



*When the smaller fish are rising to
drys, the larger trout aren't
sleeping . . .*

Fishing the Streamer During a Hatch

ART LEE

WHEN YOU FISH EVERY DAY, you become inclined to risk your time. You try something new, and if it bombs, there's always tomorrow. Not so when fishing is limited to weekends, days off or brief vacations. Those of us who have little time to fish are more apt to play it safe — to stick to the tried and true — especially if they measure success in numbers of fish. This article is for trout fishermen to whom the count isn't important. It's for anglers concerned, as the French say, *à fond*, to the hilt, with the big ones. If you covet big trout, read on. If not, read on anyway. The day is sure to come.

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Hooking big trout, particularly in the East, isn't easy. Luck plays little or no part in it. The more you fish the better your chances, but consistent success requires undivided attention. You must forget many things you like to do best and throw away the old rules you find most comfortable. Big trout seldom play by them.

Some big trout, notably browns, feed exclusively at night, and if you want to catch them, you won't learn much about it from me. Staggering around in the dark after fish I can't see once they're hooked is my idea of doing nothing. I have better things to do with my nights — but that's another story. Many big trout, however, including browns, are also daytime feeders. The big ones feed underneath while we are distracted by smaller ones sucking at the surface. If you could get a cutaway view of each pool you fish, you'd be surprised what goes on at the height of a hatch.

EXPERIENCE TEACHES ME that dry-fly fishing is essentially an inefficient means to catch big trout, like drawing manure in tablespoons. I fish just enough, both on the surface and underneath, to disbelieve all portrayals of big trout as predominately insect eaters. These fish are absolute masters of their living space and will take the most food, which is plenty, at the least expense of effort possible. In most situations, that translates into eating other fish.

When we were kids growing up on little Indian Creek we let the pools tell us where the biggest trout held. Even if the big ones seldom showed by day, we knew where they were, because few minnows, suckers or other trout would be found nearby. One way or another the big trout usually ended up on the banks, and smaller fish would fill the void until another big fish staked its claim. I saw the cycle repeated perhaps a dozen times and learned to apply its lesson to seeking the biggest fish a stream has to offer by showing them flies to represent what they should want to eat most.

It helps to understand everything that develops in a pool while all that's apparent is surface feeding. Feeding begins underwater prior to a hatch. Nymphs and emergers drift through, enough to trigger interest among small trout and so-called rough fish. By the time a hatch begins, many fish have already claimed regular feeding stations fixed by the pool's established pecking order. Trout and other species jockey for the first flies to come off, but as the emergence strengthens, they settle into feeding, not unlike livestock at the trough. Even the rhythm becomes predictable as the fish are preoccupied with the hatch, and it is then they are easiest to approach and to catch if the size, pattern and presentation of

fly you cast is correct. Thus distracted, however, the angler is not the only predator to which surface-feeding fish are vulnerable.

UNTIL THE FULL ARRANGEMENT of feeding is composed, a big trout may lie under a bank apparently unconcerned. But now it slides into the current and holds near the bottom, gently finning. Small fish nearby move away but soon take up new feeding stations, perhaps just a yard farther off. The big fish rests as still as possible. It has learned to be patient like a cat, and before long it is ignored by the fish gorging themselves on the drifting duns. The big trout pays no attention to the flies floating by overhead. It has been a long time since it bothered with them, although once it rose to the flies with the carelessness of a fat chub — such as the one that is now bobbing up and down like a yo-yo, drifting closer to the big trout by inches with each return from the top. The big trout betrays no excitement, but it is watching the chub, measuring the decreasing distance with a practiced eye, always patient, certain, fixed. Soon, in one rush that will take only seconds, the chub will die, first impaled on the teeth and crushed by the jaws, and finally turned indifferently in the mouth and swallowed in the darkness back under the bank.

Unless you swim with the fish, you will seldom see such dramatic episodes, although they are likely more routine than even creel-census takers could guess. Few big fish rise, and those that show just once to take your breath away and then are gone for good probably don't come for floating flies at all, but for fish feeding on the flies. So when feeding to a hatch peaks, you must decide which way you want to go — after the many you know are there because you see them or the few whose existence you must take on faith. If you like trout that advertise, stick to dries at the height of a hatch. But if you *believe*, switch to streamers.

I'VE CAUGHT MANY MORE big trout fishing streamers during hatches than with dries cast to occasional risers, which should be proof enough the technique works. It has worked on numerous Eastern rivers and streams and elsewhere, including a couple of spots where I might have gotten the boot if the regulars had doped out the depths of my "research." The technique was inspired by youthful observation, a little logic, some chubs I hooked that big trout thumped before I could shag them, and, ultimately, when friend and colleague, Keith Gardner, wrote: "I am supposed to be a trout's nemesis, after all, not its butler." To those sure to challenge the theory, I'll concede skipping all scientific journals whatsoever. Instead, I've relied on experience, which, when all

the pages have faded, I'm convinced is the best teacher anyway.

