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SOMETIMES IT CAN BE JUST AS REWARDING AND STIMULATING TO EXPERIENCE HISTORY AND TRADITION, AS IT IS TO DISCOVER SOMETHING NEW.

About ten years ago my fly-fishing enjoyment and success was significantly improved when a close friend, Davy Wotton, introduced me to the fascinating methods and flies of traditional wet-fly fishing. Surprisingly, this method is as effective and enjoyable as any current, popular fly-fishing technique.

Wotton, a professional fly fisher from Wales—one of the wellsprings of fly fishing—relocated to the U.S. several years ago. With a little encouragement, he eventually made his home in the Arkansas Ozarks, near the White River, where he now guides and teaches fly fishing. In a few short years, he has developed several effective flies and methods for Ozark trout streams, and his traditional wet-fly techniques top the list.

Traditional Wet-fly tactics and patterns

▶ A “cast” of three wet flies imitates different insects at all stages of life using Davy Wotton’s complete wet-fly approach.



Like most American fly fishers, I was less than enthusiastic about wet-fly fishing. As I soon learned, I only partially understood the full potential because Wotton’s methods combine dry, emerger, nymph, and streamer tactics.

It is possible, after each cast, to attract trout that are feeding on any of these four food forms—or even those that are not actively feeding at all. As soon as I got the basics of the flies, tackle, and methods, my enthusiasm began to grow in proportion to my increased catch numbers and size of fish.

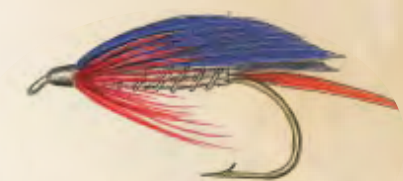
are attached correctly and presented with good technique, they can represent one or all of the above food forms during a single cast—therein lies their magic and centuries-old effectiveness.

Most of the best-known traditional wet flies were developed in the 1800s in England, and were used for brown trout, grayling, and sea trout (sea-run browns). When wet-fly fishing found its way to America, the flies were tied larger and more garishly colorful and used mainly for brook trout, land-locked salmon, and bass. After brown trout were

introduced, wet flies again were tied smaller and more imitative, similar to the English originals, because the browns were much more selective to size and pattern.

Getting Schooled

My early readings also recommended casting wet flies across and downstream, allowing them to swim and swing around into the current below. That’s correct but incomplete. When Wotton gave me my first traditional wet flies, I fished them across and down, and did indeed catch trout. He watched me for awhile and



put you a step ahead of the indicator crowd

Origin of the Species

Traditional wet flies are subsurface trout, grayling, and sea trout patterns developed over the centuries for the lakes and streams of the British Isles. Most of these flies have soft hackles, paired downwings, and neatly tied, conservative bodies and tails that resemble terrestrials or aquatic insects. They are different from nymphs which are tied primarily to imitate the nymphal versions of aquatic insects, and are most often dead-drifted.

A significant number of traditional wet flies are tied to attract rather than imitate. Wotton puts wet flies into three categories: attractors such as the Bloody Butcher or Alexandria; deceivers such as the Invicta, Whickham’s Fancy, and Leadwing Coachman; and imitators such as the Hare’s Ear, Woodcock, and Blue Dun.

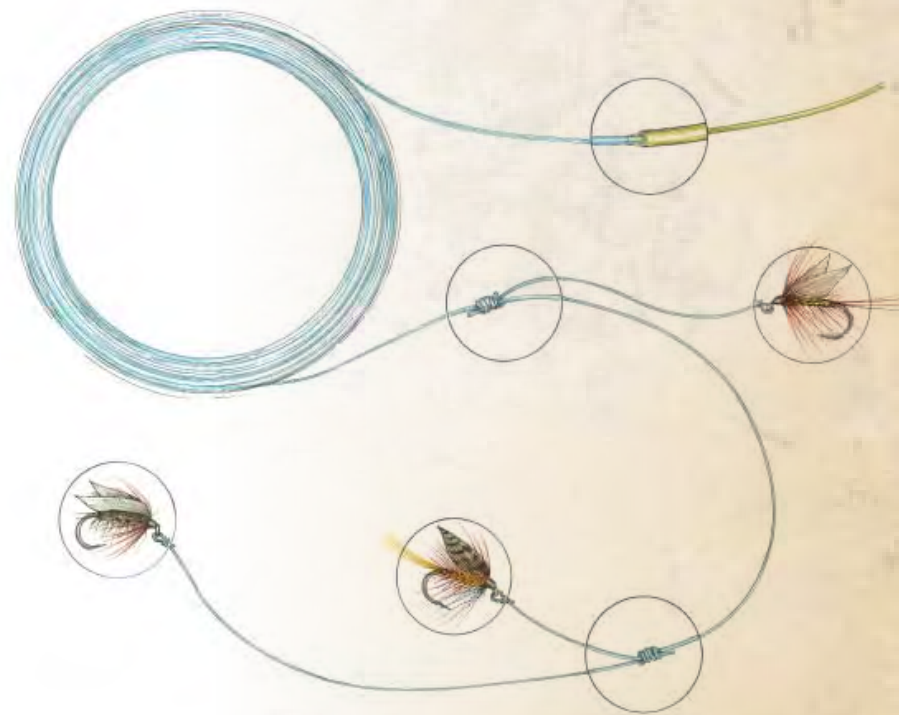
Traditional wet flies have the classic wet-fly shape, many have fascinating names, and I love to tie them. You might have noticed the red FLY FISHERMAN symbol used on the cover of this magazine and throughout, is a stylized traditional wet fly.

