

# FLY FISHERMAN®

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*High-country trout require their own tackle and tactics*

## How to Fish the Alpine Lakes

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I WAS BROWSING in a fly shop in Idaho last summer when a fortyish man and his son entered and went straight to the proprietor behind the counter. They had been fishing famous Silver Creek all week, and for a change they wanted to sample some of the remote, high-mountain lakes nestled in the 11,000-foot peaks above the shop. What flies should they use?

"Aah!" exclaimed the shopkeeper with a dismissive backhand wave. "When those fish are biting they'll hit anything, and when they're not, nothing works. Then you might as well fish the river. Very moody fish."

I couldn't have been more shocked if he had cited Izaak Walton's belief that pickerel weed spontaneously breeds pike. Although the shopkeeper's opinion is a commonly held one, I had supposed that he, a fly-fishing "guru," would know better. I hurried after the departing father and son to tell them there was hope.

This incident illustrates two lamentable facts about fishing the West's alpine lakes: It is usually a secondary pursuit to plying the rivers, and natives and visitors alike generally don't understand it. A recent Idaho Fish and Game Department survey revealed that only seven percent of angler-days involve the state's 2,000 alpine lakes, most of which offer trouting as good as or better than many local streams. And the catch averaged 2.6 trout per day — naive trout from lightly fished waters. The common explanation for this low success, repeated until it's liturgy in the West, is that high-lake trout are

temperamental, striking anything when in the mood, but uncatchable otherwise. This fatalism fosters a haphazard approach to angling and becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Consistent success in fishing high lakes is possible, if the angler recognizes their unique ecology and alters lowland fishing methods accordingly.

A first, and crucial, alteration is in tackle. Shoreline trees and steep banks around mountain lakes may prevent the long backcasts needed to make the eighty- to one-hundred-foot casts that are often necessary to reach fish. The solution is the use of shooting-tapers, which allow one-hundred-foot casts with a mere thirty-nine-foot (including leader) backcast. Although normal thirty-foot shooting-tapers are adequate, two years ago I went to twenty-four-foot shooting-tapers. This required buying all new lines: The seven-weight shooting-taper for my rod weighs 195 grains, and to cut it shorter and still come up with that weight, I had to start with a line two sizes larger (a rule of thumb that can be used regardless of your line size). The casting cycle was faster, demanding more precision in casting, but the reduced backcast increased possible casting positions significantly. Shooting-tapers still shorter proved impractical because superhuman timing seemed required. I carry medium-sinking and Hi-D twenty-four-footers, but for a floating shooting-taper I retained the twenty-nine-foot, seven-weight shooting-taper because the nine-weight line was too heavy when fishing midges on 7X tippets.

Leaders for high lakes, where conditions of low, clear water are perpetual along with frequent winds, should be at least eight feet, with a normal taper of two-thirds

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stiff monofilament and the last third limp monofilament. Gin-clear water and small flies preclude tippets larger than 3X for both dries and nymphs, and 5X to 7X tippets are a must for midges.

Items most backpacking fishermen consider extraneous are vital equipment: waders (Royal Red Ball's new Flyweights weigh less than a pound) to eliminate backcast problems and extend casting range; Polaroid sunglasses to facilitate spotting trout; and an aquarium net and a seine of fourteen-inch wide plastic netting with a dowel at each end, for ascertaining size and color of insects for matching hatches.

The adequately stocked high-lakes fly box differs substantially from its streamside counterpart. While there are similarities, insect life in mountain lakes differs in type, proportion and size from that of rivers, and the any-fly-will-do myth just ain't so. Sometimes small trout will hit any fly, but during good hatches even they become selective, probably not from wariness but from imprinting to an abundant food form. Large, alpine-lake trout are almost always tough, and unlike stream trout with only an instant to inspect food sweeping by, they have time "to read the fine print" in currentless water.

Fisheries biologist Cecil Heacox contends that brown trout at 4,000 feet consume eighty percent mayflies, ten percent caddis, and ten percent miscellaneous foods. Other authorities weigh the percentages more toward caddis. But in alpine lakes the staple is midges, comprising about sixty percent, followed by caddis at ten percent, mayflies at five percent, scuds, backswimmers, waterboatmen and minute crustaceans at ten percent, damselflies and dragonflies at five percent, and ten percent miscellaneous (such as ants, grasshoppers, aphids, waterfleas and leeches). These percentages, of course, differ with individual lakes. In some, stomach samples show a diet of eighty percent scuds. All of the above are imitated by commercial patterns, but some in the accompanying list of fly patterns for alpine lakes—caddis, midge, ant, and damselfly—are available in the West only in the best shops.

