

Fall River

LANI WALLER

Photographs by R. Valentine Atkinson



INTERSTATE HIGHWAY 5 leaves much of urban California behind just outside the eastern outskirts of Sacramento. For the next 120 miles the freeway snakes its way toward the Oregon border. Flanked by the rugged Sierra Nevada to the east, and the damp coastal forests of Mendocino to the west, the ribbon of concrete runs on monotonously. Only the textured patterns of the central valley farmlands and the distant, smoky silhouettes of the Sierra Nevada offer relief from the steady run northward.

Just outside the town of Redbluff things begin to change. The farmlands of the valley recede and are replaced by low rolling hills and the fractured

LANI WALLER is FFM's West Coast Field Editor.

R. VALENTINE ATKINSON is a free-lance photographer based in San Francisco.

structure of rocky uplifts that signal the beginning of the interior mountain country of northern California.

On a map, names like Battle Creek, Oak Run, Palo Verde and Montgomery Creek begin to replace more well-known titles, while in the distance the cleanly focused silhouette of Mount Lassen emerges suddenly from a backdrop of pastel-colored mountains that extend to Oregon.

Forty miles farther north you arrive at the city of Redding, surrounded on three sides by immense tracts of national forests and several important wilderness areas. This region marks the point at which most northern Californians begin to take their trout fishing seriously.

Just outside of Redding, Highway 299 leaves the city and serpentine westward toward the Cascade Mountains, some fifty miles distant.

There are several small towns and villages along this route, carved out of the California wilderness a century ago, and the old stone buildings and weathered facades carry with them a reminder of California's rich and unusual history. Forests here remain mostly intact, and unspoiled tracts of evergreens still surround the small communities, much as they have for generations. This area contains some of the finest trout fishing in the state, if not the West, and most serious California trout fishermen consider it with the same reverence other anglers have for their favored streams in upstate New York, Yellowstone National Park and Wyoming.

Of the many streams in the area, two receive the most attention and the most publicity: Hat Creek and Fall River. Of these two, Fall River remains the favorite of many knowledgeable

anglers and is highly respected by the best fly fishermen in California.

Fall River is not an easy river to fish successfully. Its moods and character remind me of the Firehole River in Wyoming. It can be as temperamental, if not more so.

Fall River is a pastoral stream, its broad currents winding slowly through soft farmlands and fertile pastures—the 10,000-foot peak of Lassen Volcanic National Park, although some 30 miles away, is visible from the streambanks as you fish. Along the river a legacy of early European settlers is evident in the weathered and splintered barns and in the intricate facades of cleanly whitewashed farmhouses.

Flowing at an even rate and with only a slight gradient, the river's flat surface appears deceptively simple. What seems at first like a

Fall River

steady and uniform flow is actually a collection of lesser, agonizingly complicated currents and conflicting channels that require close attention and almost perfect presentations. There is no pocketwater and little broken water to cover mistakes. The pools, slicks and runs are absolutely clear, and under a bright sky the light-colored gravel bottom illuminates the stream with a deceiving light and translucency. Each bottom stone is clearly defined and feeding trout seem suspended in midair.

There are big trout here too. Usually they are, like large trout anywhere, shy and secretive in their habits. A close friend has confessed of stowing his tackle and drifting downstream in his skiff, just searching. Using Polaroid glasses and a quiet approach, he has spotted rainbow that "would go into double figures and many trout in the two- to four-pound range."

I, too, have seen very large trout in the river. Late at night, sitting alone in my skiff anchored quietly in the center of the stream, I have seen immense rainbow boiling and porpoising in the reflected light of a full moon. At certain times of the year the large trout roll and thrash for newly hatched, moth-size yellow drake duns. At such times I have heard the crack and rattle of shoreline reeds moving against one another, and I know that something other than a beaver or muskrat is out there in the darkness—feeding. It is an unforgettable experience, and only the combination of a shot of good brandy followed by a smoke and the long row back to the car seems sufficient to settle the nerves.