When I first began reading about fly fishing more than six decades ago, I learned that wet flies were imitations of drowned insects. This was only partly correct. They also suggest live, emerging insects, diving adults, and swimming insects as well as crustaceans and small fishes. Others simply attract and excite.

When two or three of these flies

▶ **Leader set-up** for three traditional wet flies. Consider making two or three extra three-fly leaders as backups.

1. Use a Zap-A-Gap knotless connection or a needle uni knot to connect a 7½-foot, 2X or 3X knotless, tapered leader.
2. Add a 20- to 30-inch tippet section using a double-surgeon knot. Leave a 6-inch dropper by not trimming the tag end of the leader tip.
3. The “bob fly” is the top fly on the leader.
4. Attach a second 20- to 30-inch section of 3X or 4X tippet leaving a second 6-inch dropper section.
5. The “dropper fly” is the middle fly.
6. The “tail fly” is the last fly. Use an open-loop uni-knot on all the flies for maximum movement.



then suggested that I watch him.

With a cast of three wet flies on his leader, he cast up and slightly across-stream in the same riffle I'd just fished. He initially worked them with a downstream, drag-free drift as though he was nymphing. Then, mending, he let them tighten a bit and slowly swing below us.

The whole time, Davy was working all three flies with his left hand and rod tip, creating an almost imperceptible breathing action. At the

end of the swing he slowly pulled the flies upstream 8 or 10 feet, then smoothly lifted his 11-foot rod and made the top fly skitter and bounce above the surface. At the same time, the middle fly made an irregular, vibrating, zigzag V wake and the bottom fly followed the other two about an inch below the surface. He repeated this emerger-skittering, down-up-down move at least once more each time before casting again.

Now the whole picture started to

come into shape for me. Wotton had fished the flies in almost every conceivable way within one cast and one presentation. He turned that stretch of water into a classroom and eventually took trout at all the positions—and on all three flies—and caught more and larger trout than I was able to hook using my “modern” techniques. His best was a beautiful 3-pound brown.

Since that eye-opening lesson I've enjoyed eight satisfying years of

► Davy Wotton's All-Purpose Traditional Wet-Fly Method

POSITION #1

1a. Present three flies up and across-stream

1b. Let the flies dead-drift. Watch for visible takes or a movement in the leader or line.

POSITION #2

2a. Continue to let flies drift past you, mending to eliminate drag. Add subtle animation to the flies with your rod tip.

2b. As flies drift below you, switch from two-point line control to single, left-hand line control and let the current begin to swim flies across the current.

