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Chapter of Trout Unlimited

Conservation, preservation, and restoration of Michigan's cold-water resources.

Fishing letters

Trout Flies—Their Intentions and Uses

by Art Neumann

Sometimes a man is carried away by an insatiable desire to report the unusual, promote the revolutionary and discuss the postgraduate to the extent that he completely neglects basic fundamentals. The awakening can come unexpectedly. We were eating lunch the other day and, as is usually the case, talk got around to fishing. One thing led to another and before I knew it I was expounding with gusto on the relative merits of the various types of trout flies. Just as I was slipping into overdrive, Maurice Suave, one of the group, jarred me to a halt with, "Art, I don't want to appear stupid, but just what is the difference between a streamer, a wet fly, a nymph, and a dry fly?" That was the awakening. Here I've been practicing; promoting and writing about fly fishing all these years and never once have I bothered to explain the difference between the various kinds of flies. Right then and there I resolved that in the next issue of the *Wanigas News* there'd be a return to fundamentals. Here, then, for the benefit of novice and veteran alike, is a simple explanation of fly types, their intention and their use.

We'll start with dry flies not only because they're best known but also because dry fly fishing is the easiest to master. As the name implies, dry flies are fished dry. They are floated on top of the water. They imitate insects that have fallen on the water. These can be either land insects like the grasshopper and the ant or they can be water insects like the mayfly and the stone fly. Regardless of type, the fly you use must be a reasonable facsimile of the natural insect prevalent at the time. What's more, it must be delivered naturally. This calls for a delicate rod, a matching line and a tapered leader. While it's possible to fish them downstream, dry flies are most effective when fished upstream against the current. One fly at a time is the rule and it must be cast softly on the water, float high and drift on the current without drag. In the first two months of the season most dry fly fishing is evening fishing or fishing when a great quantity of a given mayfly is present over the water. This calls for a precise duplication of the natural, not only so far as size is concerned, but also so far as shape, general cast and shade is concerned. It's the reason, or at least the excuse for, why so many of us carry ten times more flies than we really need. But it is a challenging kind of dry fly fishing and, because of the heavy concentration of feeding fish, usually is the most productive. Later on, in July and August, most dry fly fishing is middle of the day fishing. What's more, it's area fishing where you cover the water rather than cast only to rising fish. It is the kind of fishing that Buy Garber, Bill Pochelon, Doc Mason and the late Otto Kessel and George O'Brien have immortalized. It is the season of the midge, the Royal Coachman and the grasshopper—of low water, long casts and ultra fine leaders. But one thing's sure. Whether you fish in April or September, midday or evening, there's nothing that can equal the excitement and the thrill of watching Old Ironsides gracefully rise to your carefully cast dry.

Next come wet flies. Wet flies are tied to imitate drowned insects and are fished sunken or wet. They are similar to dry flies in appearance but are usually tied with wings flat along the body instead of upright and with heavy hooks and soft hackle so that they sink readily. At one time, it was the only kind of trout fly used. Today it is the least used. Two or three can be cast at one time and on one line. The conventional method of fishing them is to cast across and quartering downstream and permit the fly to

drift with the current until it has straightened out below you. Gentle action may or may not be imparted to the fly depending on how the fish are disposed toward them at the time. The strike can occur anytime but it usually comes just as the fly swings across the current below you. Wet flies are a good bet early in the season or anytime fish do not appear to be active at the surface. Best patterns are either drab or bright, with few in between, the former being imitative, the latter attractive. One or more of each type, in casts up to four, the legal limit, spaced about 18" apart, makes a good assembly.

Now we come to least understood, yet the most productive of all trout flies – the nymph. Nymphs and mayflies, stone flies, caddis flies and the like, are in their larva or nymphal state. They live among the stones, logs and vegetation of the stream bottom and when water temperatures, weather etc. are favorable they rise to the surface or crawl to the bank, shed their nymphal skin and emerge as mature, winged insects. It has been said that up to 80% of a trout's diet consists of nymphs. Good nymph fishermen contend that, given an opportunity, they can clean out a stream fishing nymphs. But, perhaps fortunately, there are but few good nymph fishermen. The reason is simple. Because the fly cannot be seen, it is difficult to tell when a fish has taken and, consequently, when to strike. The entire success or failure of nymphing centers around this one thing. Learn when to strike and you have it mastered. Good nymph fishermen develop a sort of sixth sense that finds them striking almost by instinct. But in the beginning it is possible to employ a trick or two that will help. One is to attach a dry fly to the leader and let it act as a bobber. The other is to pinch on a very small split shot about 18" up from the tip fly. This serves the useful purpose of taking up slack and also helps the nymph get down deep where the trout lie. This can also be accomplished with the use of weighted nymphs. Then, whenever the line or leader hesitates or moves, strike immediately, however slight the deviation. If you can feel the strike, it already is too late. Good nymph patterns are scarce but most stores carry some. Choose those which tend to suggest food rather than imitate it, are drab in color and sparsely dressed. Use as long and as fine a leader as is practical, cast quartering upstream and across and let the fly drift motionless. Fish slow and don't become discouraged. Like anything difficult, the reward is in proportion to the effort put forth—and nymphing is no exception.

I've deliberately left streamers until the last. I hope, by so doing, to make them the last you'll forget. A lot of you reading this are bait fisherman. Fine. I once was myself. I don't bait fish anymore though. Not because I frown on it but because I find fly fishing so much more fun. I'm sure you'd find it that way too—if you gave it a chance. A logical start would be with streamers. That's because streamer fishing is a lot like bait fishing except that you use a fly. As a matter of fact, your streamer is actually a feathered imitation of a kind of bait—a minnow. And trout eat an awful lot of minnows, especially big trout. Night fishermen rarely use anything else. But there are a few things you should know before you start. First, be sure your streamers are weighted. A streamer is a fast water fly and unless it's weighted you won't be able to keep it under the water where it belongs. If there are a lot of deep pools where you fish, use a sinking line as well. It will get your fly down where the big ones live. In early season use a good size fly—a #4 or #6. Best Michigan patterns are the tapered Royal Coachman, Black Ghost, and Black Dace. Later on, as the water clears and stream levels stabilize, go to 10's and 12's. And fish more than one streamer at a time. Try a big one on the tip and a smaller one up a couple of feet. It's a good trick. Don't use too short a leader. A ten-footer is best. Cast across and, if possible, a little upstream, on a slack line. Don't move the fly until the current has taken up the slack you've cast. Then work the streamer in irregular jerks so that it runs downstream. And hang on tight. They hit hard. ♦