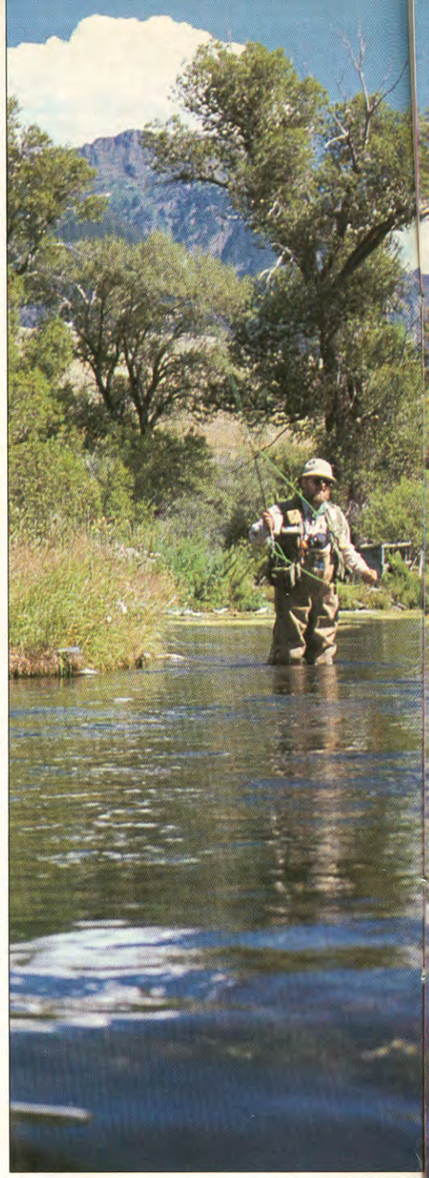
How To Fish Small Drys

AUTHOR'S PHOTOS

Yes, you can *catch large trout on teeny tinies!*

GEORGE ANDERSON



Small mayflies hatch in great numbers on waters such as Nelson's Spring Creek. Correct presentation of small drys on this kind of water is essential. Tiny no-hackle Baetis imitations (left) are typical of the small drys that produce big fish.

LEARNING HOW TO FISH small drys effectively is perhaps the most difficult challenge in fly fishing. Once you pick a size 18 or smaller fly out of your box, tie it on and fire it out over a selectively-feeding fish, you enter a new realm of difficulty in fly fishing. Not only is the fly harder to see out there on the water, but the rising fish are coming up, sipping in the small naturals with gentle riseforms. To complicate matters, small flies such as mayflies and midges often blanket the water, making the fishing tough even for experts.

Getting a decent drift with small drys requires precision casting and a perfect presentation. Fine tippets of 6X and 7X are often the rule, and getting the fly within a foot of the target with a little wind thrown in can be an interesting proposition. Once a fly fisher learns to cope with these problems and begins to master the art of fishing small drys, he finds that he can, under demanding conditions, catch the largest of trout.

Most of us start out fly fishing learning how to fish a dry fly, mainly because it is easy. There is no question of strike detection when a rainbow comes up and explodes on a Royal Wulff bouncing along in the current. It's usually just a matter of chucking it out there and fishing the water blind, hoping that some trout will be interested by the attractor pattern. It's fun fishing, and effective on fastwater streams and rivers with relatively dumb trout. But on flatwater streams, where the fish feed selectively on small insects, fastwater techniques and attractor patterns usually spook good trout.

Making the transition from attractor dry-fly fishing to match-the-hatch fishing with small flies can be tough for fishermen. Small flies are difficult to see, and getting a decent presentation and drag-free float is a challenge. After years of fishing and in teaching fly fishing on the spring creeks around Livingston, Montana, I've concluded that fishing small drys well depends on a few factors that anyone with a little ability and patience can master.

Why Fish Small Drys

IF YOU EXAMINE the average size of most mayflies, caddisflies and midges present on any flatwater stream, you'll be amazed at just how small the imitations must be to match the actual size of the insect. Sometimes the best bet is to use an oversize fly during a heavy hatch, but usually if you size the fly to the actual insect you'll use flies that are size 16 and smaller—often much smaller, right down to #22s and #24s.

