

*From a natural catastrophe grew
a magnificent trout fishery.*

CHRIS FONG PHOTO



JOHN RANDOLPH PHOTO

An Earthquake's Blessing

JOHN JURACEK AND CRAIG MATHEWS

PICTURE YOURSELF IN THE HEART of the country's best trout fishing, West Yellowstone, Montana, within a half-hour drive of such streams as the Madison, Henry's Fork, Gallatin and the waters of Yellowstone Park. The water you choose to fish tonight, however, while not as famous, certainly ranks as one of the most underfished yet consistently productive in the area.

Upon arriving at any of a number of public access sites, you can see the fish already starting to dimple the surface. Sliding into your waders, you can't help but notice the many fishermen heading down to the Madison River, or returning from their day's float. There's no hurry to get your fishing spot tonight though, for it's guaranteed that there will be no other competition for these fish.

You can start casting small dry flies to cruising trout, or dredging the depths with a minnow pattern for bigger fish, certain that either method will succeed.

Can this idyllic setting really exist next to a major highway travelled by hundreds of anglers? It certainly can, and usually does, every night of the season on Earthquake Lake.

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Commonly called Quake Lake, this body of water was formed during the 1959 earthquake that rocked the region and triggered a massive landslide across the Madison River. During the earthquake it's estimated that more than 80-million tons of rock and soil slid across the river, burying the Rock Creek campground and forming the natural dam that created Quake Lake. (Twenty-six people are known missing or dead as a result of the slide.)

Before the Army Corps of Engineers could cut a spillway through and stabilize the dam, the lake deepened to approximately 250 feet. Today, due to erosion and further work on the spillway, the maximum depth is around 175 feet. The lake is about four miles long, never more than a half-mile wide, and much of its shoreline is laced with drowned trees that provide valuable cover for the trout and interesting angling situations.

The fish life in Quake Lake is both abundant and varied; in one day you may catch brown, rainbow and cutthroat trout along with whitefish and chubs. While the latter two may not seem particularly inviting, their presence and the chubs' schooling tendencies often trigger feeding frenzies by large trout. Last summer, just as we were rigging up to get in our float tubes, a spectacular frenzy broke loose not more than 30 feet from shore. Chubs were splashing and leaping a full foot out of the water in our little cove. As fast as we could—with trembling hands it wasn't very fast—we cut back our leaders

Quake Lake...

and tied on chub streamers. Without even getting in the tubes we started casting into the thick of the chubs, and no more than two casts later, we were both fast to nice browns. The frenzy lasted an unfortunately short time, but we still managed a half-dozen good fish between us.

Insect life in Quake ranges from the tiniest midges and mayflies to the largest caddis, cranefly and dragonfly species—as well as some flying black ant hatches.

Fishing the Seasons

SPRING COMES LATE TO QUAKE LAKE, as it does everywhere in Yellowstone country. Fishing normally will not begin until late April when the upper end of the lake starts to lose its heavy layer of ice. Since the water is still bitterly cold and the trout are feeding in the shallows, we fish from shore rather than float tubes. Our favorite spring patterns are whitefish and chub streamers. We cast the flies in a fan-like pattern and count the fly down before stripping it back erratically. Once we find the depth where the fish are located, we concentrate our fishing there, usually with a sinking-tip line.

Spring access is limited to walking in from Highway 287 (which parallels the lake for all but this upper end), because the local access road usually is snowed in. The three-quarter-mile walk from the highway can be rewarding because the fish usually are ravenous after a winter under the ice.

The first week of May usually reveals more open water closer to Highway 287, and you can gain access by walking up the shoreline from the boat launch, located where Quake first meets the highway. The rainbow trout are still concentrated from their spawning activity. Along with the mouth of the Madison, one of the favorite fishing spots is the area where Beaver Creek empties into the lake. The creek flows in from the north side of Quake, midway between the mouth of the Madison and the boat launch.

By mid-May the lake is completely free of ice and our fishing moves downlake. There always seem to be as many fish concentrated in the heavy tree areas along 287 as there are toward Beaver Creek.

