

Brown Drake

JOHN GIERACH

THE SUN WAS NEAR the western horizon and the light was golden as we turned off the road at Osborn Bridge on the Henrys Fork. That afternoon we'd fished the Green Drake hatch farther upstream in the crowded conditions one finds during a famous hatch on a legendary river, but there was only one car in the little dirt parking lot by the bridge. The stiff breeze we'd fought all afternoon had calmed, and as we rigged up we could hear the powerful sound of the river.



Dale Sparras photo

At dusk, when the light has left the water and the sky darkens, the nymphs emerge from their burrows in the soft stream bottom. They mill around for a while and then swim quickly and actively to the surface. At about the same time, the spinner swarm forms in the trees.

Once the spinner flight has formed above the stream—the females low and the males somewhat higher in the air—they begin their mating dance while below them duns are hatching.

We headed upstream past the big riffle toward the spot known as Third Channel. Archie Best was walking ahead of me and he saw the spinners first. The Brown Drake is one of the largest of the mayflies but our excitement and the fading light combined to make them look as big as hummingbirds. We said little but exchanged wide smiles.

The Channel is classic Brown Drake habitat; slow, smooth currents with a soft silt bottom and treelined banks. As we waded in, the first few duns were already coming off but the only rises were from whitefish. We were just in time, a good thing since we'd only have a few hours before the feeding stopped and darkness fell.

THERE ARE SOME UNUSUAL things about the Brown Drake hatch and one of the most notable is that once in full swing, the hatch and spinner fall tend to occur together.

The duns often take flight almost immediately after clearing the nymphal husk, but at such times a standard dry fly is of little use because the trout will be keyed on the emerging nymphs. At other times, when the breeze is up, the air is cool or the humidity is high, they may travel for some distance on the surface drying their wings and the trout will take them eagerly.

The standard technique for fishing this hatch is to begin with the nymph, then switch to either the dun or emerger, as indicated, and then go with the spinner. Of course, standard procedures don't always work, especially on trout streams, and during many hatches there will be a significant period when the nymphs, emergers, duns and spinners are all available to the trout at the same time.

The ideal way to meet this situation would be to have three or four rods rigged and a well trained ghillie to hand

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Photos by the author

Brown Drake . . .

you the one you want. If you can't manage that, be prepared to make quick fly changes with as little fumbling as possible.

It's also a good idea to pick a fish rather than fish the water, as is sometimes the temptation during a heavy hatch. Trout will usually become selective to whichever stage of the Drake is most plentiful but it's not unheard of to find one fish working on emerging nymphs, another on duns and a third on spinners. The best way to determine which stage the fish is taking is to watch the water and evaluate the riseform, not always an easy task in near darkness.

THE AIR WAS COOL that evening on the Henrys Fork and the big duns rode for many yards on the surface, flapping their wings and trying to take

off. Here and there small whitefish sucked at them, sometimes making three or four tries before finally getting their tiny mouths around the big, juicy bugs. The spinners were silhouetted against the dark blue sky.

Archie had waded in and was casting his big March Brown dry fly to a rising trout in midchannel. I was watching the duns float along, wondering whether to try a nymph or a dry, when one of the duns disappeared in a large, confident rise, making the decision for me.

I chose a light brown Paradrake tied on a #10 hook and waded into the slow channel slightly upstream from the rising trout. The first cast looked good. The fly settled softly; there was no drag and it drifted down within two or three inches of where



the rise had been. The trout rose again, this time a foot farther upstream and perhaps eighteen inches farther out. My fly bobbed on the spreading rings of the riseform.

Trout in slow, smooth currents like this sometimes have the aggravating habit of moving around, nuzzling upstream, impatient for the next bite of bug. Sometimes they move upstream a bit and then drop back and start at the beginning again. At other times they cruise around, and then what looks like two or three fish can be just one.

Several casts later I managed to put the fly directly over the fish. He took a natural so close to my Paradrake that it took all the self-control I could muster to keep from striking.