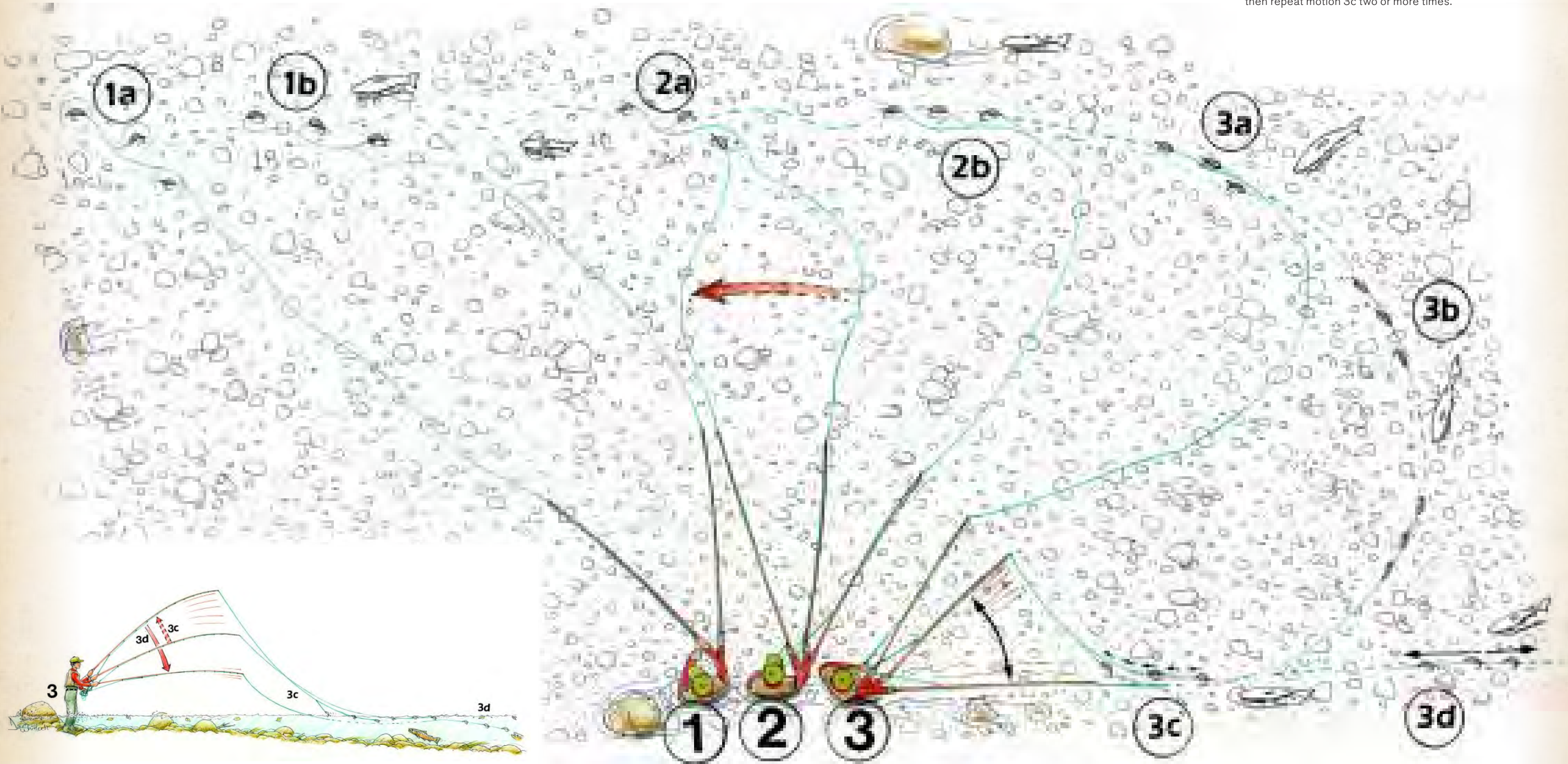
POSITION #3

3a. With the rod tip up, swim the flies across the current. Animate the flies with the rod and small hand pulls.

3b. At the end of the swing, use up-and-down rod-tip movements to tease the flies for 10 to 15 seconds.

3c. Pull the flies upstream using your line hand and rod-tip lifts, making the top fly skitter upstream at or above the surface. The middle fly should wake in the surface, while the last fly swims just below the surface.

3d. Lower the rod tip so the flies sink and drift downstream, then repeat motion 3c two or more times.



traditional wet-fly fishing, and several perspectives vividly stand out for me. First, of course, is that this method is an exciting, proactive method for almost all trout rivers. The average size of fish I catch usually runs larger than when using nymphs and dry flies in the same waters.

Most takes on wet flies are spine-tingling, impressive, and memorable. It is not uncommon to snap 3X tippet because of aggressive takes by big fish. You are able to use light tackle and small flies to get the same predatory rushes that otherwise would require a big streamer and heavy rod to experience.

What impresses me most is how well it works on the trout species it was originated for—big brown trout. Even during bright, mid-day conditions, browns often rise to two or three well-fished traditional wet flies at or near the surface.

After sundown, browns can become even more receptive to this combination of flies and method. A couple of seasons after I began using Wotton's flies, I tried them on a tough southern Missouri river where the wild rainbows and secretive browns challenge even the best local guides.

I picked a special-regulation section that is loaded with smart trout, and started by fishing upstream using dead-drifted dry flies and nymphs—I was nearly skunked. Then I fished back down that same half mile stretch with traditional wet flies and took the most fish I'd ever caught there. I remember thinking,

as I drove back home, that this "old" method was just too special not to share.

Wotton Method

Begin with a 4-, 5-, or 6-weight, 9- to 11-foot rod and a floating, double-taper line. The double taper excels for the casting, mending, and fly action used in this method.

Attach a knotless 7½ foot, 2X or 3X leader using a Zap-A-Gap connection or a needle uni-knot. Add tippet, and make one or two 6-inch dropper extensions by leaving a long tag end at each double-surgeon knot. Separate each knot by 20 or 30 inches. To the end of the tippet, tie a weighted, size 10 or 12 wet fly.