Generally, the last days of May bring a torrent of silt-laden runoff that forces abrupt an end to spring fishing. This runoff is borne not only by Beaver Creek but by



CRAIG MATHEWS PHOTO

Cabin Creek as well. This small but potent creek empties into the Madison River about three-quarters of a mile above Quake itself. Quake quickly turns the color of pea soup and stays that way for anywhere between one and four weeks, depending on the amount of snowpack.

Through the end of May streamer patterns are still the fly of choice. Again, we like the whitefish and chub flies, but leech patterns, Woolly Buggers and rabbit streamers produce well.

Quake Lake Summer

TOWARD THE END OF JUNE—conditions vary from year to year—Quake once again becomes fishable. The water has cleared and warmed enough for float-tubing, the most effective way to fish the lake in summer. The fish have moved away from the shorelines they prowled in May, and they always seem to rise just out of range of fishermen restricted to the shore. Float tubes also allow an excellent approach to big fish that love to cruise the areas where dead trees meet the open water. It's possible to sit out on the lake in your float tube and fire cast after cast toward the trees to intercept the parade of rising fish that passes by.

In the clear water, the fish really begin to look to the surface for food. Hatches in Quake are typical of most lakes; midges rank first in importance followed by the slow- and stillwater mayflies and caddisflies. In season, flying black ants and craneflies can also generate rises of fish.

The midge hatches in the lake are prolific and almost non-stop; the species we've seen range in size from #14 to #22 and come in every color imaginable. Never have we seen a case where the fish became selective to any one species, so fishing a midge emergence is some of the easiest fishing on the lake. Size doesn't appear to be critical either, and we fish a #16 or #18 imitation almost exclusively. Unlike the mayflies, midges hatch throughout the lake, and when conditions are right, trout rise everywhere for them.

The right conditions are simple: a complete lack of wind! Whenever the air is calm the trout will be rising—usually to midges. When the wind does blow, however slightly, surface activity immediately ceases. The idea is to hit the lake when the wind isn't blowing, and if there is one thing certain in this world, it is that the wind will

blow on Quake every day of the summer! As a rule, it usually blows from about 10 A.M. to 6 P.M., so all surface feeding is concentrated in the morning and evening.

Quake's Mayflies

MAYFLY HATCHES ON THE LAKE generally occur in the morning before the wind first hits. Concentrated emergences are rare and seem to be confined to the upper end of the lake. The most common species are the Blue-Winged Olives (*Baetis* and *Pseudocloeon*), Pale Morning Duns (*Drunella inermis*), Speckled Spinners (*Callibaetis*) and White-Winged Blacks (*Tricorythodes*). Fishing these hatches is a chancy proposition because of their sporadic nature, so sporadic that in the course of our fishing we

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Selected Fly Patterns

Spring: May-June

Woolly Buggers

Standard tie in black and olive, brown and yellow, and orange and white.

Leeches

Simple marabou and Canadian leech yarn ties. Brown and black, olive and black, and crimson and red.

Rabbit Streamers

HOOK: Partridge Streamer Hook or Mustad #9674, #2-#8.

THREAD: Pre-waxed Monocord.

BODY: Red, olive or black wool yarn over desired wraps of lead wire.

RIB: Gold wire.

WING: Strip of rabbit tied Matuka style. Natural rabbit for red rabbit, olive dyed rabbit for olive, black for black.

HEAD: Clumps of dyed wool. We like a banded effect obtained by tying in three different colored clumps of wool. The wool is tied in the same manner as spinning deer-hair heads except the wool is simply bound down since it will not spin as deer does.

Chub and Whitefish Streamers

HOOK: Partridge Streamer Hook or Mustad #9674, #2-#8.

THREAD: Pre-waxed white Monocord.

BODY: Silver scale tinsel for whitefish, gold scale tinsel for chub.

RIB: #22 Swannundaze.

UNDERWING: (Tied below hook) white marabou for whitefish, gold marabou for chub.

OVERWING: Olive marabou over aqua marabou for whitefish, dark olive marabou over brown marabou for chub.

THROAT: Red wool or floss.

HEAD: From working monocord build up a large head and paint eyes of yellow with black centers.