FALL RIVER HATCHES ARE PROLIFIC and have made the stream famous among dry-fly fishermen. These hatches can be complex and difficult to understand. Multiple hatches often appear and during such periods several insect species may be on the water, usually with only one being actively taken by the trout. It makes for interesting fishing, especially when the spent bodies of an earlier hatch overlap with freshly hatching insects and the angler must determine which insect is actually being taken. Close observation and patience is required, and knowledgeable anglers look to the riseforms for solutions to the problem. As a friend who guides the river says: "It can be tough, yet it can be the finest, most challenging dry-fly fishing available anywhere."

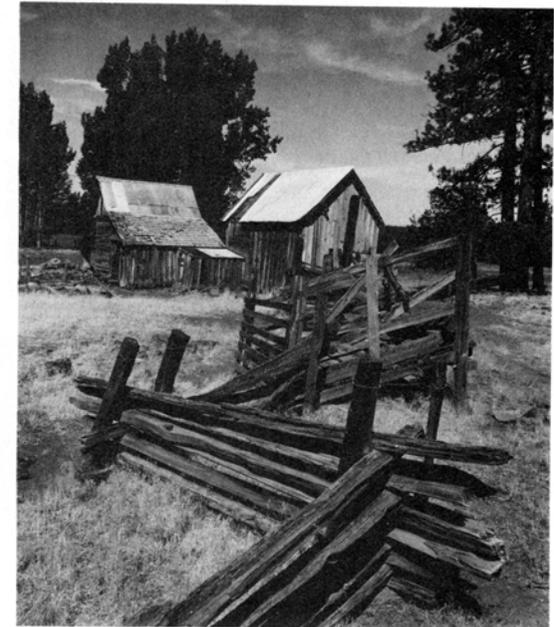
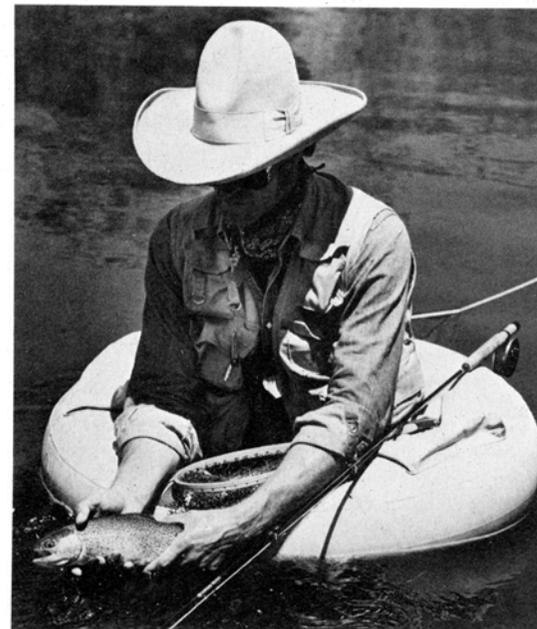


The Fall River hatches and the trout that respond to them have influenced some of the finest fly-tying in the Western United States. Local patterns are both effective and beautifully designed, and visiting anglers should check local sources for pattern selection, hatch activity and schedules. The range of insect activity and the trout's response to them can be many and bewilderingly specific.

Fortunately these hatches are fairly stable, and follow certain rough timetables from year to year. Most local fly shop proprietors know the hatching periods, and they are a big help to visiting anglers.

Favored dry-fly patterns include the no-hackle series in various shades of tan, gray and olive, as well as common spinner patterns in #16 through #20. These patterns ride well in the surface film and present a realistic silhouette. Traditional patterns with orthodox hackling are fine, but there are times when, despite the best of presentations, they simply don't work on fish that are keyed in on a specific insect. Both Eastern and Western orthodox patterns are fished on the stream, however, and favorites include the Adams, Quill Gordon, Blue Dun, Light Cahill and the ever-present Horner Deerhair Fly or Humpy (#14-#20).

Although wet-fly fishing has lagged in its development on northern California waters, as it has elsewhere, standard patterns such as André



Hatches

The following hatch information was provided by Chuck Stranahan of Hat Creek Anglers, Burney, California.