Prepared with an inclusive array of flies, the next consideration is optimum fishing hours on lakes. The stream-trouting cliché of morning and evening hatches applies, though less strictly. In higher lakes trout may feed all day. Season, elevation, latitude, exposure and depth determine insect activity, but generally after ice-out in late June or early July feeding begins around 9 A.M. at 8,000 feet, slacks off about 1 P.M., then resumes at 7:30 P.M. As summer progresses and air and water warm, trout feed earlier and later in the day until cooler weather in late August reverses the process—and freezing temperatures in October end it.

Once at a lake, suppress the stream-fishing urge to head for deep water. Water temperature is the key to insect life here, and the deep water is usually sterile. Trout cruise the sunlit shallow when feeding, using the depths primarily for rest and refuge. Look for trout in weedbeds and mossbeds, shoals sloping into the lake and at inlets and outlets. Trout may be distributed

over all shallow areas, but they will most likely favor a few, leaving others barren. Locating the trout is half the battle and a deliberate process of elimination is best.

First, look for rises. If no hatches are in progress, prospect. If it's early season, and ice still covers most of the lake, your search is simplified. Trout will hug the edge of the iceflow, and although sluggish, they'll take a small nymph worked slowly.

But if ice is long gone, amble along shore, scanning the shallows. Fish any reefs and the deep water on both sides. Probe any offshore reefs within reach. If you find several fish working, establish a good casting position with the sun at your back if possible, and let the trout come to you. Drop a nymph far enough ahead of cruising trout so it doesn't spook them, yet has enough time to sink to the fish's level, then retrieve in four-inch spurts. No trout in sight? Continue to the inlet and cast so the current carries the fly deep, then retrieve. If you see no trout and get no strikes, move on around the opposite shore, fishing all likely shallows, to the outlet and its logjam if there is one. Trout may lie well back under the logs, so probe any open water as you move forward to finally fish the lake itself.

The final haunt to explore is deep water; often trout hold just beyond the shallow's outer edge. Cast long and let the fly sink for ten seconds, then retrieve. Make every fourth cast progressively deeper, by waiting longer before retrieving, until you're scratching bottom. If no luck, alter the retrieve, change flies. Eventually you should connect. If after covering the lake thoroughly you haven't had a touch, try an adjacent lake. Sometimes trout in one have lockjaw, while those in its neighbor at a slightly different elevation are ravenous.

The spawning urge will radically affect trout distribution in alpine lakes. Spring-spawning rainbows, cutthroats, and goldens move into inlet creeks—and, if none is available, over rocky shoals—in early July and even into August in higher lakes with northeastern exposure, and brookies, lakies and Dolly Vardens frequent the same places in September. The fish holding in the inlet's main flow are intent on reproduction and will be oblivious to most flies. One exception is an egg-imitating fly. Two summers ago I caught spawning cutthroats in the Mission Range's Piper Lake on a #16 hook wrapped with fluorescent red yarn after they spurned my flies and friend Ernie Hoffert's lures. For action with conventional flies, concentrate on those fish farthest from the inlet. Trout over redds in the lake itself are ready strikers until just before spawning.

Even if you locate trout that refuse everything, don't assume they speak for the majority; they may have brethren across the lake that are voracious. Similarly, if feeding trout prove impossible, explore. Trout in different structure may prove easier to dupe.

Last summer, I took my mother backpacking in Idaho's White Cloud Peaks, and the first night we camped by Walker Lake, where limited habitat, an ideal spawning stream, and negligible fishing pressure have produced an overpopulation of rainbows. A

spring by camp flowed at a constant forty-two degrees Fahrenheit, drifting gray midge pupae along its fifteen-foot channel into the lake. Daily, upwards of twenty eight-inch trout sidled nervously over an alluvial fan at the spring's mouth to intercept the pupae before they could hatch. They scattered like quail at the sight of me, and refused all dry flies, having become selective to the pupae. I enjoyed the challenge of drifting a fly from a kneeling position, keeping the speck in sight, and striking at the right instant. But the little devils were impossible for my mother, who had never caught a trout.

