the run. I continued to change patterns and presentation but was still fishless. I took a break and explored my fly boxes for something not yet used. I was staying with an isonychia type pattern, as I knew the previous days had yielded a decent hatch. I came across a general purpose mayfly nymph tied with a rusty floss body, black tail, legs and wing case. It looked nothing like an isonychia but it was the correct size and given the morning that I was having, I figured what the heck. Well, long story short, it worked. I not only took several of the larger fish but the little guys loved it as well. Another angler happened by and after the usual dialogue; I discovered that he had experienced the same type of morning except he still hadn't sorted things out. I told him of my find and gave him a copy. We fished together for a while through three more runs with continued success. Now, one could argue that the fish just turned on for what ever reason and it happened to coincide with my tying on that non descript little fly, but I will tell you that we did experiment with several other patterns with no success.

I can't explain why that fly worked so well. Perhaps the rusty body floss and the light conditions combined to make it right to the fish or I may have been wrong with my original assumption of isonychia being on the menu; but I can't deny it saved my day. My point is, by trial and error, I found a pattern that the fish liked and although it took some time, it paid off. Patience is rewarded and although not every day will turn out like this, it's a great learning experience. The trial and error approach is not fool proof and sometimes it simply doesn't prevail but it is a great starting point if there is no evidence to what the trout are feeding on.

Rise Forms

One of the more misunderstood areas of fly fishing is rise forms and their relation to fly selection. My trial and error method works well if there are no tell tale signs of the trout's feeding activity, but what about those days when bugs are hatching and fish are working the surface? You can identify the insect, you have a good match and let's assume your approach is stealthy and your presentation is adequate. You find your target fish, make an accurate cast and the fish moves under the fly, drops back with it poised to accelerate forward, but then leave it and return to its feeding lane. A classic refusal and no matter how often it happens, it still leaves you scratching your head.

This is why identifying rise forms becomes critical. Many things happen during a hatch and they can all affect how the trout react. Some flies sit on the water longer than others and take longer to dry their wings. This may be due to colder than normal air temperature or it's simply the nature of the insect. For example, blue winged olives will drift for many yards before taking off, where light Cahills may drift only for a few feet. Cold weather may also cause an unnatural number of stillborns or cripples. Often you may find two or more insects hatching at once. A spinner fall may occur during an evening emergence causing the fish to change their feeding rhythm. These factors and more will affect how the fish feed and what the rises will look like. Recognizing these differences will make you more successful.

Let's look at a hatch and its relationship to rise forms. There are four practical stages to an emergence that pertain to rise forms: When the time is right, the nymphs break away from their homes in the substrate and get caught in the current. They drift helplessly for the most part on their way to the surface and are at the mercy of the river. Most nymphs at this point start to go through a change. Their nymphal shuck starts to separate from the adult body and through respiration, they develop a thin layer of air between the shuck and body at the wing case. This bit of air makes the nymph buoyant and accelerates its ascent. Once on the surface, it breaks through the wing case and desperately wiggles out of the shuck. For all intents and purposes, this is what we label "emergers". Once completely out of the shuck and exposed to the air, the wings start to dry and the dun is ready to fly. Those that don't get eaten or die of natural causes fly to the trees, go through one more shedding and return as spinners.

Mayflies and caddis flies differ slightly at each stage but the life cycles and their relationship with rise forms are close and need to be understood in order to fully appreciate how critical they are to greater success.

For the purpose of explaining this, we'll look at a typical Mayfly hatch on an average day. Assuming that we know what insect is most likely to emerge and that we are prepared in terms of patterns, what do we use and when? During a hatch period the emergence can be fairly predictable. Providing no weather anomalies, the bug that emerged at 3:00pm yesterday will probably emerge at the same time today.

Trout react to each stage of the emergence as it suits them. They will move about within their territory to intercept food and the stages of the emergence dictate where they will be found. At the beginning of the emergence, trout will move from primary lies where they have been eating nymphs and relocate to an area where the nymphs are more vulnerable. If a riffle is producing a lot of emerging insects, then it makes sense, given the time it takes for the shuck to be completely shed, that the bugs are helpless for a long period of time and the trout will move to these locations to feed on those carrying the burden of the trailing shuck. Not every piece of water is an ideal "riffle, run, pool" situation but it won't take long to locate the fish if you are patient. The rise will be subtle at first. Slow and deliberate with almost no sense of urgency. Often, even with duns on the water, the trout will be keyed in on the helpless emergers as they offer the easiest meal. What you need to look for here is a rise without a mouth. The easiest way to describe this without a visual reference is to call it a "bump" in the water. If the emerging insect has not yet been trapped in the surface film and is riding just under the surface, you will seldom see the trout's head. What you will see is a slight bulge of water followed by a dorsal and maybe the top point of a tail. To present a dun to this fish would more than likely result in a refusal. The fish at this point are looking for active, yet helpless bugs. To a gluttonous trout, this would be like you or I preparing lasagna from scratch or throwing last night's leftovers in the microwave. Its right in front of you and it's easy.