Summer: July-August

Midges

HOOK: Partridge Captain Hamilton or Mustad #94840 #16-#18.

BODY: Dubbed rabbit fur in olive, red, tan gray or black.

HACKLE: Two or three turns of grizzly.

Sparkle Duns

HOOK: Partridge Captain Hamilton or Mustad #94840, #16-#22.

TAIL: Sparkle poly in brown or brownish olive.

BODY: For Blue-Winged olive, dubbing of medium olive rabbit; Pale Morning Dun, dubbing of yellowish olive rabbit; Speckled Spinner, dubbing of tan rabbit; White-Winged Black, dubbing of olive rabbit.

WING: An upright wing of dyed deer or elk.

NOTE: This no-hackle mayfly pattern represents the emerging dun. It is the most effective pattern we've used on rivers as well as lakes. The deer or elk wing gives it the proper silhouette, durability and floatation. The sparkle poly tail represents the nymphal shuck still attached to the dun.

Caddis

Standard Elk Hair Caddis ties—light elk hair wing with olive body and dun hackle; dark elk hair wing with dark brown or gray body and brown hackle.

Fall: September-October

Midges—same as summer season.

Sparkle Duns—Blue-Winged olive.

Streamers—same as spring season.

Helpful Hints for Float Tubers

THE WATER COOLS DOWN IN THE FALL, so a pair of long underwear makes a day in a float tube more enjoyable.

Float tubes are available for rent from some of the fly shops in West Yellowstone.

When tubing Quake, be careful around the dead trees—many of them have hidden branches that can snag a tube or waders.

If you plan on tubing around the outlet be aware of the current, even though it is gentle.

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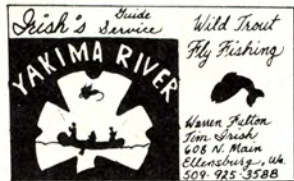
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have not been able to put together any sort of specific emergence timetable.

As with the midges, when mayflies emerge the fish will feed steadily until the hatch is over or the wind starts to blow. Our favorite pattern for fishing any of the mayfly hatches is the Sparkle Dun, a modified hairwing no-hackle fly that represents the emerging dun.

The best strategy we've found to fish the hatches is to put our float tubes in at the mouth of the Madison and let the current carry us down lake. When we find a group of feeding fish, it's easy to move out of the current and take our time working over them. If the morning is particularly calm and a strong downstream wind hits suddenly, it's possible to end up quite a hike from the car, so it pays to be aware of the distance you're floating. More than once we've been faced with a 30-minute walk back to the car in our flippers (no easy task!).

Although the best mayfly hatches are found toward the head of the lake, we have encountered good spinner falls, especially in the evening, over the entire lake. Caddisfly emergences typically are minor; however, there always are caddis flying



CHRIS FONG PHOTO

around the entire lake and some of the evening mating swarms are exceptionally large. At these times an Elk-Hair Caddis pattern can be especially effective. Our friend, Dave Steinbaugh, had an excellent evening last summer skittering an Elk Hair around the outlet of the lake.

(A couple of worthwhile notes: There is a slight but definitely noticeable current present in the lake, so be careful when tubing about the outlet area. Also be aware that there is a good population of surface-feeding chubs in the lake—they love to rise, and if you're not careful you can waste a lot of time with them. Typically, the best trout (and you will see some big ones) come up in the classic head-and-tail rise, while the chubs will always barely dimple the surface. Distance between the rises is also a good indicator—

chubs will rise successively just inches apart, but the trout will spread their rises out two feet or so. Chubs also tend to feed in small schools, something we've never seen the trout do.

Earthquake Autumn

SEPTEMBER AND OCTOBER are the most dependable months for fishing the lake. The wind doesn't blow nearly as often or for as long as it does in the summer, so it's possible to fish from morning to evening. Blue-Winged Olives (#22) and midges (all sizes) continue hatching through both months and provide great angling. The browns in the lake begin to congregate at the mouth of the Madison, and if they are not receptive to tiny dries it is a safe bet they will pound the same big streamers that are so effective in spring.

