

The trout respond to the "tip-toe" impression of these sprightly flies and the aloof stance of the fly as it perches on the surface film.

High-Profile Imitations

by Gary J. LaFontaine

THE BROOK WAS BAWDY IN ITS SECLUSION, a brazen speck of ecological morality amidst a cramp of industrial squeeze. It existed unnoticed and unspoiled, hidden as it rumbled deep within the notch of the valley, the factory over the ridge and the houses behind the trees blocked from the sight of the preoccupied angler.

My fly drifted in and out of the dapplings of sunlight on the water, the tree limbs a canopy overhead to spread a lattice of shade. The white-fronting hackle of the Brown Bivisible stood out clearly, the pattern dancing on small eddies and pirouetting over miniature falls until a 12-inch brookie, a veritable trophy specimen for that unstocked Connecticut stream, struck and missed to drown the fly. "You fool, you," I muttered at the fish.

I picked up line with a half-roll and flicked the fly dry, just skirting the hazard of maple branches. I placed the fly back to the undercut of the pool, and the same pugnacious brookie attacked, slashing and turning with the Bivisible in the top of the mouth. I snapped up the rod and the light leader tippet popped, and I stood with a mock grin, a slack line, and no excuse. "You fool," I muttered again, this time at myself.

Properly chastened by this bull trout of the tiny flow, and heartened by the hook-up with one of the wild fish, I knotted a fresh Bivisible to cast to the adjacent upstream pocket. I fanned the wing flows of the rock obstructions, those current edges behind the jumble of stones at the head of the pool, and an 11-inch native took the fly on one of the exploring floats. I lifted the fish as it attempted to dart down-current and it flopped on the rock bench until I grasped it. I clipped a bit of the adipose fin and I released the trout into the still water of the pocket.

This spurt of action had followed close upon a full morning of frustrating angling on the small brook. In the hours of early light I watched as trout rose wantonly to my standard upwing patterns, but the fish tipped upwards so slowly in the clear water that often the impatient currents of the brook scuttled my fly downstream, sending flustered trout back into hiding in the shade cover of bottom snags.

Then I tested a Bivisible as I randomly picked through my selection of flies. A subtle variation in the way the fish chased the pattern, a certain haste in the brookie to capture the fly, hooked the trout in the twists of the brook current. The fish rushed to intercept the fraud of an insect that dawdled lightly on the water surface.

The Bivisible seemed to be a cure for the lazy rise of the wary trout. It fell gently with an air-resistant drop onto the water. It skipped on the conflicting currents. It imitated no specific insect, but as it shivered and wobbled high on the hackle points it captured an illusion of living entity and triggered the brook trout into decisive strikes.

I peppered the head flows and the pool edges, casting onto the wends among the rock walls. If the fly landed in position to float over a likely spot of water, most of the time a fish was ready to strike at the Bivisible. I line-hauled struggling brookies onto the stones. In the mile of scattered pockets that I fished before scrambling out of the valley I caught sixteen of the natives, including two more of the trout at the 11-inch length.

AS I FISHED THROUGH THE NEW ENGLAND SUMMER, I noted the moments of effectiveness of such basically sprightly flies as the Bivisible, Spider, and Variant. Although a high-floating pattern did not simulate the exact body-form of an insect, the trout apparently responded to the "tip-toe" impression. The aloof stance of the fly perched on the surface film. Development has scaled both concepts to successful extremes, the no-hackle and the all-hackle, and both styles of replica that deceived the trout, both as an attractor pattern covering a blank stream and as an imitator pattern matching a hatch of active insects.

Close-up of one of Gary LaFontaine's high-profile spider flies. Photos courtesy of the author.



In the history of fly fishing there have been two divergent approaches towards fooling the trout into accepting a dry fly as an actual insect. With contrasting reasoning, the artificial fly has evolved into either a *flush pattern* designed to float *in* the surface film or a *hackle pattern* designed to float *on* the surface film. Development has scaled both concepts to successful extremes, the no-hackle and the all-hackle, and both styles of dry fly are found in the fly box of the modern angler.