Large fish in any stream don't get old and big by being dumb, especially if there is heavy fishing pressure. Big fish learn selectivity over a period of time, and during insect hatches the larger fish key in on one specific fly and feed primarily on one specific form—nymph, emerger, adult or spinner. Big trout learn quickly that nymphs and emergers are more vulnerable than the adult mayflies, which can fly off the water at any moment. Large fish can be extremely selective in their feeding habits, and during mayfly hatches a variety of emerger patterns fished in the surface film can be deadly. After the duns have hatched for the day, there can be another period of extreme selectivity during the spinner fall that evening or early the next morning. Anyone who has tried to use a standard dry to catch large trout feeding on spinners in the surface film can attest to the frustrations.

Midges or Diptera provide outstanding fishing with small drys. Heavy midge hatches often occur at times

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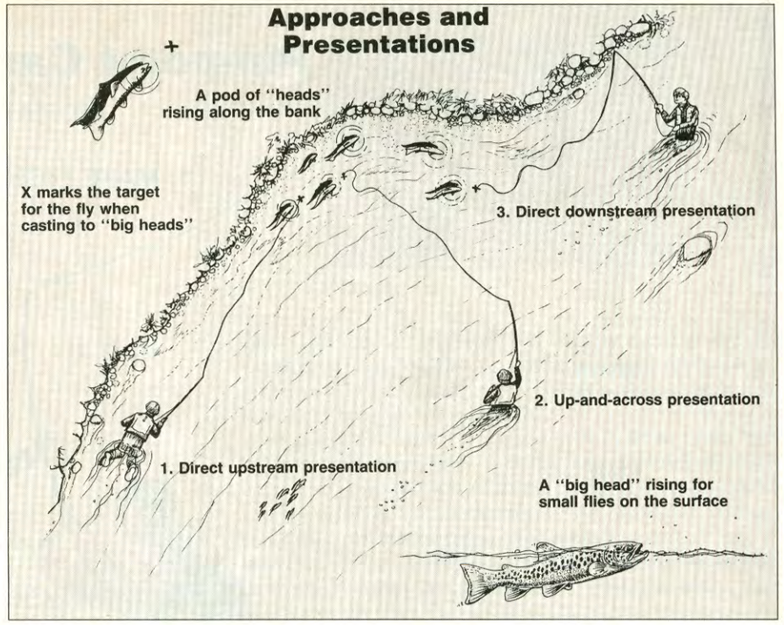
Micro caddis (left), as seen here on Montana's Bighorn River, constitute major hatches on many streams. Success during these kinds of hatches requires the right imitation, proper approach and pin-point casting accuracy.

Three ways to cast to "big heads" (right). 1. Direct upstream approach: fly is aimed directly in front of the fish and the tippet drapes across the trout's head. 2. Up-and-across approach: reach cast presentation used to get best float. 3. Downstream approach: slack-line cast delivers fly first, before tippet, leader and line, with no drag. Note that in each case the X indicates where to present the fly.



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during the year when there are few mayfly or caddis hatches to bring the fish up. In Montana we have heavy midge hatches throughout the winter on our spring creeks as well as on many big rivers like the Yellowstone, Madison and Bighorn. Midges vary in size from the #16s and #18s you see on lakes and ponds to the minute versions that make a size 26 look gigantic. I seem to use more #20s and #22s than anything when fishing midges although the naturals might be smaller. Often midges cluster on the surface and a fish will take a swipe at the whole bunch. At such times patterns such as the Griffith Gnat can be deadly, and you can use a much larger imitation than the naturals. In addition, this pattern, tied with palmered grizzly hackle, is easy to spot on the water.

When terrestrials like ants, beetles or leaf hoppers come on, they provide excellent small dry-fly fishing. I can't count the times I've been stymied for lack of good black ant imitation in my box. Ants often swarm around rotten logs lying along streambanks and when they fall into the water they are easy prey for trout, especially on flat water. During the summer here in Montana at times on some streams we see huge hatches of small, black flying ants. The hatches happen for only a day or two during the season, but if you don't have the exact imitations in size and color, and present them perfectly, you are out of luck.