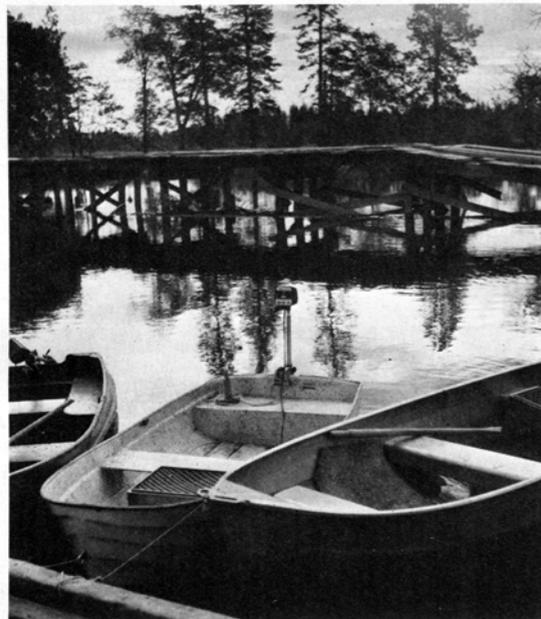
Baetis: Intermittent and localized hatches during the spring and fall. The hatches are normally steady from mid-September through October.

Infrequens: Pale morning duns start mid-June and continue into July and August, followed and overlapped by *inermis*. Several species of pale morning duns hatch throughout the season.

Tricorythodes and *Caenis*: August and September.

Hexagenia: Appears late June through mid-July.

Fall River



limited, and most anglers launch their skiffs at an access and drift downstream, fishing as they go. Electric motors and oars are used for the return from a day's fishing.

Boat techniques on the Fall River are important. Most fly fishermen position their skiffs to insure the best possible fly drift. Experienced fishermen bypass long river stretches and fish where hatches are expected, concentrating their efforts on insect-active water. The boat fishing actually gives the angler an advantage since fish are spotted more easily from the higher vantage point a skiff provides and the angler can choose from several alternative casting positions.

This boat advantage is needed on the Fall. The trout, especially the large fish, see many anglers and hundreds of patterns each season and the clear waters and steady currents provide the fish with an excellent view of both the angler's offering and a myriad of floating naturals. Poised in their feeding lanes, these feeders exhibit all the behavior of ultra-selective trout.

Puyans's nymphs and Frank Sawyer's Spring Creek series have continuing popularity on Fall River. The Pheasant-Tail Nymph, Zug-Bug and Hair's Ear Nymph are also popular. In #14 to #18 these patterns cover most of the essentials. However, visiting anglers should check with local fly shops to obtain the latest on hatches and "hot" patterns.

Spring begins the season on Fall River, and as water temperatures rise, and the season develops, hatches become longer and more prolific. The stream is famous for its daytime dry-fly fishing in June and the fishing then is both pleasant and productive. Hatches remain consistent throughout the season and into September.

The challenge of the water coupled with a rich tableau of insect life would be interesting enough, but Fall River has another fascinating aspect—rising trout. Due to the nature of the river, one can approach rhythmically-feeding large trout throughout long stream sections. If one moves carefully, following the migrations and various insect hatches, he can work over good rainbow and observe their feeding habits firsthand.

BECAUSE OF THE UNIQUE ATTRIBUTES of this fishing, certain unorthodox techniques have developed. The river is fished almost exclusively from skiffs or prams, for almost all of the river runs through private property. Access points are

THE FUSSIEST TROUT are covered by a downstream presentation, a deadly technique considered essential by river regulars. You anchor the skiff upstream and slightly to one side of the fish's feeding lane. The cast is normally made in one of two ways.

The first method calls for a false-cast made longer than required to reach the fish. On the final delivery you abruptly stop the rod at about 11 o'clock and wiggle the tip from side to side as the line falls to the water. When done properly, the cast creates zig-zag curves in the line that absorb the current's drag. The fly, leader and line drift into the feeding trout's position just prior to straightening out. It's tricky—the problem is with casting accuracy—but it works.

