

*The flies, times and places are all traditional.  
Only the methods have been changed to protect  
the angler against fishless days!*

## Early-Season Streamer Strategies

JOHN MERWIN  
MANAGING EDITOR

IN MUCH OF THE COUNTRY, A STREAMER OR BUCKTAIL is the early-season fly fisher's prime weapon—for the simple reason that it traditionally accounts for more trout more often at that time of year than anything else. The customary method of stream fishing with these patterns is three-quartering downstream, letting the fly swing, and then stripping it back upstream in a fashion which supposedly simulates a baitfish. This is relatively easy to do, and once in a while it even works. That's the basis for many traditions and it's the basis for this one.

But there's an art and science to this type of fishing which has been generally neglected in contemporary writing in favor of dries and nymphs. Dries in the very early season are generally out in most parts of the country. Fishing nymphs along the bottom of cold, early-season streams is a deadly method if properly done. But this bottom-sounding method is probably the single most difficult technique to master in all of fly-fishing; there are amazingly few who can do it well. It can also leave a lot of expensive flies stuck on the bottom.

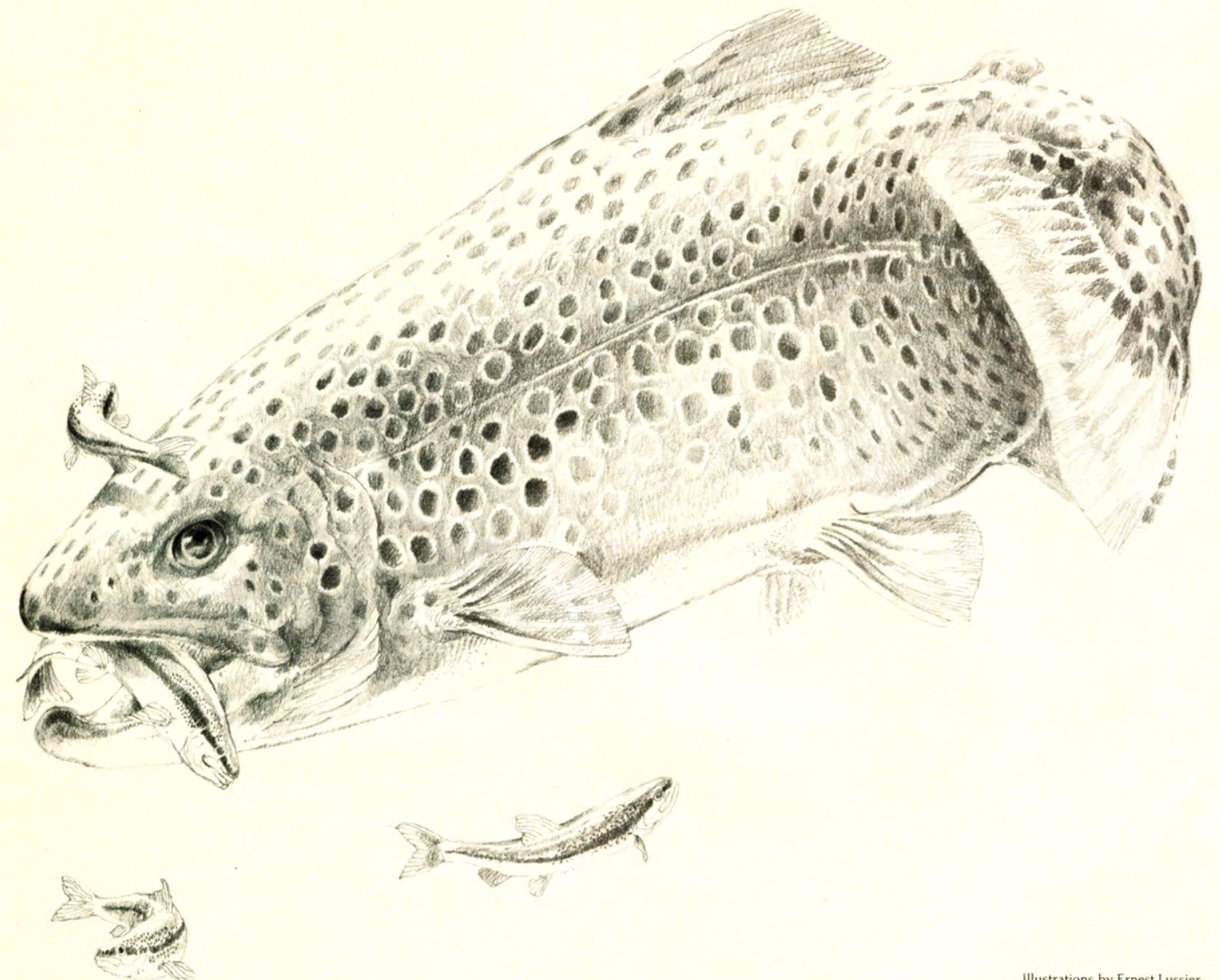
That leaves baitfish imitations. There are a number of specialized methods for fishing streamers and bucktails in moving water—sinking lines at mid-depth and bottom, high-speed retrieves, and others—all have their

