

# Fluorescent Flies

*A radical approach that defies long-held beliefs and deceives trout*

GEORGE W. HARVEY

WHEN I STARTED fishing dry flies many years ago, it was rare to find another fly fisherman drifting a floating fly. Fly fishermen were few and far between and when you did run across one, he would be fishing a cast of two or three snelled wet flies looped on a six-and-a-half- or seven-foot heavy leader.

During my youth all of my fishing was for brook trout in the freestone streams of north-central Pennsylvania. The trout were so plentiful that even when there was a heavy hatch of caddis or mayflies the fish rarely were selective and would take almost any artificial. On most of the streams I fished, one could catch 100 or more legal fish a day, with tackle that was crude by today's standards.

In the late spring of 1927, I travelled to Centre County, Pa. to fish Spring Creek with Ab Larson, one of the few dry-fly fishermen I knew. It was the first limestone stream I had ever fished, and it had a mixed population of stream-bred brook and brown trout, but the browns predominated.

We camped at Benner Spring, about half way between Bellefonte and Lemont. During the following two days I experienced the heaviest hatch of mayflies and the most rising trout I had ever seen. The first evening below the confluence of Benner Spring and Spring Creek one could stand and without moving, cast over several hundred fish.

I was using the same equipment and flies I used for brook trout in the northern-tier streams and was able to catch only a few small brook trout. The browns ignored everything I tried. The naturals looked like Light Cahills but were smaller and I didn't have any smaller than a #12. I was using a seven-and-a-half-foot silkworm-gut leader tapered to about a 2X. It was just too heavy. The following week I tried some small Cahills on #16 hooks and bought a few dozen 3X and 4X gut tippet. That weekend we returned to the same place and I lengthened my leader with a 4X tippet for the smaller Cahills. Ab and I both caught our limit of trout, about half were browns, the most browns I had ever caught!

After that experience I paid attention to emergence times and dates of all the hatches I observed with particular attention to the size and color of all the naturals. Until the 1973

season I duplicated them as closely as possible.

Since I retired that year I have had time to really experiment and put together new techniques in fly fishing and fly tying. Some of those experiments have changed life-long beliefs that most anglers still accept as hard, cold fact.

In the past I believed that exact imitations of natural insects—aquatic or terrestrial—were of the utmost importance, especially size and color. I still believe that to be true in most cases. Body and hackle colors are essential in imitating the natural insects. However, I am now certain that *wing color does not make any difference to trout*.

Though I am not certain that wings are necessary at all, I still tie all my flies with wings because they are more pleasing to my eye.

For the past two years I have had an eye problem that makes it difficult to see and follow a dry fly floating on the surface. The problem has been especially troublesome with the smaller size flies. And in some light conditions I could not see the fly at all. All I could do was strike when I saw a rise where I thought my fly should be. It was also difficult to see whether I was getting a drag-free float, the most important element in dry-fly fishing.

Forty years ago I tied a Green Drake pattern using fluorescent calf tail for wings and I was able to see the fly better than any other pattern I had tied before. I still use the same pattern, as do many others who have seen it perform.

Until the spring of 1983 I had never used any other fluorescent material for wings. Then in May of 1983 I was given some Metz hen saddle patches dyed fluorescent orange, hot pink, yellow and green. Since I had been using hen saddle feathers for wings on the dry-fly patterns I most frequently use, I decided to try using fluorescent wings to see if they would help me to see the flies, and to find out how the trout would react to the brilliant colors.

The first fly I experimented with was a deer-hair ant; I wanted to see how the bright burnt wing compared with the fluorescent red lacquer I had been using on the back to make the fly more visible. The first wing I tied on was hot pink. I could see the fly twice as far away as the lacquered version and the wing was still visible when the deer hair was practically torn apart. That discovery alone was worth the experiment because deer-hair ants are actually better fish takers when they are broken up and fuzzy looking.

It was a phenomenal experience to see trout rise and take my fluorescent flies without any

hesitation. The best part was that I could see the flies in quiet or riffly water and missed very few rises. It turned the frustration I had been experiencing into delightful days astream once again.

THE ADAMS, QUILL GORDON and Hendrickson flies have always been on my list of favorite patterns but they were very difficult for me to see, so I tied the flies according to the original pattern but substituted the hot-pink divided wings in place of the barred Plymouth Rock wings on the Adams and the wood-duck divided wings on the Quill Gordon and Hendrickson. I alternated using the original patterns with the fluorescent winged flies and found they worked equally well!