The second approach is to make the cast deliberately short. You spot the trout's position and the direction of the currents. Then, holding the rod tip low, almost horizontal or below horizontal, you shake out extra line by wagging the rod back and forth, simultaneously stripping extra line. The line travels downstream in a series of relaxed curves and the fly floats drag-free. Line, leader and fly positions can be altered right or left by mending the line to one side or the other, but always well before the trout sees the fly. Both techniques show the fly first. By using long leaders and fine leader points you can achieve nearly perfect drifts.

Fall River

After the fly has passed the trout and you are ready to pick up, if the drifting line floats too close, the pick-up will put him down. Long leaders, up to eighteen feet, help keep the line point well back from the trout's sight.

A favorite technique is to wait until the fly has just passed the trout's tail. Then, keeping the rod low, I throw an exaggerated mend in the line (to my side of his feeding position) so the current pushes the line off to the side. If I mend this way just after the floating fly has slipped past the trout, and well in advance of the tip of the line reaching the immediate vicinity of the fish, the entire line, leader and fly quietly "swim" out of the way where they can be stripped in for another presentation.

Presentation is more than half the game. Upstream or cross-stream offerings are effective, but most fly fishermen are right handed and favor the left stream side (looking upstream). This approach calls for a right-hooking cast, more difficult to throw (for a right hander) than a left-hooking cast. Downstream presentation answers this problem.

Fall River anglers favor specific tackle for their fishing. For dry-fly angling long rods with soft tips to maximize line control and protect delicate tippets on the strike are preferred. Favored line weights are four and five, or a six or seven for windy days.

LEADERS FOR FALL RIVER fishing have special importance. Their role in presentation is critical; length, proportions and tippet should be given careful attention. A leader, no matter what its length, should be approximately sixty percent butt portion, ten percent gradation and thirty percent tippet, including those instances when you extend the leader length up to as much as eighteen feet. These figures can be juggled around some, but this formula is almost always sound.

As for tippets, the arguments I hear revolve around length versus diameter. Some anglers when working over selective fish drop their tippets to small diameters, as fine as 8X, (diameter .003 and 1-pound test). This will fool a trout, but it's fine stuff and difficult to strike a fish without breakage. Also, overly light tippets only prolong the fish's struggle, sometimes causing fatal exhaustion.

The alternative is to use heavier and longer tippets that produce as many strikes, provide a margin against breakage and give more control with struggling fish.

FALL RIVER FISHING IS SO FINE that demands by traveling fishermen on the resource have been heavy. Unfortunately, not all fishermen sense the river's importance, and sharp divisions in management philosophy, use and access have resulted. Most people *do* seem to care greatly about the river, however, and it is guarded jealously by the landowners along its banks. Several years ago I had the pleasure of meeting a man who, as both landowner and angler, seems to epitomize the best kind of concern.

Harley Nuerberg knows and respects the river as few others do. He speaks of the times when four-and five-pound trout were common and could sometimes be seen from his back porch, rolling in the twilight and softly porpoising for insects against the brushy shoreline of the far bank.

"Things have changed," he told me one afternoon, "but it's still good," and he told stories of his last thirty years on the river.

During the long conversation his mannerisms often changed and his voice would soften as he spoke of the river on which he has spent so much of his life. He is a gentleman of the old school and at the end of our conversation he offered advice on where to fish that evening.

Thanking him, I left for the evening's fishing. It was a beautiful, calm afternoon with only a slight, warm breeze on the water. As he had predicted, the insects began hatching near my skiff and the fishing was good. I kept two small trout for supper, and released several good fish.

Just at dark the hatch stopped. I lingered, sitting at anchor, listening and watching the river change in the darkness. Sometime later the moon rose over the basin rim and the dark currents passing my boat looked much different than I had remembered them that afternoon.

It was after midnight when I finally drew the oars and began the long row back to my car. As the boat pushed through the current and into the darkness I watched the pull of the oars scatter reflected moonbeams across the water's surface and I couldn't help but think about the life of the stream, its importance, and all the many relationships, attachments and claims that had formed around it. I recalled the look in Harley's eyes as he spoke so clearly about something that had captivated him for over thirty years.

As the skiff finally touched shore and I stepped out onto the moist gravel, it occurred to me that in a very real sense a river such as this always belongs to those who care for it.

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