Micro caddis hatches also provide exciting opportunities to fish small drys. In Montana these tiny caddis hatch in large numbers, and on flatwater streams like the Henry's Fork, Firehole and Bighorn they bring up big fish in droves. The best fishing comes on imitations of the adults or spent adults caught in driftlines along a bank, weebeds or eddies. Close observation of the feeding fish indicates the type of pattern to use, and how to present it.

Three Keys to Success

SUCCESS IN FISHING SMALL DRYS hinges on these three things: 1. The ability to cast accurately enough to put your fly within a few inches of your target. 2. Getting the proper presentation or drift with the fly. 3. Knowing, to within one foot, where your fly is on the water.

Casting Accuracy

Casting accuracy is a problem for most fly fishers. Even good fly casters have trouble consistently putting the fly within one foot of where they are aiming at 30 feet. Add a little breeze and perhaps a leader that won't turn over and the average fisherman won't get the fly within two feet of where it must be. When trout have taken feeding positions and are rising selectively, to be successful you often must put the fly within two inches of a current line that will carry it downstream over the trout's nose.

As a hatch progresses, there are increasing numbers of naturals on the water and the trout become more difficult to catch. At the onset of the hatch, when there are few insects, fish must cover a lot more water looking for the emerging bugs. At such times trout are relatively easy to catch. They range widely in search of naturals, increasing the chance that they will find your fly, even if your cast is off the mark a foot or more. These hunting trout often cruise rapidly, covering water and taking everything coming down the pike. As the flies begin to blanket the water, however, the fish need to move less laterally to find the flies, and they take feeding positions just under the surface in a feeding lane, sipping in only the emergers, duns or spinners that float over their noses. Because each trout's window of vision is so restricted when the fish is holding close to the surface, he cannot see high-riding insects, even a few inches laterally from a drift line that flows right over his nose. Such a fish can be fooled just as easily as those wide-ranging fish earlier in the hatch *but* you will have to cast more accurately to put your fly on this perfect line over the trout's head.

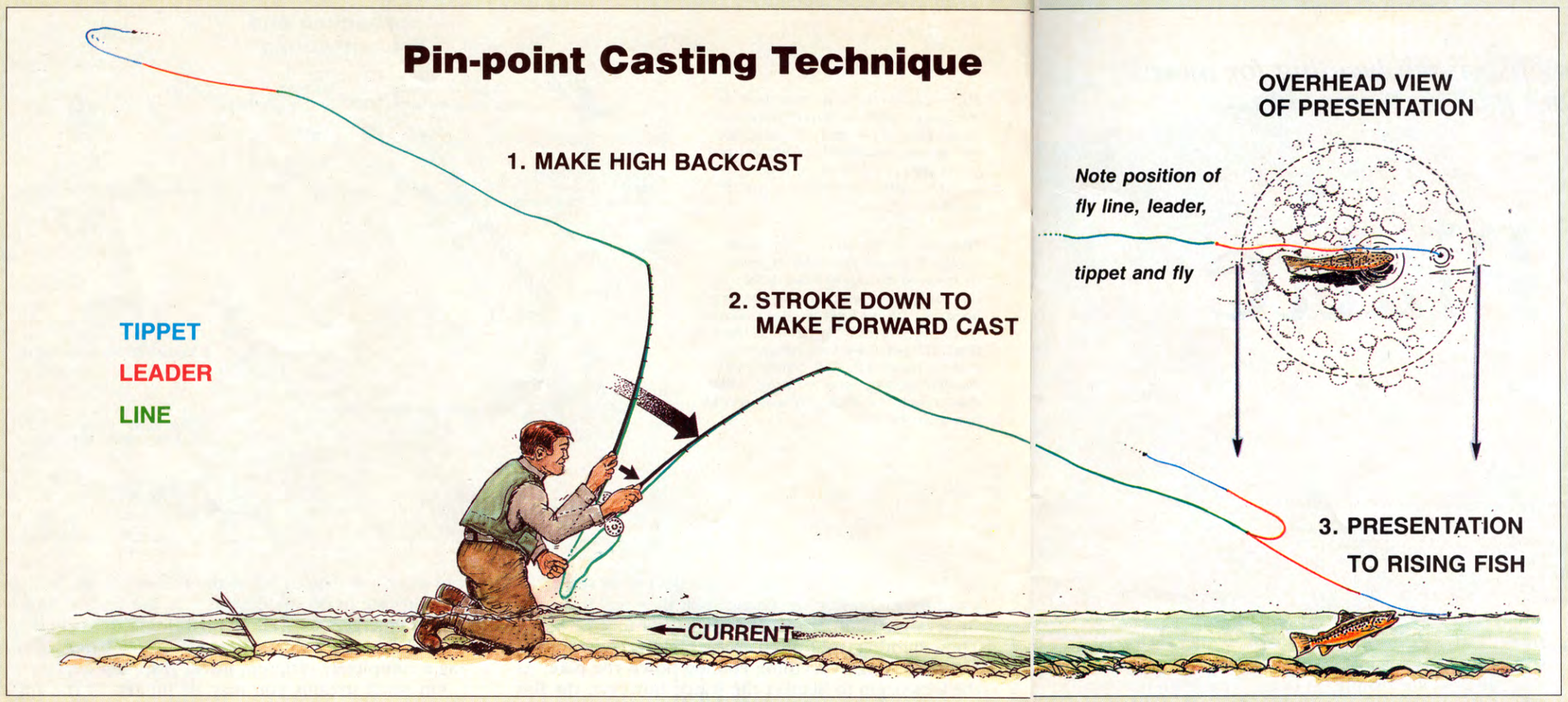
Watch a good dry-fly fisherman under these conditions and you will see him pick out one big fish and stick with that fish until he catches it or puts it down. In this situation, casting blind is about as successful as shooting into the middle of a covey of flushing quail. You learn to concentrate on one bird and make a good shot before looking for another. A good caster has the ability to make a hundred perfect casts over a rising fish without putting him down, and sooner or later the fisherman will hit on the correct pattern and presentation that looks just right to the fish. The big difference is that the *expert* caster might take an individual fish on one of his first five casts, while a novice might take 50 casts and *never* get the fly in front of the fish with a decent presentation.