After two days we departed for another lake, but as we skirted the shore across from our former camp, trout flushed from under overhanging heather. Accustomed to scavenging for a variety of food forms along the shore, they eagerly attacked her Otter Shrimp as long as she didn't bean them with it. A week later at a lake in another mountain range, I hooked small trout stuffed with scuds, and thirty minutes later at the lake's opposite end I landed a brace of 2¼-pounders feasting solely on *Paraleptophlebia* spinners.

Prospecting for trout can be intriguing but probably won't be necessary if you've planned your hike to reach the lake by 9 A.M., because in sunny weather, something will be likely to be hatching. Now, knowing the riseforms specific insects elicit from alpine trout and corresponding tactics to use come into play.

Midge hatches are most common, and a cruising trout's response will be leisurely, sipping rises in a linear series as it takes pupae and half-emerged adults in the shallows. Midges oviposit mostly in the evening, and the riseform then becomes a rambunctious leaping. The vast majority of fly fishermen are defeated by these midge hatches because they aren't prepared. But the recipe for success is really quite simple: With the seine or aquarium net, capture a natural and match it. Then, gauging speed, direction and distance of a cruising trout or school, gently drop the fly seven to ten feet ahead. If they spook, lengthen the lead. If a dry fly is ignored, but you have correctly matched size and color, then the trout are probably imprinted to the pupa, so switch.

A heavy midge hatch may last two hours before sated fish retreat to deep water to rest. But if the hatch was thin, or the day cool or cloudy and thus lengthening the hatch, hungry trout may continue cruising for dead and immature pupae, appearing to wander just under the surface and suddenly knifing up to take something, then dropping back down. After collecting and matching a natural pupa, grease the leader to within the last few inches so the fly will hang near the surface. If several trout are cruising an area, cast to the vicinity and give a slight pull whenever a trout passes. If trout are scattered, stalk one, delicately placing the fly in his path, and again, give a tug to catch his eye.

Occasionally trout feed on midges near the bottom. My father and I were fishing a lake last July when a sudden breeze obscured midges on the surface from the trout, and they switched to pupae and larvae in four

## Flies for High-Country Lakes

THE ALPINE-LAKE FLY FISHERMAN should have a fly box well stocked with midge, caddisfly, mayfly and terrestrial imitations as well as imitations of scuds, damselflies and other food forms often found in the high-country lakes. Here is a brief summary of the flies I've found most effective. The selection as a whole should prepare you for fly-hatch situations on most Western alpine lakes.

**Midges:** You should be prepared with midge adult imitations tied on #18 to #28 hooks in the following colors: gray, light olive, pale blue, and black. Midge pupa imitations should be tied on #18 to #24 hooks in the following colors: cream, gray, olive, black, red. Midge larva imitations should be tied on 2XL hooks in #18 and #22 in the following colors: red, black, and cream.

**Caddisflies:** For caddisfly adult imitations, your selection should include flies in the following sizes and color schemes: olive-gray body/brown wings, #10 and #12; brownish-olive body/brown wings, #10 and #12; black body/black wings, #16; and reddish-tan body/tan to reddish-tan wings, #10. I have found caddisfly imitations most successful with the wings tied 50 percent longer than the body of the pattern.

**Mayflies:** From standard mayfly dun imitations, select five basic wing and body color combinations: slate wings/gray body, #10-#14; gray wings/yellow-olive body, #16 to #18; gray wings/brownish-olive body, #16; gray wings/mahogany body, #12; mottled gray-brown wings/gray body, #16.

For the mayfly spinners you'll encounter, three patterns should suffice as imitations: a #16 pattern with a gray body and white wings blotched with black; a #10 white poly-winged pattern with a mahogany body and a white poly-winged pattern with a white body.

For mayfly nymphs, three patterns should suffice: the Swisher-Richards *Siphonurus* nymph, #10; *Ephemerella* nymph imitation, #14 and #16; and a *Paraleptophlebia* nymph imitation, #14. If you tie your own flies you may consult one of the entomological references for anglers (such as *Hatches* by Al Caucci and Bob Nastasi, *Selective Trout* by Doug Swisher and Carl Richards or *Nymphs* by Ernest Schwiebert) to locate an accurate description of these naturals that you may copy. Such books may also suggest patterns for these naturals.