The dry fly as a flush imitation is as old as the practice of "cracking" a wet fly free of excess moisture, thereby momentarily achieving a surface drift. In the evolution of American dry fly angling a number of theorists have tied flush patterns: E. R. Hewitt on his Neversink River stretch clipped the hackle top and bottom on a fly to approximate the natural drift of a stonefly. A man named Brush received an early patent on a design of the parachute fly, and E. Hille, in a letter to Ray Bergman published in the 1952 revised edition of *Trout*, described his Emergent Dry Nymph as a hackle-less upwing pattern. Vincent Marinaro, in the classic *Modern Dry Fly Code*, developed surface-level constructions such as the Jassid and Quill-Bodied Spinner to imitate terrestrials and mayflies. Most recently, Doug Swisher and Carl Richards, in their *Selective Trout*, expanded the concept of flush patterns by matching no-hackle and para-dun patterns to an extensive range of exact insect counterparts.

The exact-form imitation of the flush pattern is especially valuable on gentle flows, where trout in a cycle of selective feeding carefully inspect drifting fare. The fly presents a realistic visual representation of the wings and the body of an insect. The upright wings appear initially within the window of vision of the trout. The body of the fly sharpens into distinct view as the fish approaches the pattern. The acceptance by a trout of a correctly matching fly is characteristically an assured and gentle strike, the fish certain that the prostrate image is safely mired in the film.

But there are certain mayflies, caddis flies, stone flies, and terrestrials that do not ride the surface flow sedately. These insects skip, bounce, and flutter on the water, and this motion

of the naturals attracts the trout. The required imitation sits lightly on the film, with the hackle-points holding the hook and body off the surface. The fly as a simulation of the insect appears capable of independent movement.

The innovative E. R. Hewitt, originator of the Bivisible and the Skating Spider, speculated that his Neversink Skater was an imitation of a butterfly. He introduced the pattern in an article entitled "Butterfly Fishing," but with contrary logic the fly is often successful on clear water when there are no butterflies in evidence. It is used as an imitation for active insects of all types, suggesting not the body form but the skittering movement.

Charles Fox devotes an entire chapter in *This Wonderful World of Trout* to the Spider, describing success with the pattern on the Pennsylvania limestone waters of Spring Creek and Penn's Creek. He mentions an incident where a Honey Spider is the only acceptable imitation of the Green Drake spinner, *Ephemera guttulata*. The female spinner of this species dances and dips to the water as it lays its eggs, and the trout seek the full bodies of the dipping females rather than the empty husks of the dead insects drifting on the surface. The skate of the Spider approximates the motion of the live insect, and the advice from Fox is precious fact for deceiving the selective trout that gorge on this large Eastern mayfly.

The Spider is also dramatically explosive at times when there are not distinctly visible insects on the water. Used as an attractor, as a drumming fly, it stirs trout to rise to the surface. When the midday sunshine of summer drives the trout to sheltered niches in the stream, and standard patterns are ineffective in arousing the somnolent fish, the Spider is the final resort of the dry-fly purist. Fished either with a dead drift or with a skate retrieve on still-water patches, the Spider draws the "curiosity attack" of the trout, and it provides action on the pools during an otherwise slack period of the day for the dry fly man.

ON A RIVER FAMOUS FOR FINICKY BROWN TROUT, I witnessed as the Spider produced fish under the toughest of conditions. The Battenkill in Vermont possessed a justifiable

reputation for educated trout at any time, but the meager rainfall of the 1971 spring season left all New England rivers in low flow by early fall. The trout promised to be particularly unsusceptible to any artificial fraud of a fly.

Fred Rapp and I spent most of a morning driving north from Connecticut, but as we crossed into Vermont and neared the town of Manchester the river flowed parallel to the highway. Resembling excited school boys at a carnival peep show, we parked every few miles to lean at the guardrail to search the river for signs. On a windless day the Battenkill meandered in limpid stretches of clear flow, a surface glaze reflecting the beat of a high sun, and we viewed long flats of water visibly undisturbed by feeding trout.

We intended to check out some local anglers, seeking any information available about the river, but we dallied and each stop stretched in minutes as we decided whether or not to break out our rods, until I coaxed Fred back into the truck, "We'll come back to hit the evening hatch."

I drove, and Fred was forbearing nicely until he spotted a small stream entering the river. "Let's take a look. The water might be moving there."