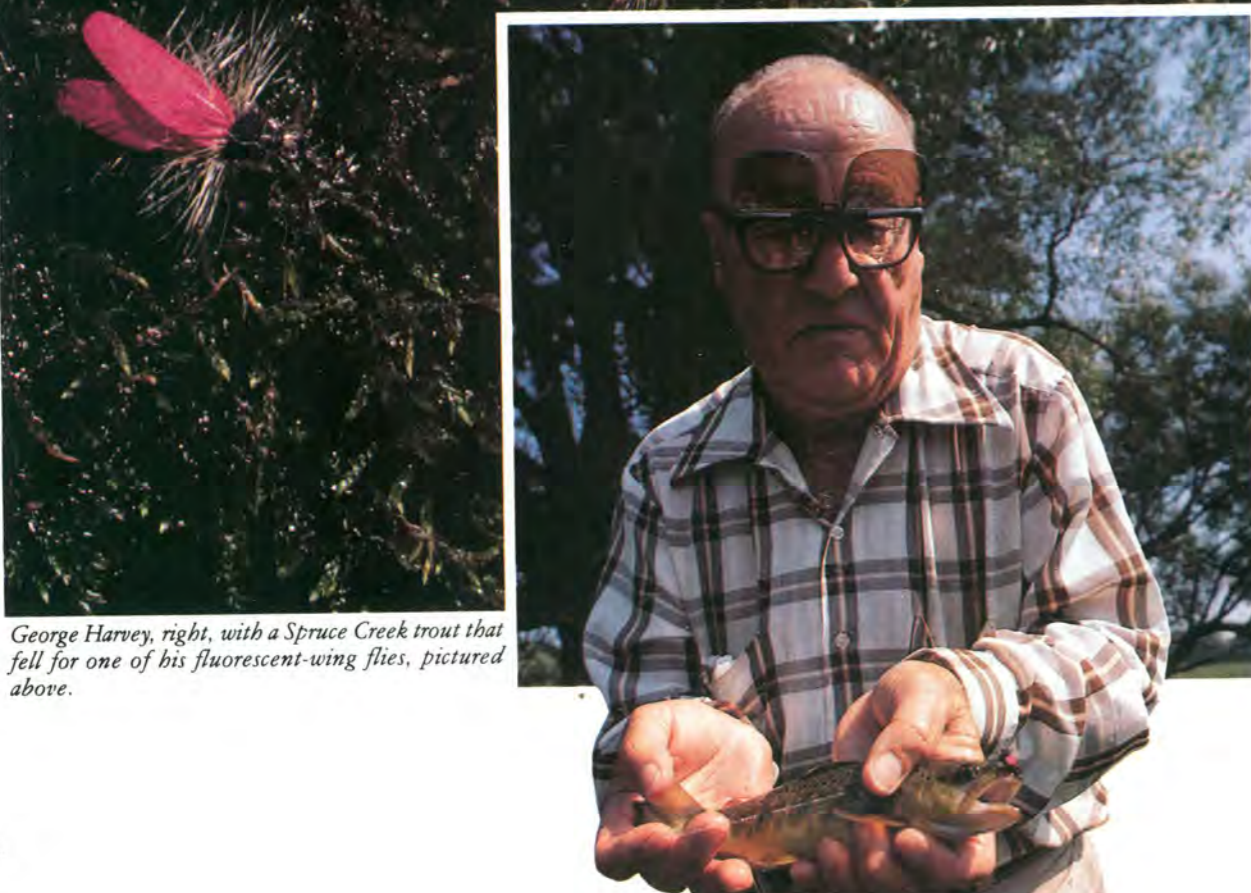
The hatch I enjoy the most during the trout season is the *Tricorythodes*. Trout are more selective to this hatch than any other. When the trico came on full blast on Spruce Creek during the last week in July I really had a problem. I couldn't see the tiny flies except on very quiet water or smooth glides. Again I used the fluorescent wings on both the dun and spinner, and because I could see the fly much better, I had the best season in years.

I tied fluorescent divided wings on all the flies I use, not only in Pennsylvania but also for the most productive patterns I fish in the West Yellowstone area. Fishing a caddis on the Madison below Quake Lake, I could follow the fluorescent hot-pink fly in the faster, riffly and pocket water and as a result I could catch almost every rising trout.

On many small mountain streams, overgrown with rhododendron and other trees and shrubs, the light can be so dim that it is difficult to see a fly beneath the foliage. Joe Humphreys and I gave the fluorescent-wing deer-hair ants a real test on such a stream and the results were better than I had even hoped for. We could see the ant under all light conditions and the wary, native trout accepted them.

Even though I know my eye problem will be corrected by next season and I will be able to see all the patterns, I will never be without a good supply of fluorescent flies. I have been surprised by the number of anglers with 20-20 vision who have told me they have difficulty following a fly. If you are one of them, I suggest you tie, or have someone tie some fluorescent-winged flies.

I am not suggesting that the fluorescent-wing flies are better than the traditional feathers used on the original patterns but for those of us who have trouble following drifting flies they are God-sends.



George Harvey, right, with a Spruce Creek trout that fell for one of his fluorescent-wing flies, pictured above.

JOHN RANDOLPH PHOTOS

GEORGE HARVEY, author of *Techniques of Fly Tying and Trout Fishing*, originated the sport-fishing course at Penn State University when he was a member of the faculty. Retired, he lives in Centre County, Pa.

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