OVER THE YEARS I've fished a number of so-called legendary or super hatches—the Green Drakes, Salmon Flies and so on—and if I've learned anything from the experience it's that, although big trout will come up to heavy hatches of large insects, they seldom act the way many fishermen and writers say they do. They do not “go crazy” or “throw all caution to the winds,” especially in an insect-rich stream like the Henrys Fork. They do become selective to the big bugs, but they behave more like gourmets than starving refugees, and they often treat your fly the way you'd treat a bit of eggshell in a fancy omelet.

SPINNERS WERE beginning to drop, the females landing flat on the surface with wings outspread to lay their eggs. At first I thought I could actually hear them but then realized that the sound was being made by bat wings. My fish was still taking duns. There were dozens of them in his feeding lane now, fluttering their wings hard, trying to leave the surface.

I inched my way upstream a little farther, threw down and across, and when I thought the fly was over him, I gave it a slight upstream twitch. The fly went down in a solid rise. I set the hook; the fish shook his head and the fly came loose.

The evening was very still. I could hear the slurping sound of rises and the swish of Archie's fly line. From upstream came a strange, sharp sound, a sandhill crane perhaps or another angler whooping over a big fish.

THE FACT THAT SPINNERS lie flat and spread out on the surface to lay their eggs may have something to do with the Brown Drake's preference for smooth currents. Although I suppose it could be the other way around, as the chicken and the egg. There are other reasons.

The Brown Drake (*Ephemera simulans*), also sometimes known as the Chocolate Dun or the Western March Brown, is a burrowing mayfly in the same family with the *Ephemera guttulata* (one of the Green Drakes) and *Ephemera varia* (Yellow Drake).

The nymphs live in U-shaped burrows in soft stream bottoms. They average thirteen millimeters long, are rusty brown with three short tails and fantastic featherlike gills arranged along the abdomen. The nymphs use these gills to keep a current running through their burrows and this fact should indicate to fly tiers just how prominent this feature should be on nymph imitations.

When the nymphs rise to the surface to hatch, they do so with a vigorous swimming motion. The best tactic is to sink the fly deeply in the current, using either a weighted fly or weight on the leader, and lift smartly when the fly nears a feeding trout or a likely area.

The best nymphs tend to be those tied wiggle style with thick, ostrich-herl gills, a brownish body and brown partridge legs. In this and other cases, I prefer to put my weight on the leader rather than on the fly because an unweighted fly acts more naturally in the water.

Some anglers will also use an emerger pattern, nothing more than a large brown soft-hackle pattern with brown partridge hackle and tail and a yellow floss rib. These are either greased and floated or sunk an inch or two.

The dun is a robust, chocolate-colored mayfly with three tails of equal length and heavily mottled wings. As is true of other mayfly duns, it is lighter on the bottom of the body than on the back and sides.

Under ideal hatching conditions, the dun rides on the surface for only a second or two before taking flight. But conditions aren't always ideal and, given the vagaries of weather and insect behavior, it's best to be prepared with dun imitations.

The standard Brown Drake dry fly is a #10 or #12 brown Paradrake. This deerhair-bodied fly floats low in the water, showing the trout a realistic silhouette unconfused by a standard hackle. The large, upright wing is both true to nature and highly visible. The only problem with the Paradrake is that it's easily shredded by the teeth of large trout. I can live with that.

Another good pattern is the standard March Brown dry tied on a #10 or #12 hook. The brownish cream body and mottled mallard flank wings are an excellent match. Tied with the tails slightly elevated, this pattern is a good copy.

The spinner is also brownish-tan and the wings are mottled. A poly-wing spinner will work, but it's better to tie the wings with mottled hen or partridge feather to imitate more accurately the proper shape and color.

IT TOOK A MINUTE after missing the big trout, which had gained a pound or two in my mind's eye the second the hook came loose. I figured I'd better check the hook point and take a few deep breaths before starting to work on the fish I'd spotted just upstream.

I glanced down at Archie, who had worked up fairly close to me. He was as far out in the channel

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as he could wade, casting to the far bank. The bottom of his vest disappeared in the gentle current, the fly boxes in the lower pockets beginning to ship water. That night back at the camper I would drink strong coffee and watch him spread his flies on the table to dry.

As I watched, he tightened on a strike. His rod bent and the fish splashed twice before boring deeply. It was a heavy fish but Archie was leading it in with relative ease.

"Looks good," I said.