place and time. I suspect, however, that I'm no different than many others in often stealing a few hours on an early-season stream with only a floating line and a few streamers. There are some streamer techniques particularly appropriate to floating lines that can pay off during the early season without the angler having to resort to the old across-and-down routine. For openers, stop dragging your fly through the water and start fishing it!

ONE KEY TO FISHING for stream trout with streamers and bucktails lies in getting the fly in the vicinity of a fish and keeping it there with the appearance of a natural. If you read nothing else this spring and go forth with that one sentence on your mind and some streamers on your vest, you will be likely to do well. Once again, get the fly in the vicinity of a fish and keep it there! Consider the following example.

You're rigged up with a Blue-Dun Matuka Streamer of about the same size and coloration as the dominant forage fish in this stream. Across the stream against the bank is a large rock, behind which is an eddy about four feet in diameter through which a portion of the current turns before shooting downstream. That old feeling in your stomach tells you with no uncertainty that there's a good trout in that dark hole.

Keeping your fly near the fish means you have to prevent the current from pulling your line—and the fly—out of the neighborhood. You have to control your line. The less line you have out, the better you can control it,



Illustrations by Ernest Lussier

so get as close as you comfortably can to that eddy without scaring whatever may be in there. Twenty-five to thirty feet away should be fine, with the eddy directly across-stream from your position.

Soak your fly in the water so that it will sink when you make your cast. Make your false casts gently to avoid drying out the fly. If you have to tug and yank the line to get the fly to sink when you should be fishing it, you're wasting time.

You know there's a trout there. The object is to keep the fly swimming naturally in front of him for as long as you can. Aim your cast so the fly will drop in the downstream portion of the eddy. While the line is straightening out in the air, make an upstream mend. When the fly and line hit the water, the line will be already mended. (After power has been applied on the forward cast and while the line is straightening out in the air, move the rod tip sharply with a semi-circular motion in

the direction you wish the line to be mended when it lands on the water.)

The fly, having landed at the lower end of the eddy, is being carried upstream. The line on the water in front of you is being carried rapidly downstream. If you don't do something—and fast—the current on the line belly is going to pull the fly out of the productive water and send it swinging rapidly downstream. That is, by the way, the traditional across-and-downstream method; so much for tradition.

Get the rod tip up—high. Get the line belly out of the main current flow and keep the fly in the eddy. Twitch the rod tip gently. A little twitch makes the hackles pulsate; your imitation comes alive. You stop; it stops. It rests and drifts a few inches. Twitch again, gently. The fly swims a few inches and then rests.

By now you've probably got the rod tip as high as you comfortably can and the accumulated slack be-

JOHN MERWIN raised his editor's eyebrows instead of a trout by including a comment about "stealing a few early-season hours" in the above article.

tween the rod and the fly is starting to be affected by the main current. This is where most people give up. But don't. You are, coincidentally, in the perfect position for a roll cast back into the eddy. Use an *underpowered* roll cast which won't actually lift the fly from the water but will throw some leader and line back into the eddy, and get you out of that awkward, reaching-for-the-sky rod position. Now you've done it, so get the rod tip up again and the line belly out of the current. Twitch gently, then rest for a split second. Twitch. Rest.

The fly has been swimming in lifelike fashion around the eddy for a couple of minutes. Your arm is starting to hurt from the strain of keeping that rod tip up and making those underpowered roll casts at the right split second.

The fly pulsates gently and rests. Pulsates. Rests. A brown trout resting on the bottom can't stand it any longer. You've got a slashing strike; the sore arm is worth it.

LET'S GO BACK and examine a few things, now that the fish has been landed and released. Obviously, you won't always be directly across-stream from the suspected lie of a trout. But I illustrated two related tools—mending and an underpowered roll cast—that you can use in many other situations, always with the goal of keeping that fly in productive water for as long as is possible. I'm sure that most anglers can take that basic bit of advice and start to adapt it to situations as they occur, be they straight across-stream or not.

If you don't know what the baitfish in your stream look like and how they behave, this technique is largely useless. On any stream, there are eddies and backwaters close to shore where baitfish can be observed. Set your rod against a tree, get in a comfortable position and invest some time in watching them.