One simple strategy that can improve anyone's casting accuracy is to *get as close to the fish as possible* before beginning to cast. A careful approach pays big dividends. It allows you to cast more accurately and observe the fish's feeding activity more closely. You can often see exactly what the fish is taking. Perhaps he is keying in on the emergers in the surface film or taking emergers as well as high-riding duns. Perhaps the fish, during a simultaneous multiple hatch, is taking a completely different insect than you expected.

On small streams you may be limited in the angle through which you can approach or cast to fish. In such situations, your best bet is often to fish straight up or quartering upstream. With the fish lying facing the current, it's easier to approach closely from the rear without alerting the trout. By measuring your casts, you can fire *only the tippet* of your leader over the fish, reducing the chances of spooking the fish. On larger streams and rivers where you have room to maneuver, set yourself up to take advantage of the sun (put it at your back) and wind. It's often a good bet to fish across or down and across to the fish, using a reach or slack-line cast for the best presentation.

On larger rivers most fishermen invariably cast farther than they should, and with less accuracy. Take the time to make a careful approach and you can get within 20 to 30 feet of any fish. I like to wade in, keeping low and often wading downstream to a rising fish so as not to alert him with waves caused by my wading. In a big river such as the Henry's Fork on the Railroad Ranch, where you can wade nearly everywhere, the approach from above is my favorite trick to reach position. I start about 100 feet above the rising fish, wade out well past him into midstream and then approach by wading downstream with the current.

When I get to within about 40 feet of the trout, I angle in toward him. I set up so I'm positioned about 25 to 30 feet across and slightly upstream from the area in the current where the trout is feeding. If the water is shallow enough, I kneel to keep a low silhouette. I keep my rod low while casting because any quick movement in the air close to a big fish can spook



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him. Big trout have had unpleasant experiences with herons, hawks or eagles and are spooked easily by the glint of sunlight off a rod or a fly line zinging overhead. If the water is deep, I spread my feet or bend over to lower my silhouette. On the western spring creeks I kneel, or even sit, in the water to stay close to fish.