"He's not fighting very well," Archie replied, "I think it's a big whitefish."

At that moment, the fish seemed to realize its predicament and began a strong run downstream. Over the singing of his reel, I heard Archie say "Then again . . . perhaps not."

The fish fought well, staying deep, running back and forth looking for a snag; but there was nothing on the flat, soft bottom to foul the leader. When it began to tire, Archie asked to borrow my net (he'd sat on his a few days earlier), and as I retreated to a respectful distance, he landed the fish smoothly. It was a male rainbow of just over twenty-two inches. It was too dark for a good photo but we took one anyway. It's not every day you land a trout that size on a dry fly and a 5X tippet.

A GOOD BROWN DRAKE HATCH can be as difficult to locate as it is to fish. The hatch is elusive in the West for a number of reasons, the most important being the relative lack of proper habitat. Western rivers are not known for soft bottoms and smooth currents—just the opposite in fact—and for this reason there are few burrowing mayflies of any species to be found. Where the proper conditions exist, however, *E. simulans* can be found in large numbers.

The Henrys Fork of the Snake River has some of the most widely known Brown Drake water, but there are also fishable hatches on the Clark's Fork of the Columbia, the Yellowstone below Livingston, the Big Hole below Melrose, the Beaverhead, Odell Creek, and in the smooth stretches of the upper Gibbon.

Brown Drakes are of only minor importance to Eastern anglers but many Midwestern rivers have good populations. Michigan's Au Sable River has some renowned Brown Drake water as does Wisconsin's Wolf River. Many lakes in both states have excellent hatches. In fact, the Brown Drake is known in many areas of the Midwest as the Lake Fly.

This hatch is relatively short, usually beginning in late June or when water temperatures permanently reach the high 50s, lasting only three to four weeks. On the Au Sable, hatches are said to be of even shorter duration, often lasting only a few days.

The hatch always occurs at dusk, around eight on the average, earlier on overcast days, and lasts until nightfall. The trout often become very selective to

the nymph, dun or spinner, and it's not uncommon for them to feed so heavily on the nymphs early on that they become stuffed and feed only sporadically or even quit altogether by the time the angler is aware of the hatch. Once in full swing, Brown Drake hatches are typically heavy and even when trout are feeding actively on or near the surface, they have plenty of naturals to choose from. Trout will seldom move very far for a fly or break their selective feeding pattern.


In the West, Brown Drake activity begins toward the end of, or just after, the better known Green Drake hatch. If you're at the right place at the right time, you can fish the Green Drakes until late afternoon, take a break for supper or wader patching, and then fish the Brown Drakes in the evening.

Unfortunately, good Brown Drake water is also good whitefish water and anglers should be careful to pick out and cast to trout.

Hatches can be hard to find. Once found, they're difficult to fish. The trout may have gorged on the nymphs early and become maddeningly lazy and selective. By the time you've changed from a nymph to a dun the trout you're working on may have changed from a dun to a spinner. And the whole thing lasts such a short time that when you get it figured out it's over. You're standing in a dark, silent stream feeling vaguely cheated.

But therein lies its charm. For the reasons mentioned above, the Brown Drake emergence is not followed as avidly as other better known hatches and anglers who seek it out may well have it all to themselves. The largest trout typically come to the surface for these big bugs and you can catch them if you fish carefully and intelligently. It's a challenging and often rewarding hatch.