A common Eastern baitfish, for example, is the dace, in several species. They often hang close to the surface near the banks. They occupy typical trout-holding water—but in miniature; the eddy behind a twig is typical. These fish will dart upstream a few inches, then drop back in the current without moving. Then dart. Then drift. They never, but never, streak 30–40 feet across-stream in a down-and-across direction as traditional angling technique would have it. They drift to the side. Swim up. Most importantly, they stay in about the same place. A successful imitation will do the same.

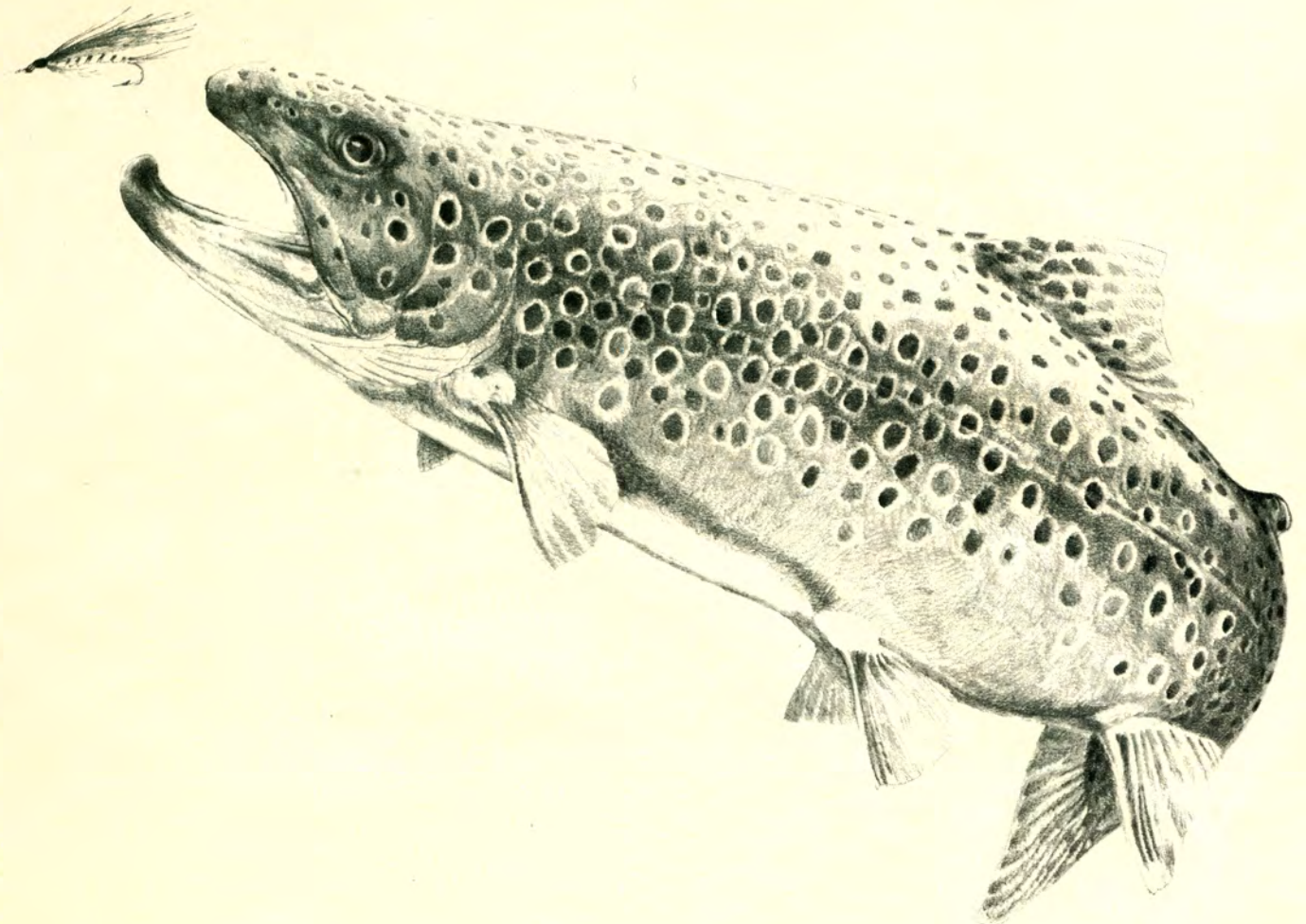
Having observed the baitfish, you may have realized that there's something unique about the way in which their imitations must be fished. Most dry flies are fished without any constantly added motion. The same applies to wets and nymphs. Forage fish, however, are always moving and your imitation will require constant attention and manipulation to keep it behaving naturally. It is in this type of fishing more than any other that the behavior of the fly in the water is a real extension of the angler through his rod and line. The dry-fly man is concerned with fly-form and a dead-drift. The streamer fisherman must endow his fly-form with life. At times, the concentration this requires on the part of the angler can be exhausting.