Pick as long a leader as will turn over a two- to three-foot tippet in a breeze. I like stiff-butted leaders for all my dry-fly fishing, and when I fish small flies, my standard leader is a 12-foot, 6X. If the surface currents are tricky, I sometimes use a slightly longer tippet, but never longer than three and a half feet. Longer tippets simply don't cast accurately in a wind, and I feel that by manipulating the cast using a reach cast, slackline cast or a combination of both I can get a perfect drift under even the most difficult circumstances. I always kid friends who get on the 6- to 10-foot tippet kick for "better fly drifts." They may get a good drift, but by the time the fly reaches the fish it can be as much as three feet off target. A good caster using a 2- to 3½-foot tippet can easily outfish any long-tippet fishermen regardless of the situation.

Assuming that you know how to cast, a good leader is the key to accurate casting, so do some experimenting with different designs and types until you find one that works well for you. My favorites are the knotted leaders with a compound design that allows me to use a stiffer butt section and a limper, stronger tippet. I have never liked the braided-butt leaders much for dry-fly fishing. They cast small flies decently when

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Direct upstream, "hit-'em-in-the-head" casting technique. 1. Make a high backcast. This sets up the casting angle for the forward cast. 2. Stroke down on the forward cast to drive the fly toward the target area on the water in front of the trout's nose. Aim directly at the water, a few inches in front of the fish. Do not aim even a few inches above the water's surface because the fly could be blown off target or pulled away by the weight of the fly line. 3. The perfect presentation: The fly hits the water inches in front of the fish as the tippet turns over. As the leader comes to rest on the water, the tippet is draped over the fish's snout and back (see the overhead detail). A reasonably close approach and controlled casting, with tight loops and accurate delivery, are the keys to this technique.

there is no wind, but try to launch them accurately into a stiff breeze and you'll be lucky to hit within three feet of where you aim. In extreme flatwater situations the first false cast over a fish with a braided-butt leader throws out a shower of fine water particles that can spook wary trout.

Proper Presentation

It has been said that presentation is 90 percent of catching fish and the other factors combined are 10 percent. This might be overstating the case, but presentation *is* a critical factor in fishing small drys. When casting to a rising fish I try to get the fly in front of him in a natural float with the water currents. In flatwater situations where you are likely to be fishing small drys, there are often weedbeds and subsurface contours on the stream bottom that create undulating surface currents, making it more difficult to get a perfect fly drift. Finer and long tippets help in these situations.

When onstream, take a minute to analyze the situation and to scan the water for rising fish. By watching the riseforms you can often determine the size of fish and what they are eating. Get below a difficult fish and examine what is floating down his driftline. It will give you clues as to what he is taking.

Pick out the largest fish and plan your approach to take advantage of the sun, wind, surface currents and any casting restrictions such as trees or bank brush. You may have little choice, but take any advantage to make a better presentation. A good caster can often

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catch fish in any direction, but usually there is one position that can set him up for a perfect presentation. For most fly casters, the down-and-across-stream presentation is most effective. You can be a little sloppy in your casting yet still get a good drift in front of the fish by mending your line or using a slack-line or reach cast. The combination of a slack line and reach cast is my favorite in these situations: It puts just enough slack into my leader to give me a perfect drift once I'm lined up with the fish. This down-and-across-stream cast puts the fly in front of the fish first, the leader and line second—thus there is less chance of spooking the fish with a bad cast.

Cast close to the rising fish. Ninety-five percent of our fishing school students simply do not get the fly close enough to the fish on their first cast. They think that by casting six to eight feet above the trout they can have a better drift, thus a better chance, to catch the fish. They usually get two feet of decent float with the fly and then four feet of drag as the fly approaches the trout. The fish ignores the fly or spooks as the fly careens over his head. You need perhaps two feet of drag-free drift to catch a difficult fish, but you need the two feet *in front of the fish's nose*. Try to make your first few casts your best. Your best chance to catch that big fish is *the first time he sees your fly* in front of him. Once you alert the fish to your presence by casting or presentation, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to fool him. Once he's suspicious, it's better to move on and find another fish to tempt than to waste valuable fishing time on a lost cause.