**Damselflies and dragonflies:** To imitate the damselfly adult, use a Blue Damselfly tied on a #10, 3XL, 2XF hook. For the damselfly nymph, use an olive or brownish-olive body with a matching marabou wing on a #10, 3XL hook. The Blue Damselfly in #8 imitates the dragonfly, and for a dragonfly nymph pattern any standard dragonfly nymph pattern in olive, brown or gray tied on a #6 to #10 hook should work.

**Terrestrials and other foods:** Other imitations to include in your selection are the Trueblood Otter Shrimp in #10 to #18 (to imitate scuds and shrimp); a beetle imitation and Gary LaFontaine's Diving Waterboatman in #10 (for snails, backswimmers and water beetles); an ant imitation in black and cinnamon, both in #10 and #22 (to imitate ants and termites); and the Letort Hopper and Letort Cricket #10 to #14 (to imitate grasshoppers and crickets).

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feet of water. We tied fluorescent yarn tags at mid-leader, and with medium-sinking lines drifted larval patterns, jiggling them whenever a school passed. Strikes registered as a jerk of the yarn tag, which was visible underwater, or a tug on the line. This demanding, difficult fishing produced only five trout in about ninety minutes, but one was a nineteen-inch cutthroat.

High-lake caddis elicit good rises during both ovipositing and hatching, and success depends on differentiating between the two stages. Hatching caddis rise from the water in towering flight, while egg-laying adults skim and dip along the surface.

If a hatch is in progress, and you don't want to seine a pupa but can see the adults aren't the small all-black genus, tie on a brown pupa and also a green one as a dropper and cast a floating line, letting the flies sink the leader's length, then draw them to the surface in a pulsing lift. If no action, switch to the reddish-brown pupa.

Cast adult imitations to the rise, using an attention-getting splat if you can't see and precisely lead the trout.

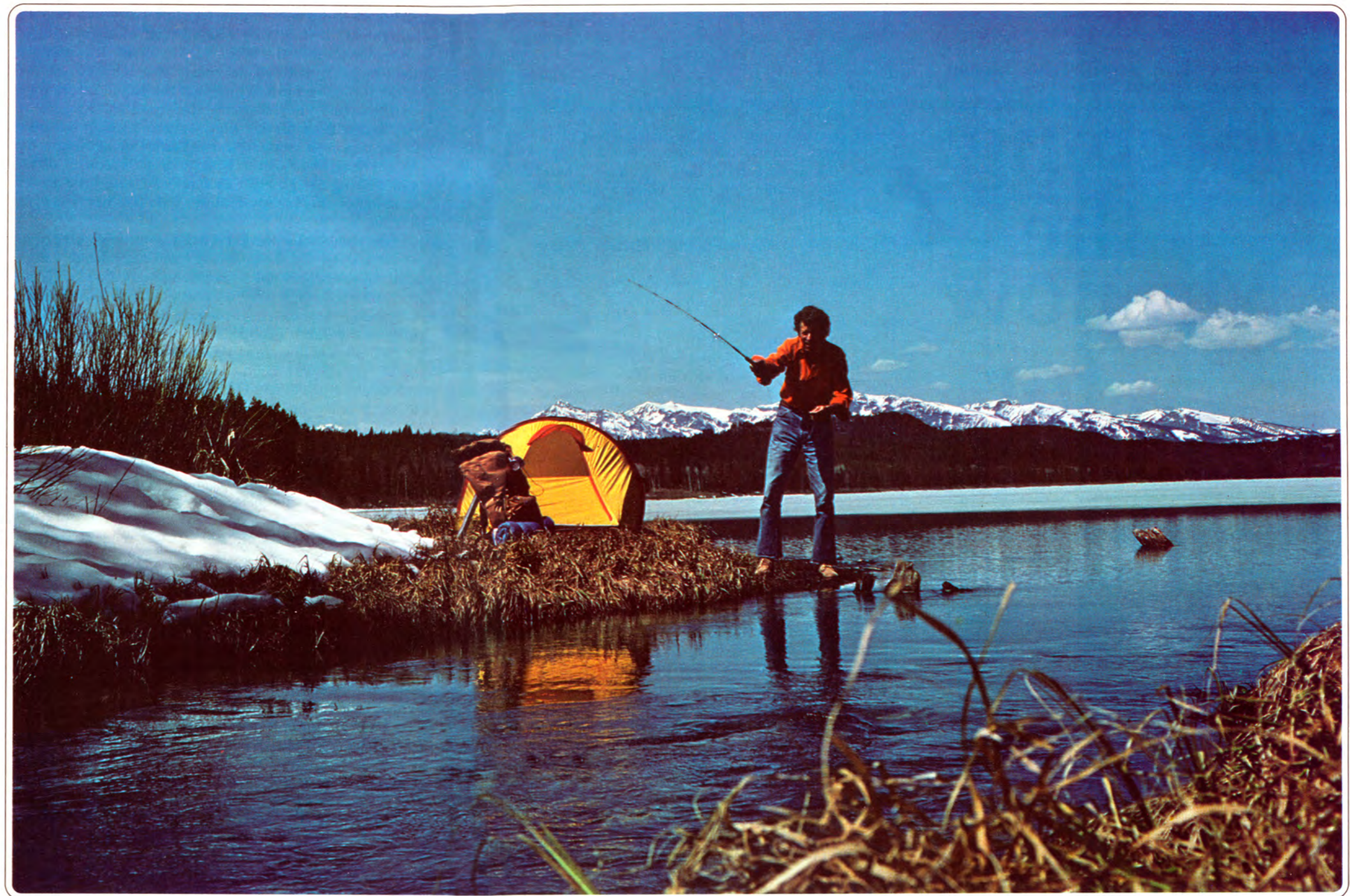
Hatching damselflies and dragonflies emerge near shore and weeds, and pursuing trout make heavy boils. Damselfly nymphs swim near the surface with a minnowlike swimming motion, and nymphs should be fished there on a floating line with a slow-pull, jerk-jerk, retrieve. Dragonfly nymphs should be fished near shore along the bottom in short spurts. When damselflies and dragonflies are ovipositing around weeds, a Blue Damselfly given an occasional twitch may bring smashing strikes from prowling trout.