MUCH OF THIS TECHNIQUE depends on line control. There is no greater asset to line control than a long rod—the longer the better. For the past couple of seasons, I've used a pair of 9-foot graphite rods for this fishing; the use of one or the other was mainly dictated by anticipated fly size. One was a nine-foot rod for a five-weight line, which had a real edge in handling small streamers in streams up to about 40 feet in width. I have a tendency to use somewhat larger flies on heavier water and the answer was a nine-foot model for a six-weight line that handles flies up to #4 with no difficulty. It's important to note that the choice wasn't dictated by casting distance, which was about the same in both cases—the less the better—but by line weight and fly size. In both circumstances—small stream, small fly; bigger stream, bigger fly—the casting distance was often about the same, 40 feet tops. A weight-forward line was almost exclusively used in both cases. At the maximum fishing distance, most of the line belly was used in casting and, as fly size increases, the extra line-weight in the air is a real help in keeping casts under control, even at relatively short distances. Really large rivers or high winds will usually dictate even heavier rod/line combinations for the same reason.

Having fished streamers extensively with rods of cane, glass, and more recently graphite, I'd have to say that graphite seems to have the edge. A graphite rod in hand gives a sense of fine tuning; the connection between my hand and the fly somehow seems more precise, more sensitive. The rod-hand motion that I send to the fly seems to arrive there more quickly with graphite than with other materials. Much as I love some cane and glass rods, the more intimate and rapid response of graphite makes it my choice for stream fishing with bucktails. That doesn't mean, of course, that rods of other materials are inadequate. As always, by far the greatest responsibility for angling success lies with the angler—and not with the material of which his rod is made.

NOW THAT YOU'VE GOT THE BASIC IDEA DOWN, let's look at a couple of refinements. Suppose you'd swum that fly around the eddy until your arm couldn't take it anymore and you hadn't had a hit. One possible answer depends on what appears to be almost a universal relationship between predator and prey. Most predators will choose a victim within a group if that victim is behaving abnormally. For a trout and some baitfish, that can mean a couple of things. The trout may single out one baitfish if that baitfish tries desperately to escape. The trout may also attack if aroused by the behavior of a slowly-moving baitfish which is markedly different from normal. Anglers fishing with streamers can take advantage of both of those traits.

Let's take the first example of desperate escape and apply it to the eddy fished earlier. Instead of the fly swimming about normally near the surface, let it sink slowly as long as possible. Then, before drag starts, pull the fly to the surface in a series of very rapid twitches. If the fly makes a wake or skips along the top toward the



end of the retrieve, so much the better—so do baitfish when pursued.

If your trout hadn't responded earlier, he may well do so now and viciously! You should realize that you'll have considerable difficulty in retrieving the fly fast enough to take it away from a trout that wants it badly, so don't be bashful with the speed of your retrieve. A portion of the success of this method lies in making those rapid twitches at a consistent speed. The rapidity will trigger the fish's response, while the consistency will let him home-in on the fly.

If you *still* haven't had a hit, there's a last resort that works often enough to make it worthwhile. If you're using a standard streamer or bucktail, loop the leader under the wing. If you're using a Matuka-style streamer, tie it on with a riffling hitch. The object in either case is to make the fly spin or vibrate unnaturally as it *slowly* passes through the eddy. That, sometimes, is more than a poor trout can stand. Be careful though, because after a few tries this may start to twist your leader.

If you still haven't had a hit, you've been in that cold, early-season stream too long already. Head for some

hot coffee and then for another likely pocket where you can try it again.

THERE ARE A COUPLE of other incidentals I should toss in for those of you who, like me, can't wait for the hatches to start before you hang up that freshly painted "Gone Fishing" sign. Don't neglect fly patterns. You've got to match the size and general color of the baitfish prevalent in the stream you're fishing. There is no commercially available streamer pattern for stream fishing that more closely approximates the inherent action of most baitfish than a Matuka. The general shape and action of these flies, when properly tied, is absolutely tops. I do fish with traditional patterns because I enjoy them as old friends, but a Matuka has them beat hands-down in terms of consistent fish-taking ability.

Finally, if you get a visible refusal—a flash or a fish jumping over your fly—stop fishing and change flies. If you go in the right direction of size and color, and fish the next cast very, very carefully, your chances of a hit are good. If you don't get another positive response, your chances of a take will often diminish with successive casts.

SEASON OPENER • 1977

Volume 8 • Number Four

Price \$1.50

36562 IND

# Fly Fisherman