We strung our rods and scrambled down the embankment. With a final stalk we approached the river, scanning the water where the brook mouth bubbled into a circular bowl of an inlet. A wrinkling of current spread against the curve of the bank and I spotted an erratic succession of dimpling rings against the grass. I pointed the rises out to Fred. "Brookies?"

"Maybe."

I dabbed the fur body of a Black Ant imitation with floatant, casting the fly so that it washed against the grass of the bank. The fish continued to rise undisturbed, but the pattern passed untouched. "I thought that an ant would do it," I remarked, and I was left to conclude obviously that the Battenkill was a tough classroom on theory.

I yielded the casting spot to Fred, noticing the Badger Spider fastened to his tippet. As he cast to the risers, the large fly presented a garish show on the quiet water, but I knew better than to believe that Fred was not serious in intent. I may wander on tangents, periodically limiting myself to the use of maybe dry flies, or no-hackles, or midges, on some infathomable romantic notion, but Fred is the consummate realist, prey to no such whims, and if he chose a Spider it was because there was a chance for the pattern type to catch a fish.

The fly completed a short natural float. As the leader dragged and tugged, the hackle curl cocked upright and jiggled over minute banks of varying current. A wake arched out from the bank in chase, and the largest Eastern trout I had seen in over a year in New England wallowed and missed the hopping Spider. Embarrassed at the lack of aim, the trout swirled under and beyond to loop back for a repeat of the assault. The fish engulfed the Spider and the hook set in the jaw.

The trout panicked in the shallow water, whipping the surface into a froth as it flopped in the single spot. Too big to clear the water, it slashed and slapped part in the river and part in the air, the head and tail bending in tandem to throw a splash upwards with each unfolding. The trout flurried in the circle of the inlet, until it dug nose down to the depth of the bay.

A certain fight is expected from a brown, just as a certain fight is expected from a rainbow, but every once in a while an individual fish breaks the mold. "Look at this," Fred shouted.

The trout burst out into the river, peeling line off the reel. Fred chased along the shore edge to gain a spot below the fish, to use the river current to help fight the trout. He pressured the fish and it whirled on the surface. "He has to be a brown," he said.

"Splashy brown."

SPRING SPECIAL / 1974

"No, this big, he has to be."

The trout attempted to slide into the deeper water to sulk, but all the bulling strength was wasted with the early commotion. Fred snubbed each run, until the fish lay exhausted at the bank. With a two-hand scoop Fred lifted his catch onto the grass. On a hand scale we weighed the brown trout, the marker jiggling at the four-pound mark.

He handed me the Badger Spider and I stashed it carefully in my box, saving the same fly to use successfully on situations in Montana. The fly proved the same value as a prospecting pattern on the flats of the Clark's Fork above Missoula a year later as it nabbed 14-inch to 18-inch rainbows and browns.

"It's the crazy movement that makes the fish hit," Fred added.

USE THE BIVISIBLE ON THE BUBBLING RUNS, where the bushy imprint of hackle fibers is visible to the fish, and I use the Spider on the flat patches, where the skittering motion of the fly is exciting to the trout. But I cast the Variant on any suitable water in the lane of a feeding trout, where the subtle lightness of the pattern effects a match for active mayflies.

In his work on American angling entomology, *A Book of Trout Flies*, Preston Jennings credited Dr. William Baigent of Yorkshire, England, with the conceptual design of the Variant pattern. Mr. Jennings used the Variant pattern on the trout streams of the Catskills, and he reasoned in his book on the success of the fly type, "Flies, either naturals or artificials, floating on the surface of the water, indent the surface film because of their weight and these dents collect light in much the same manner a lens does. The trout sees the sparkles of light radiating from the dents in the surface film, and if the pattern of dents looks as though it might be a fly, the reflexes are stimulated and a rise results . . . the impulse to investigate is stimulated long before the fly arrives within the limits of the trout's direct vision."

Mayflies emerge differently with variations in manner with each species. They hatch from different water types, from different stages; some pop into the air almost instantly, some struggle tangled in the nymphal shuck, some flutter and dance on the water in attempts to become airborne. The action of the insect leaves a distinctive imprint on the surface film for the artificial fly to match.