Onto the next one or two tippet extensions, add size 12 or 14, unweighted wet flies. My first choice is often a beadhead caddis emerger as the tail fly, then an Invicta on the middle position, and a Whickham's Fancy on the top.

Pick an area where there is a nice riffle or run with medium depth and current speed. It helps to be positive and expect great results. Work out about 30 to 40 feet of line and leader and cast with smooth, moderate speed, forming medium loops. Tight or tailing loops can result in a bird's nest of tangles.

Present the flies up and about 2 or 3 rod lengths across-stream from your position. Cast far enough from you that trout are not frightened by your presence, and so the flies can naturally drift and then swing to below your position.

At this first upstream position, focus and closely watch where the flies are and expect a dry-fly-type rise or subtle underwater swirl signifying a strike. Sometime you'll see the drift just hesitate and stop.

If you see a trout strike, or if the line or leader butt begins to slow, pause, or twitch, set the hook just as you would on a nymph. On this up-and-across position, the flies are just below the surface, so the takes are often visible.

After the flies drift past you, switch from two-point line control to a line-hand-only hold, and let the flies swim and swing across the current. With the tip up to absorb a shocking strike, begin to work the flies using very slight animation with small, rod-tip, heart-beat-like pulses using line-hand movements or right-to-left rod tip wobbles.

You should shift your focus to expecting to see or feel a hard pull or splashy surface strike. This is a critical point because if you get a strong strike and fail to release your grip on the line



► Top to bottom: Whickham's Fancy, Invicta, Hare's Ear, Alexandra, March Brown, Coachman, Bloody Butcher.

or make a hard-snap strike set, there's a good chance you'll lose one or all of your flies—and the fish. I know, because this position cost me a lot of flies and big fish until I cultivated a delicate, cool response.

A passive hook-set is critical on light tackle. It's similar to what a wet-fly Atlantic salmon or steelhead fly fisher uses to let the fish hook themselves.

Provided your flies get through this down-and-around swing, the next point is to let the flies pause directly below you for 5 to 10 seconds. Then impart a series of zig-zag, right-to-left, irregular pulses.

A fly taken against the taut leader at this point can be violent. Don't hesitate to give line from the coils in your left hand. I constantly preach to myself not to muscle up on these lunging, downstream assaults. Such strikes quickly overdose you with adrenaline, but you have to stay calm.

To continue the presentation, slowly raise your rod tip to make the top fly skitter above the water for several feet. Then smoothly lower the rod tip to allow the flies to drift downstream, sinking into the emerger position.

Repeat this lifting and skittering procedure once or twice. Using two or three wet flies, this last technique can be awesome when big fish are whacking caddis emergers, egg-laying adult caddis, or mayflies.

Move your feet steadily to cover the water. After a half hour or so of fishing this complete method, if one zone seems particularly productive, abbreviate the other zones and focus mainly on that section of the technique. For instance, if the skittering seems to be moving more fish, focus on that, and do less dead-drifting. As fish preferences eventually change, you'll want to go back to the complete, multi-zone fishing.

Choosing a Fly

Patterns and sizes don't seem to be as critical for wet-fly fishing as they are when dry-fly fishing and nymphing, but if you are not raising fish to your expectations, begin experimenting with a complete menu.

When changing flies, or when break-offs shorten your dropper lengths, clip off the short section and tie on a new dropper to the leader using a uni-knot just above the surgeon's knot. Then slide the new dropper section down against the original double-surgeon's knot.

The end wet fly often hooks most of the fish, but not all of them. Wotton believes that using three different flies has a teamwork effect and I agree. I suspect one fly attracts, the next excites, and another mimics food. When choosing traditional wet-fly patterns or colors, I start with one bright fly, a black fly, and a shiny-metallic fly or in natural tones, one dark, one medium, and one light-colored fly.

Traditional wet-fly fishing is effective in most freestone rivers like the Delaware, Madison, Green, Yellowstone, Snake, Gallatin, and also in tailwaters like the White (Arkansas), Bighorn, and Missouri rivers.

It works best in moderate to fast flow, and where the surface is broken with chop, foam, or wavelets. I consider this a season-long technique that works well at all but the most extreme low and high water levels. When the water is above normal and not too off-colored, I use a clear, intermediate fly line and fish the flies deeper and a little slower on a swing and then retrieve back upstream.

It seems, here in America, we are always looking for something new. Traditional wet-fly fishing is not historically new, but for those of us who are open-minded enough to try something old-fashioned, there's a world of new challenge and fun waiting. 🐟

Contributing editors Dave and Emily Whitlock operate a fly-fishing school in Oklahoma (davewhitlock.com). Contact Davy Wotton at davyfly@ozarkmountains.com.



► Davy Wotton adapted his traditional British Isles wet-fly techniques to U.S. rivers and streams.