Mayfly hatches and spinner falls are normally easy to recognize, with duns and spinners visible on the surface. Fishing the rise is *de rigueur*. Be alert, though, for rises that aren't breaking the surface; the trout may still be taking the nymphs rather than the duns. All the lake-dwelling species of nymphs are agile in the water and imitations should be fished with a darting retrieve.

Wind is a major variable affecting alpine-lake hatches, and while a surface whipped into whitecaps retards hatches and obscures surface food, a light wind can create fantastic dry-fly action and simplify locating trout.

A few Septembers ago, I was fishing Toxaway Lake in Idaho's Sawtooth Range, when I noticed hundreds of flying insects around shoreline trees. Backlit by the sun, they looked luminous and huge. I thought they were caddis. Since there were no rises, I continued casting an Otter Shrimp, working my way along shore, hooking two small brookies in an hour or so—slow fishing. Near sunset the flies thickened, and moved out over the lake. Soon tentative rises appeared in the formerly unbroken lake surface, and incredibly, in less than five minutes acres of water boiled with hundreds of trout.

For once, I resisted tying on a fly and netted a specimen. It was a winged ant! In fact, there were two colors, black and cinnamon. I should have suspected, since I'd encountered their autumn mating flights



If a lake has feeder streams, they are often productive waters. Photo by Erwin Bauer.

many times before. I tied on a #10 winged Black Ant, and caught trout on every cast until its wings were gone. Tying on a new fly, I noticed the risers had moved eighty yards to the cove's opposite shore. I ventured several casts where I was, then moved over and began taking fish again. I released over thirty in the half-hour before dark, then reeled in, jaded. I sat listening to the slurping sound of the trout, like an audible mist over the lake, and pondered the abrupt shift in the rises. The wind, of course. It had blown the

flying and drowned ants alike to the windward shore and the trout had followed. A similar situation nearly always occurs the morning after a strong night wind, when a potpourri of midges, mayflies and terrestrials accumulates in narrow bands on the lake's windward side.

Such moments of unexpected bounty make up for the days—and they do occur at 10,000 feet—when nothing moves, and you'd swear the lake was barren, or when four-pound trout circle shallow coves within

casting distance, but refuse all offerings. Much remains to be learned about alpine lakes, their trout and matching their hatches. But the fly fisherman who approaches a lake with an attitude of respect and inquiry won't encounter the boom-and-bust myth about high-lakes trout very often. And even if he is foiled, there's the omnipresent balm of stunning scenery, and the knowledge that probably no one else was around to witness his being fooled by a trout that sees about six anglers a year.