Mayflies of the genus *Stenonema*, with species such as *S. canadense*, *S. vicarium*, and *S. ithaca* providing important angling in the East, are examples of active surface insects with distinctive habits. The nymphs are fast-water clingers, hanging in the riffle gravel and detrital clutter of trout streams, and they migrate towards the shore line to the edges of the swifter water as they prepare to emerge. Rising to the surface, they struggle in the nymphal shuck and drift in the film. As the straw colored debutantes slip free of the shell, they flutter on the stream in the new dress of the dun. They ride the bounces of the edge flow, hopping in premature lifts to fan their wings to dry, skipping across current lanes as they fall back to the water.

The Jeremy's River in Connecticut is a stream suited to the clinging *Stenonema* nymph. The pure and chilled water delivers dissolved oxygen, and the quartz-and-feldspar-mix gravel provides habitat. The duns emerge from late May through late June, sliding from the riffle heads down to the quieter flow of the pools.

Fred and I spent a day in early summer to test the stream, in a joust of wits with the brook trout and the brown trout. Both of us worked and lived in the southwestern area of the state, usually devoting our angling days to fishing such challenging rivers as the Housatonic in Cornwall, the Saugatuck River in



Weston, and the Pomperaug River in Woodbury, but on a holiday weekend I decided to show Fred the pretty little Jeremy's River.

The sky was cloudy as we arrived, hinting of the drizzling rain that lingers into early summer season, and we hustled to ready our tackle. The rain started to fall on the tree tops above us as we walked through the forest, the water dripping slowly through the leaves to fall on us, the first of the intermittent sprinklings of the day.

Early in the morning there were no insects hatching or flying, and I clinched on a small Muddler. I finagled and manipulated the fly in all the ways that the versatile Muddler can be played, busting out an occasional stray trout from the stream. I waded upstream, casting the fly to wallow in dead drift, and near noon I turned and waded downstream, casting the fly to arc across stream in swing.

As we ate lunch at the Junction Pool, the first specimen of a sporadic emergence of *Stenonema* mayflies bounced from the riffle onto the flatter water. Most of the hatch for the year was past, lost to the fly fisherman in the long high-water of the 1972 spring, but on this day a few stragglers began to struggle to the surface. As more duns drifted free of the shucks to flit across the pool, a trout rose and slashed to miss one of the insects.

Fred moved upstream to catch the hatch on the riffle, while I changed my Muddler for a Light Cahill to fish the Junction Pool. The deep water was formed by the inflow of Judd Brook, and as I waded in below the spot of the trout, the feeder brook curled into the river from the right. The river sluiced through a guard of rocks at the head of the pool, the main flow bending to meet the brook.

I started casting at the tail to pick off any unseen fish that might dart upstream to spook the trout in the deeper channel. As I fished, a number of mayfly duns fluttered from the riffle out onto the pool. A trout rose at the crease of the brook current, and I cast for it with the Light Cahill. The fish captured two more of the hopping duns that settled too near, but it avoided the floats of the artificial fly. I hurried a cast to try to meet the feeding rhythm, and the haste caused the fly to hook the leader and the tangle of monofilament fell in a wopse over the trout. To compound the sloppiness, I lifted the cast and dragged the line over the rise spot, and the fish stopped rising.

With moments to ponder and rest the water, I trapped a specimen of the insect and matched the natural against my fly. The Light Cahill seemed like an acceptable imitation in color and size, and I tested it again on the trout rising at the head of the pool. Each of the three fish held within the serpentine flow path of the current among the rocks, and I cast the fly among the trout without breaking the feeding flurry.

Fred hurried down from upstream, calling, "I just came to see if you've found an answer."

"Not yet."

"I tried nymphs, but I didn't do any good with them."

I showed Fred the Light Cahill and the insect specimen. He held both samples against the dull light of the sky. "They won't take a Cahill?"

"No."

He shook his head, "Now, that's fussy."

I clipped off the Cahill, and after a search through my fly box I picked out a Light Ginger Variant. "Maybe this one is a better dancing partner to tickle its nose."

The fly perked jauntily on the current. As it slid with the flow through the rocks, the second trout in the feeding line sliced to take the pattern. The splash put down the upper fish, and the trout bolted downstream over the holding lie of the lower fish, but I played it in the pool and landed it, a plump

12-inch brown.