Your best bet here is to fish whatever pattern you choose just under the surface. I tie most of my nymphs in traditional patterns as well as a flash-back style. The flash back makes a nice representation of the air pocket under the wing case and makes for a very good, ascending nymph. Pearl flashabou or crystal flash will work and all you need to do is add a few strands over your usual wing case. Present the fly as you would a dry but remember; you can't see this fly. Know your leader length and set the hook on anything close or use a miniscule bit of strike putty about three feet up the leader as a visual reference. Klinkhammers, floating nymphs and Usuals also work well in this situation. Do not apply floatant and pull the fly just under the surface before introducing the slack needed to get a drag free drift.

It is critical that your fly be presented under the surface. By placing yourself across but just up stream of your target, you are in a position to make your cast above (upstream) and beyond the target fish. Casting above and beyond it allows you to then draw the fly back by moving your rod in an upstream "reach" mend. The

reach mend is an on-water mend that allows you to draw the fly back and deposit it exactly in the fishes feeding lane but equally important, it will pull the fly under. If this mend is performed correctly, your casting arm will be extended to a point off your upstream shoulder and your handle should be somewhere at your head level. Once your fly has found the fish's feeding lane, your line and leader will be close to a right angle from your rod tip. Now it is simply a matter of sweeping your casting arm down stream at the same rate of speed as the current. This should allow your fly to drift drag free over your target.

During the peak of the hatch, duns will often be mixed in with emergers that have not yet fully shed their shuck; you have no doubt seen or heard these referred to as "trailing shuck emergers". Most often tied as a floating nymph, or sparse hackle with a trailing shuck of Antron or some other translucent material, the fly is made to ride low in the film but not under the surface. Once again, this stage demonstrates the inherent laziness of trout, as the fish will often refuse meaty duns in order to take these easier targets. The rise form here is similar to the first in that it is still slow and deliberate, but you should start to see the trout's head. This rise starts with a bulge on the surface as the fish's head breaches it and is followed by a slow head to tail roll. The important thing to remember here is that there is still no sense of urgency in the fish's rhythm. The bugs are still easy pickings and the fish know this. This may seem rather academic in terms of spotting the rise but during a heavy hatch where duns and emerging insects, yet to free themselves are mixed together, one can waste a lot of time casting duns and blaming your casting when in fact, it is the fly selection that failed. Take the time to watch a few rises to determine whether or not duns are disappearing. If they are drifting by unmolested after a rise, then try a tailing shuck.

The easiest rise to recognize is that of the trout eating duns. I'll reiterate how important it is to stand back and observe the trout's behavior. Once the emergence has ended, and it eventually will, the task becomes somewhat easier but still has its challenges. During moderate hatch activity, you can usually get by with an artificial of the same size. However, during heavy activity, more finesse is required. At the beginning of the hatch, providing the trout have keyed in on duns, again, go with the closest thing you have. A Catskill tie, CDC dun, Compara dun or variants are a good bet. When the fish have limited opportunities, the chances of them picking off yours are pretty good. But as the hatch intensifies, your chances diminish exponentially. During a blanket hatch, when there are bugs every six inches, finding your fly among them is like looking for one particular needle in a stack of needles.

One of the most difficult things to do during extraordinarily heavy hatch activity is to stay focused on one fish. If you have fish rising all over the pool, the chances of one being more stupid than the rest is slim. Discipline yourself to target one good fish and work it until it's spooked or fooled. But let's go back to the "needle in a stack of needles". At this point you need a fly that will stand out both to you and the trout. One size larger or smaller may do the trick but I prefer to be a little more creative. During heavy hatches, many duns are crippled or stillborn and trout will eat them among the healthy duns when they appear in their feeding lane. Carry with you a good assortment of these imitations as they may make the difference in blanket hatch situations.

Heavy hatches can be the cause of frustration but remember this; every hatch begins, peaks, and ends. Often the most consistent fishing will be at the start, when the duns are few and at the end for the same reason. We don't get to experience blanket hatches every day or every year for that matter. Don't blow the opportunity to learn just for a couple of trout. Take the time to watch the fish and how they react to each stage of the emergence. Its kind of fun and you'll get the chance to see what many miss due to their impatience.

Spinners

The most under fished stage of the mayfly is the spinner fall. It is also the most misunderstood stage, yet if you talk to anyone who regularly looks for it, they'll tell you it can provide the most exciting fishing of the day.

Unfortunately for anyone who has to travel to fish, it can also be the most unreliable fishing due largely in part to the fact that the event can occur very quickly and timing is absolutely critical.

What is a “spinner fall”? The spinner fall is the final stage of the mayfly’s life cycle. Sometime between one hour and twenty-four hours after hatching (this varies by sub-species) the male and female return to the river from their cover. When the spinner falls happen varies and it is hard to put any kind of rule of thumb to this, but the most consistent activity occurs in the evenings just after dark or early in the morning. It’s important to note however that there are several factors that can ultimately affect the timing. For example, a dramatic drop in air temperature in the evening can and probably will delay the fall. This delay can last as long as thirty-six hours depending on the weather and may cause the flies to deposit their eggs at odd times like the middle of the day. Ultimately though, the females drop their eggs and die, giving the trout a steady and very easy meal once a day.