As soon as your cast passes the fish, gently pick it up and fire it right back in there. Even a good caster may need many perfect casts to take a difficult fish. If you feel you have gotten four or five good casts over a fish, switch patterns. In selecting a fly, the size, the right silhouette and color (in that order) make a big difference.

Cruising fish are especially difficult, and you must take care to observe and determine their feeding pattern so you don't position yourself too close to the fish while casting. *Blind casting usually fails.* Wait. When the fish rises, cast to him quickly, anticipating his direction of movement, speed and rise rhythm. Sometimes it helps to false cast continuously to one side of the fish. Wait for the fish to rise, then put the fly right on his nose.

I line up my false casts to one side of the trout and short by from three to five feet. On my last cast I fire

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the fly in low and fast with a tight loop so the fly turns over close to the water's surface. It takes practice, but it allows you to put the fly in front of the fish quickly and with little chance of spooking him.

Once your fly is on the water, you can increase the chance that the trout sees and takes it. If your cast is too long, strip in line, skidding the fly into a line that brings it over the fish. Anything you can do to put your fly on a perfect downstream line into the fish helps (assuming you avoid spooking the fish). If you see that a mend can help give you a better drift, mend immediately—just after the cast hits the water. Don't wait until the fly is halfway through the drift and starts to drag before mending. Late mending usually spooks the trout. Learn to feed line out using short lateral flicks of your rod tip. It greatly increases your drag-free drift, especially in down-and-across-stream situations.

Try to avoid fishing straight downstream. Using a slack-line cast, you can get a good drift down into the fish, but if he doesn't take on the first cast, you'll have more difficulty picking up the fly without scaring him. When faced with a downstream situation, I angle the rod well to the side as the fly passes the fish and I let the current straighten the line and leader before I lift for my backcast. This tactic positions my leader and fly a few feet to one side of the fish. A gentle lift on the backcast puts the line in the air without alerting the trout.

When fishing at a sharp angle down-and-across or straight downstream, take care to slow your strike so you don't pull the fly from the fish's mouth. A slowed strike is especially important when fishing midge patterns on #22 to #26 hooks, with their small hooking gaps, because fish gently rising to midges often take deliberately, with a slow, rolling riseform. Try to wait until the trout's head disappears back under the surface before setting the hook.

Fishing straight upstream is an excellent way to fish small drys, especially midge patterns. When you find a fish holding steady in shallow water, sneak up below him, kneel down and throw a short, accurate cast directly over his head. I make sure I false cast short by about three to five feet and then fire the last cast in low and fast, landing the midge one to two feet ahead of the fish so just the tippet passes over his head. You can take fish in difficult lies using this technique, but you must approach them carefully and use 6X or 7X tippets.

Finding Your Fly

It sounds easy, but difficulty spotting the

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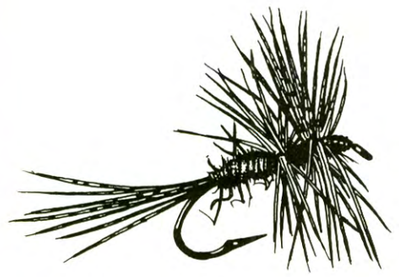
fly is *the* reason most fly fishermen have trouble fishing small drys. People watching me fish tiny mayfly or midge patterns often ask how I can see my fly on the water among all the naturals. Most of the time I can't! But I have a good idea where the fly is, and if I see a fish rise within a foot of where I *think* the fly is riding, I set the hook. It's surprising how often that rise is to your fly, but if you don't react, you'll be lucky to catch any fish.

Knowing where your fly is on the water brings us back to accurate casting. A good caster knows within six inches to a foot of where his fly hits on each cast, even if he can't initially see his fly. Once you've pinpointed where the fly has hit the water, it's just a matter of eyeballing the drift and speed of the currents. With a little practice you can gauge where your fly is to within a foot—a real pro gets estimation down to inches. Also, when the trout rises to your fly, react quickly to set the hook. Most fly fishers strike too slowly after a fish has taken their fly. Medium-size rainbows are especially quick to jump on a fly. It's hard to strike too quickly. An experienced fisherman with quick reactions may have to slow his strike for a big brown or cutthroat, but I see many more people who

are too slow on the trigger rather than too fast.