Fred clapped, adding a ringing "Bravo! Bravo!"

With the fight ended, as I revived the trout in the waters of the pool, the uppermost fish resumed a feeding position at the head rocks. Confident of the effectiveness of the Variant, I dried and presented the fly. The fish accepted the pattern on one of the drifts, and it fought a battle in the riffle.

Fred declared, "It looks like you have an answer now."

I landed the brown trout, and it was the same size as the first fish. I agreed with Fred, "For the moment, I guess."

THE HIGH-PROFILE PATTERNS are only a part of the crazy-quilt of dry-fly types arrayed for the choice of the modern fly fisherman. The various modes of dry fly construction — the no-hackle to the all-hackle — are a puzzle which the dry fly fisherman continually attempts to piece together. When the attractor patterns are considered the puzzle becomes a four-block construction, with four broad groupings of choice for the angler.

For selective trout that feed on flush insect prey the angler might choose a Low Profile/Imitator such as a Sulphur Paradun; for active trout in riffle water he might choose a Low Profile/Attractor such as a Royal Trude; for selective trout that feed on active insect prey the angler might choose a High Profile/Imitator such as a Light Ginger Variant; for inactive trout in still water he might choose a High Profile/Attractor such as a Badger Skating Spider.

An observant angler matches his fly to the natural insect in color and size, but often it is more critical to match the float characteristic of the fly to the habits of the insect. It is the configuration of the fly pressing into the surface film that triggers the impulse in the trout to rise. The mirror image of the fly on the water imitates the dominant identifying factor of the insect. By modifying the indentation pattern with the type of fly that he selects to cast, the angler controls the impressionistic representation of the behavior of the insect.

New or re-discovered innovations in fly tying constantly widen this scope of dry fly theory. Leonard Wright's *Fishing the Dry Fly as a Living Insect* is an advancement in the direction of imitating the action of the insect. His fly patterns to imitate the downwing caddis not only simulate life by riding off the water on hackle points, but they are designed to be fished with a twitch, a tantalizing moment of movement as the fly enters the vision range of the suspected trout.

The pieces of the dry fly puzzle fit into specific slots and meet the necessity of particular situations. For the angler on the stream involved in the problem, seeking an answer to the selective bent of the trout or to the attraction urge of the trout, the choice of fly pattern is determined by the variables of the moment. The High-Profile fly, as one corner of the dry fly theory, attracts and imitates by simulating the ethereal qualities of the actual insect. ■

Gary LaFontaine is an FFM field editor based in Deer Lodge, Montana. In 1972 he spent the fishing season in his home state of Connecticut, then returned to his adopted state of Montana early last year. His specialty is entomology, and was the author of the series of FFM articles, "Primer of Streamside Entomology."