In my experience the most predictable falls occur during the evenings and are usually preceded by a long period of inactivity. Like most events in nature, there are few steadfast rules and some mayflies regularly deposit at other times such as early morning or just before sunrise. The only way to get a feel for timing is to put your hours in waiting and try to develop patterns based on sub-species and weather conditions.

Trout that have fed heavily during the day on emerging insects are resting during the mid to late day period. High sun during this time may also cause them to be cautious and seek cover, making this period the least productive time of day. However, as the sun drops below the trees and shadows slowly settle on the river, the trout will move from their resting place and return to primary feeding lies. It is at this time when we start to see early signs of spinner activity with the odd bug showing in the air. As the evening progresses, more and more spinners appear high above the water until it peaks, with the sky filled with thousands of bugs.

Preliminary activity will have the spinners high in the air; often hovering around the tree tops that earlier provided cover. As their drive to procreate increases, they drop lower to the river and begin mating. It is common to witness this act as it is often performed over the river and near the run or pool that they hatched in just hours before.

Mating mayflies are easy to spot as they pair off and appear as one, dancing and diving above the water. Mating is surprisingly quick and will be followed by a mass migration up river towards a shallow riffle that will provide the eggs refuge for the next generation. Some of the most remarkable natural events that I have ever witnessed on the water have been spinner falls and no matter how often I see it, nothing really prepares me for the anticipation I feel when those first few bugs begin to hover above the river. At this point, it is worth taking note of what is going on around you. Has the wind died off? What is the air temperature? Is it humid or dry? All of these factors can affect what happens.

What happens next depends on the aforementioned conditions but if the spinners commit and begin dropping, the fish should react to them. The activity will be slow at first, like the emergence but can increase into a frenzy. Where rise forms and fly selection relate can be a little confusing but if you know what to look for, it will be easy to distinguish what the trout are eating.

Often, early in the season (late May and June) during the “big” fly activity (i.e.: March Browns, Grey Fox, Cahill and Coachmen) hatches will occur in the early evening. If the emergence and the spinner fall overlap, expect the fish to switch from eating emergers and duns to spinners. This is where it can get confusing. On many occasions, I have seen big, beautiful duns ignored due to the presence of spinners. If you have to guess due to low light, go with the spinner. The rise forms will be different for each; if the rise is aggressive and quick, it could be that the fish are still on emergers or duns. If the rise is very subtle, (often all you will see is a snout

followed by the ‘thwop!’ sound of the trout’s mouth closing shut on the surface) they should be eating spinners.

Assuming though, that there is no activity prior to the spinner fall, rises will be infrequent at first. Keep an eye on the slow side of converging currents, back eddies and immediately below runs where the river slows to a pool. These areas will pick up dense groups of dead or dying spinners and the largest trout usually take up the best lies. Look for rises there but if light and time permit, resist the urge to cast to the first fish that you see. If one fish starts working, chances are more will follow and it is worth letting them get into a rhythm and allow them to feel secure in their feeding lane.

At this point, you should be fully prepared and ready to pull the trigger. Some of the preparations that I make are:

- Have your head lamp ready.
- Have a half a dozen flies dressed and on feeders ready to go.
- I generally shorten my leader during low light conditions as the fish become less weary as the darkness increases.

By twilight, I am down to about six feet and as heavy as three times and by dark, it will be as short as four feet. The reasons for the short leader are twofold. One, a shorter leader allows you to be far more accurate. During low or no light, you are often casting to and reacting to the *sound* of a fish rising and it is far easier to see your fly line than your fly. With a short leader, you can determine the proximity of a rise more accurately. In other words, at four feet, you should have a much better idea of when to react when a fish rises close. Anything within four or five feet of the end of your fly line will warrant a hook set. If you are using the same leader that you had on two hours before, which may have been nine to eleven feet, your compromising accuracy and feel, plus, your target area is far too broad with the absence of light. Reason number two is far less complex; a lot less can happen with a short leader. Casting and line management is easier; you have to worry less about what is behind you and you will seldom tie a wind knot with a four foot leader.

The spinner that I use is one that I developed over period of a couple of seasons of watching spinners on the water. The RH spinner has been my exclusive spinner pattern and a number of friends have signed off on it as well. It has all of the characteristics of a natural and is easily converted from a finesse fly to a high visibility pattern. It also works for all but the largest may flies. For these, I generally use the Jerry Regan tie (search “Regans Hex”) as it supports the larger hooks of the Hexagenia and big drakes better.

Whatever pattern you use, spinner falls are technical but fun and if you want big trout, give them a try.

I still put more import on presentation than fly selection however, the balance is tenuous. You can remain in the game with really good presentation and a “just barely OK” pattern, but you will be a super star with sound casting and accurate patterns. Practice your casting and try to put yourself in as many situations as possible. Keep a good assortment of nymphs, emergers, duns and spinners and finally, take the time to observe hatches and how fish react to them. In the end, you will become a more successful angler.

Part Two: Migratory Fish (Coming Soon)