The feeding habits of big trout relative to smaller ones seem to depend on the average-size fish supported by individual rivers and streams. There is no rule that trout of a certain size suddenly turn from easy rising to killing other fish. A big cannibal brown on the little Indian Creek might have been stretched to fifteen inches against a stock average of seven or eight. However, I was shown a river last summer where fifteen-inch fish were small; browns averaged at least four pounds, big fish eight to ten. The four-pounders of this river rose easily to an Adams, properly presented, but to hook the big ones you had to offer something fit for their size, like a Black Ghost streamer on a #2-#4 hook, 8XL.

As a boy with a lot of time to fish, I was taught the pattern of fly or streamer was not as important as knowing how to fish it. Later, when work limited my fishing, I slid into "biologizing" and was converted to precise representation, complete with a catalog of Latin names and a supply of urine-stained underbelly fur. Now that I'm fishing two hundred days or so a year again, I'm back to where I began — although my vest is still heavier than it ought to be.

Developing precise imitations can be satisfying; and they work. To catch big trout, however, matching the minnow is no more necessary than I believe matching the hatch to be, and you can get into trouble when you start to confuse creativity at the tying vise with technique on the river. A streamer must behave like a fish — a feeding fish, a distracted fish, a frightened fish, a wounded fish or a just-plain-stupid fish that gets too close to a big trout out to eat it. Your first concern, therefore, should be proper presentation, followed by streamer shape and silhouette and finally, if you have the time to fool around, artistry at the vise. A well-fished Mickey Finn, you will learn, hooks more big trout than a poorly fished Black-Nose Dace sporting gills and lacquer eyeballs.

If I could fish only one streamer pattern to big brown trout, give me the Black Ghost on a 1/0-#14 hook. I use it now almost exclusively because Walt Dette, the great Catskill fly tier, has always liked it best, and I have faith in him. The pattern works well for me, better than any I've tried on a day-to-day basis, although I won't push it too hard, because my respect for it, like respect for most flies, is largely a subjective thing. Other patterns I'm sure would work just as well, given equal water. I dress numerous variations of the fly, but mostly because repetitive fly-tying bores my backside off. All variations maintain the black, white and yellow mix of the traditional Black Ghost. If I had to give any variation an

edge for effectiveness, it would probably be one with a marabou wing, but that, too, may be because my faith in it gives it more river time when conditions are right.

YOU CAN'T SEE MOST big trout working on fish distracted by a hatch, so you will often sacrifice the ease of fishing a floating line to get down to them. Except in high water, when fast-sinking lines help, a sinking tip performs well behind leaders no longer than 7½ feet, shorter when practical, and flies weighted for conditions. Big trout aren't leader shy when they have a meal such as a streamer to home on, even on waters noted for fidgety trout, such as Pennsylvania's name limestone, the Letort. To insure a straight pull, absorb shock and to minimize breakoffs, streamers should be tied to tippets as heavy as 0X or 1X with double turtel knots. Rods should be long and powerful to present large streamers long distances without false casting and, of course, to bull big trout once you get them on.

To hunt up big trout, the more time your streamer spends in the water the better. It will hook no fish in the air, before or behind you. Try to pick it up and lay it down without false casting. False casts only dry flies off and waste fishing time. Probe places experience teaches you big trout lie when feeding deep. The edges of eddies with good cover nearby, pockets tight to banks, areas where concentrations of small fish rise during hatches, spots like underwater box canyons where big fish might trap small ones. Mark places you see big fish rise for special attention. Big trout are creatures of habit.

Vary presentation, fly speed and depth of retrieve. Slap streamers tight to banks. Mend line often and permit flies to hang carelessly in the current. Twitch them. Back them off. Tumble them through likely spots, dead drift. Whistle them across the surface. If you turn a big fish that doesn't take, rest it before giving it another look. Try ruffle-hitching your largest streamers. Fish through pools with small streamers, then back through them with large ones. When a big trout rolls, go right for it. Offer a trout a long look first, then a quick peekaboo. If it won't play, bonk the fish right on the head with your streamer. Big trout don't like little fish on their turf.

If a stream holds trout, chances are it holds some big ones — no matter how heavy fishing pressure may be. In the end it becomes a matter of fishing hard and long, covering as much water as you can, meticulously, with a plan. Then, if you can resist playing follow-the-leader when most leaders are tipped with dry flies, your success will come just as surely as the big ones keep making meals out of the little ones.

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