Position yourself so you can see your fly on the water. Sometimes getting low can make a big difference. Try different casting positions, with the sun at different angles, until you find the one that works best for you. The sun should be behind you, but occasionally late in the day it helps to fish directly into the glare of the setting sun. Small flies stand out well in the twilight glare, and fishing into it can often give you another hour of evening fishing.



HUBERT FITZGERALD ILLUSTRATION

If your eyesight is poor, try experimenting with more visible small-fly patterns. A light-colored wing on a dark fly normally makes little difference to the fish, but it's much easier to see out on the water. Dave Whitlock's idea of using fluorescent poly or yarn on the top of hard-to-see patterns like beetles and ants works great. Surprisingly, a dark or black fly often stands out *better* than a light-colored pattern, particularly in Trico fishing. Often when fish are taking Trico spinners in the surface film, a high-riding, black-bodied thorax dun with a dark wing is easier to spot, and it's often selected by the fish over the many naturals on the water.

Another trick is to grease your leader right out to the fly. I'm convinced that a floating leader puts down no more fish than a sunken one—if you get a good dead drift over the fish. With a greased leader you can spot the leader out on the water where it depresses the surface film, even if you can't see your fly. The technique is especially deadly when fishing emergers or nymphs within a foot or so of the surface. When a fish takes your fly, the leader snaps straight in the film or slices under the water. Simply set the hook. The greased-leader technique works best in flat-water situations where using an indicator might spook fish while you are casting.

Indicators are popular for fishing nymphs and emergers, but they also work well in fishing small drys, and they are especially effective in insect-rich riffles, where big fish often move to feed during a hatch and where spotting a small fly is difficult due to fast, turbulent currents.

Fishing small, dark patterns that match the abundant Western Baetis is especially tough in the riffles and an indicator helps. When fishing riffles I like a yarn indicator, tied in above the tippet knot. It casts accurately and hits the water lightly. If you use an indicator, set the hook when you spot any rise within a

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foot or two of it. The rise is probably to your fly, although the indicator may remain motionless. (The slack in your tippet between the indicator and fly allows the trout to take and eject your fly before the indicator moves.)

Hooks, Tippets and Tackle

RECENT IMPROVEMENTS in hook and tippet strength make it easier for less experienced fisherman to master fishing small drys. Years ago, 6X tippet was perhaps 1½-pound test, and you seldom considered fishing anything smaller unless you had flies you didn't mind losing. Today some of the new materials are so strong that 6X tests over 3 pounds and will straighten out a standard #16 fine-wire hook. As a result, fishermen are using more 7X, and even 8X, when fishing small drys. Better drag-free drifts are possible with these super-fine tippets, yet with care you can still land large fish.

New hooks like the Japanese Tiemco TMC models are far stronger than our old standards, and they provide the hooking and holding power needed with the new tippet materials. I like the ring-eye hooks (TMC 101) for flies smaller than size 18. The straight ring-eye gives you much more usable hooking gap on the small flies. I try to avoid using hooks smaller than #22 because my hooking success drops dramatically when using #24s and #26s versus the larger #20s and #22s. To take advanatage of the larger gap and greater hook strength, I simply tie smaller-silhouette flies on the larger hooks.

New, superlight-action graphite rods are appearing on the market that throw 2- and and 3-weight lines effectively, even in a breeze. Outstanding examples are the Scott 8-foot 2-weight, the Winston 7½- and 8-foot rods for 2- and 3-weight lines, and the new Sage L.L. rods for line sizes 2 and 3. These light but accurate rods help you present the fly gently and they allow you to strike harder without breaking off fish. As a bonus, a 12-inch fish fights like an 18-incher on the light rods.

There is nothing more challenging than going after big fish rising to tiny flies in glassy-smooth water. Learn to do it successfully and you may even forget about the salmonfly hatch or the easy hopper fishing of late summer. Instead it's midges, Baetis, Tricos, other small mayflies, microcaddis and tiny terrestrials providing the action. Fishing small drys isn't frustrating anymore—it's just plain fun.

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