FLY FISHERMAN

SPRING
SPECIAL
1974



Fly Fisherman

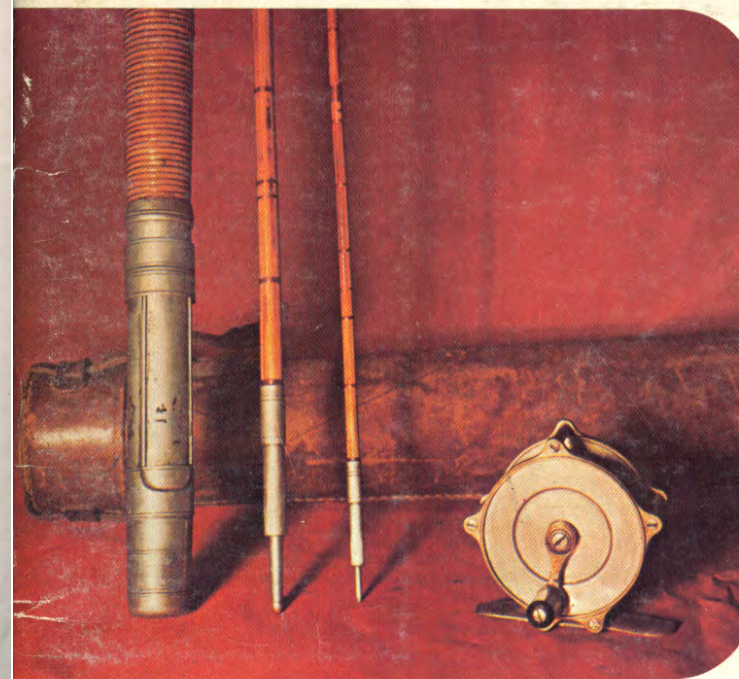
THE MAGAZINE FOR THE COMPLETE ANGLER

SPRING SPECIAL / 1974

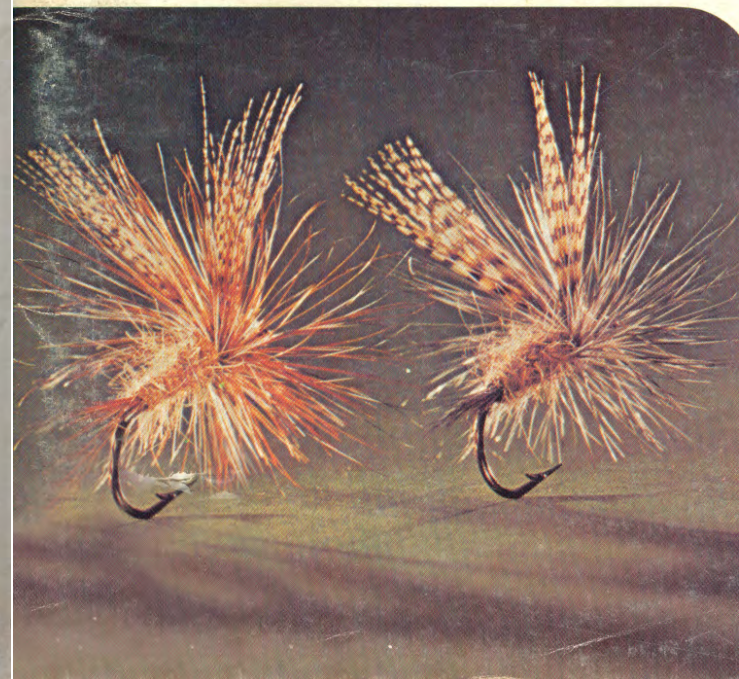
Volume Five • Number Three

Price this issue \$2.00

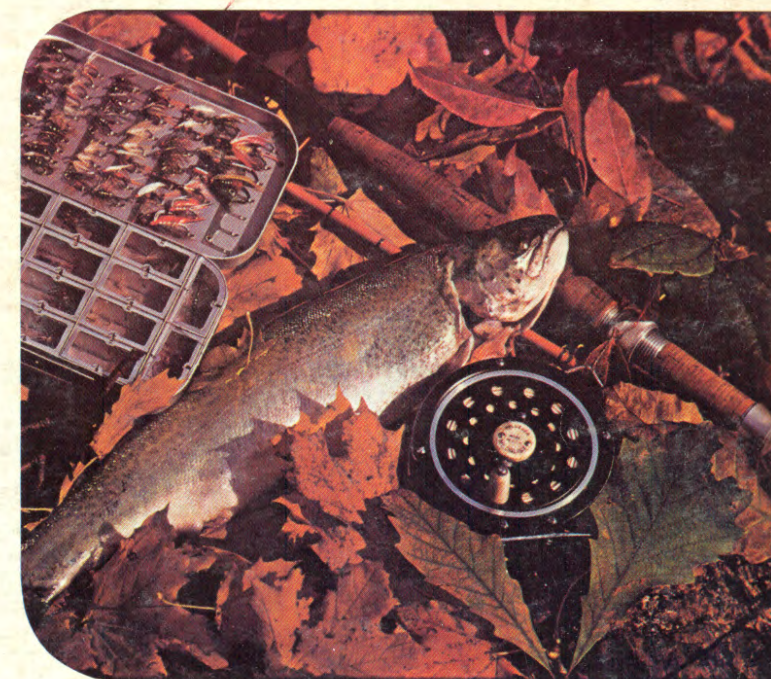
State of the Art — The Bamboo Renaissance



Fly Types — and How to Use Them



Tackle Selection for the Novice



On the Beach with "Ernie's Army"