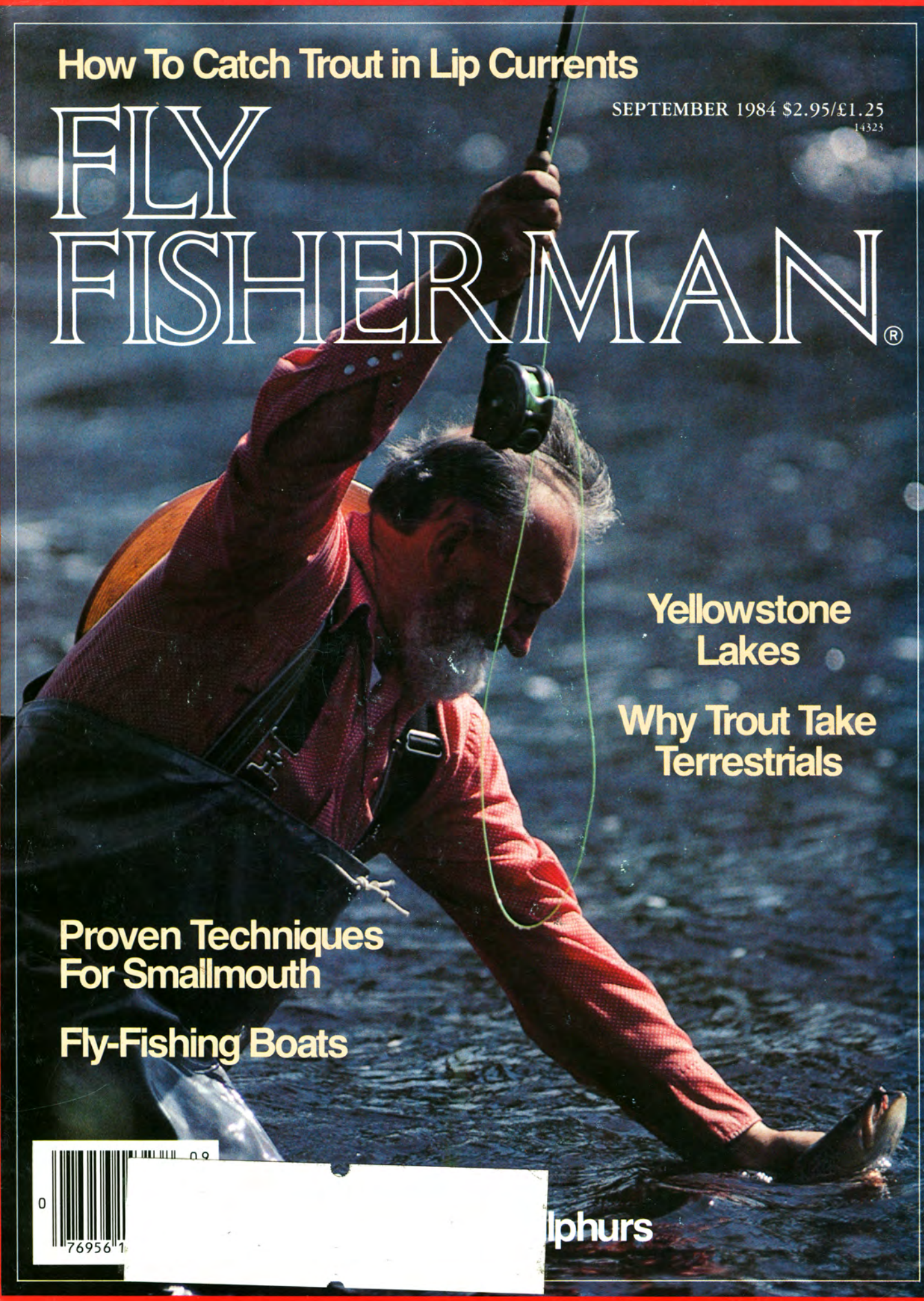
On several evenings every year we have seen flights of black ants on the surface. If the wind wasn't blowing the fish were always up feeding and any simple floating pattern was devastating.

Our fishing techniques and strategies are the same as for the rest of the year: Small mayfly dries are best at the upper end; casting to cruisers sipping midges is good all over; and casting, counting down, and retrieving streamers is excellent in the upper end.

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