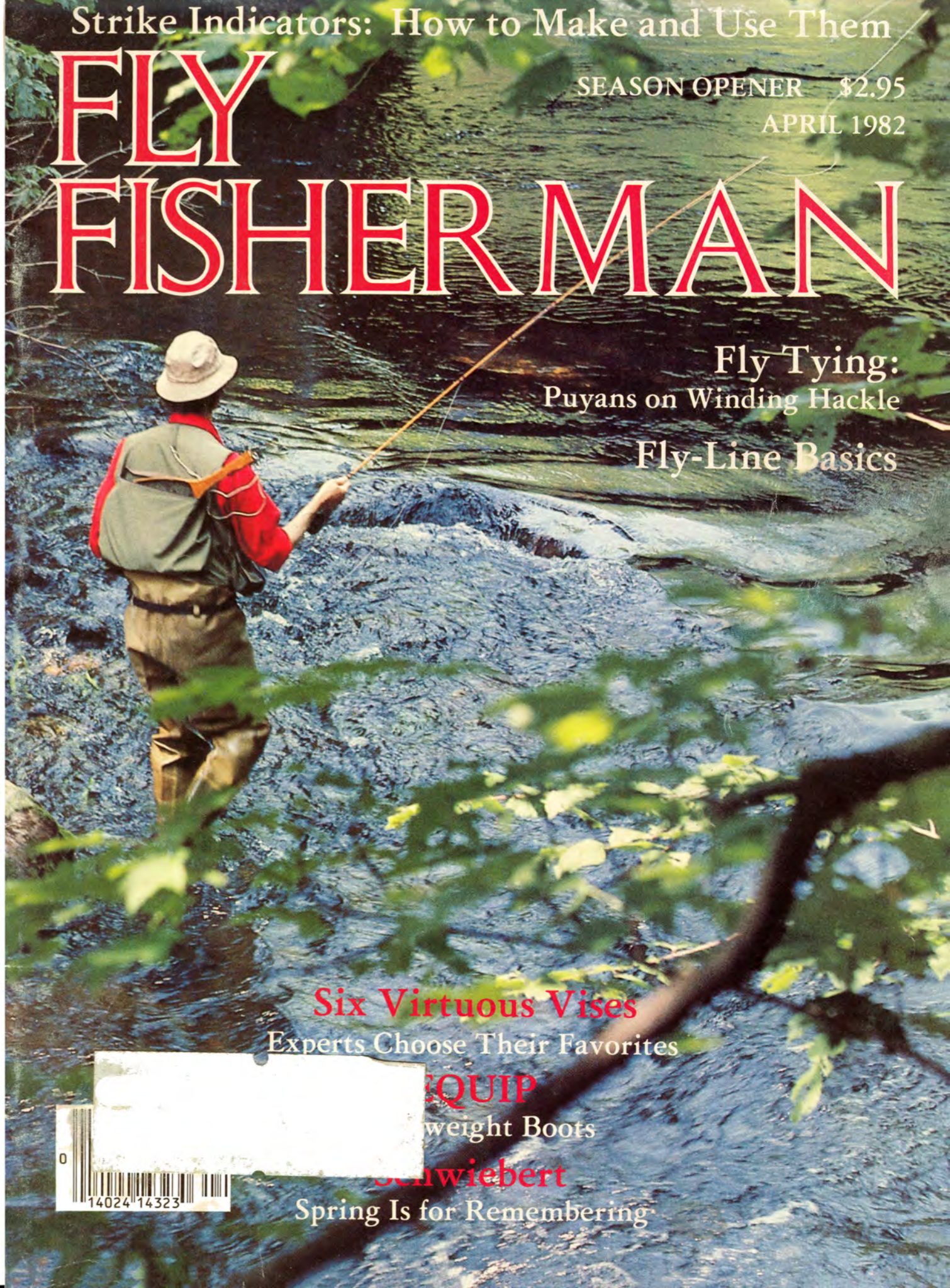
I suppose my favorite thing about the hatch, though, is its unique beauty. The wide, smooth flats where Brown Drakes are found are uncommon in the West. On a still evening they are strangely quiet and soothing, although there's plenty of activity. The simultaneous hatch and spinner fall of the large, lovely Drakes and the trout feeding on them is just part of it. Muskrats run errands across the smooth water. As dusk turns to dark the swallows retire and the bats get to work. Above the trees ducks glide in and owls move in the branches.

THAT EVENING on the Henrys Fork ended as many evenings do when you're fishing the Brown Drake hatch. I'd switched to a spinner that I had then broken off in another nice trout (too hard a strike, a knot too hastily tied, a spool of faulty tippet material all flashed through my mind) and by the time I'd tied on a fresh fly it was over. No fish rose, no spinners could be seen against the purple sky. The river was dark and quiet. Back at the camper, with waders drying and gear stowed, the talk was all plans for the next night. The fact that I hadn't landed a fish hardly entered my mind. 

"I think it's a big whitefish . . . then again perhaps not."

FLY FISHERMAN

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