

They're not the legendary catch-them-on-anything bug

Matching the Hopper Hatch

JOHN GIERACH

THE FIRST TROUT I EVER CAUGHT was on a live grasshopper. I had moved West and the first order of business was to land a rainbow. My friend Ed Engle took me to a small stream just west of town. It was high summer, and as we walked down the grassy slopes to the water we caught a few hoppers. I fished one through a riffle and caught my first trout, then my second. I was hooked.

We worked the same little stream all summer, dapping hoppers along the undercut banks, fishing them dry in the runs and even sinking them with split-shot to fish the deep holes. If we could get a hopper to where the fish were, they would bite it; it was as simple as that.

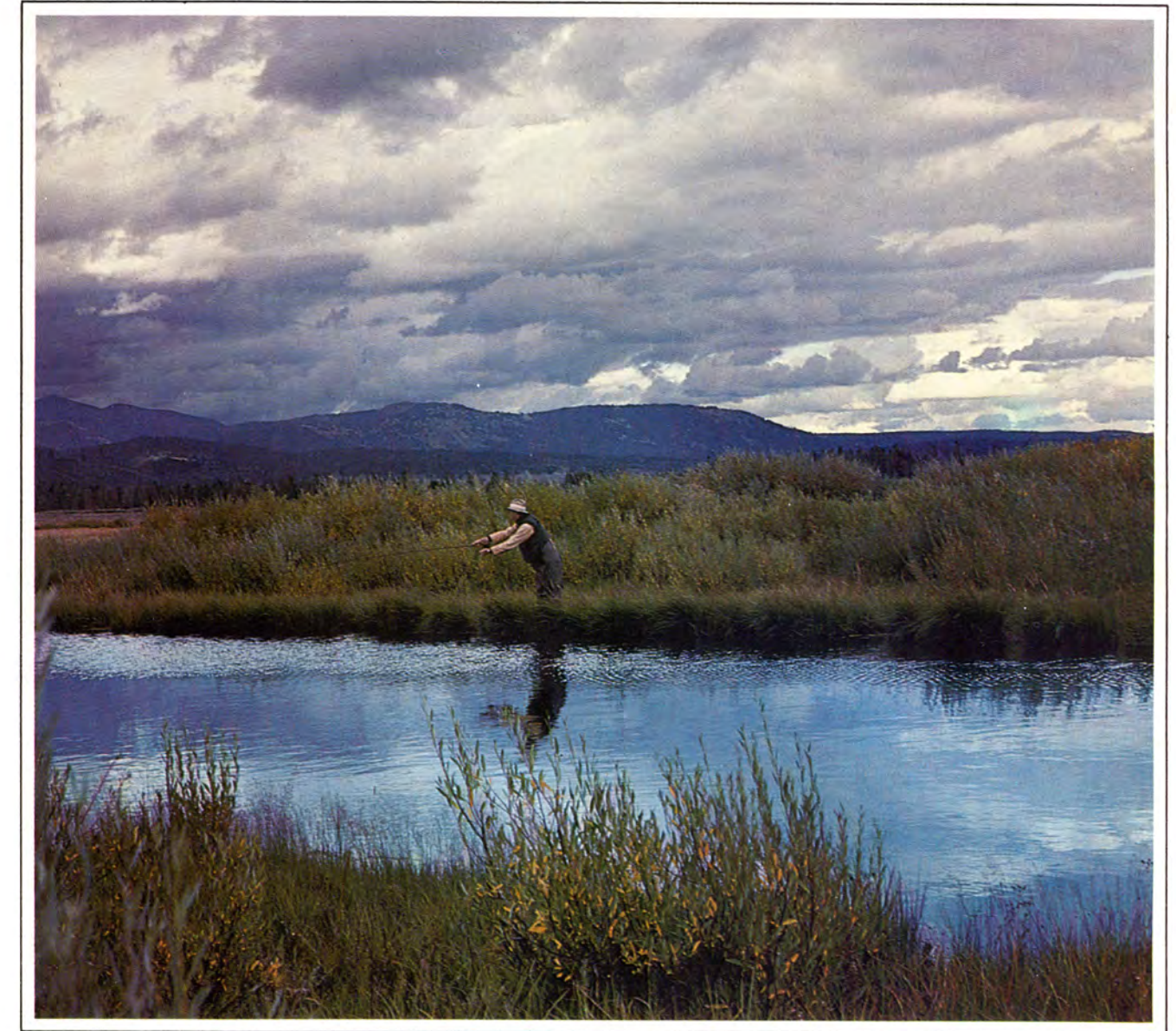
JOHN GIERACH is a freelance writer who lives in Longmont, Colorado.

I took to going up every evening after work, and one day it occurred to me that catching hoppers was cutting into my fishing time. So, early the next morning when it was still cool, I went into the field behind my house and collected a jarful of hoppers. They were still dormant from the night before. It was easy picking.

That afternoon I fished alone and didn't move a single trout. When I stopped at Ed's on the way home for a consultation, he looked at my jar of hoppers and said, "Well, you see, these are an olive color, and the ones up there are light tan with a red stripe on their legs."

In all the time I'd fished with Ed I'd noticed that when he used bait he always collected it from the area he was going to fish. Now I understood why.

Grasshoppers can be found almost anywhere there is vegetation. They share the order *Orthoptera* with



Prime hopper water. Photo by Dale Spartas.

katydids, crickets, cockroaches, mantids and walking sticks. Although some are flightless, most grasshoppers fly with varying degrees of efficiency. They are, as a rule, fat-bodied, with strong hind legs for jumping and large, squarish heads. The hind wings, the ones actually used for flying, are soft and membranous and are often brightly colored. The forewings are hard and shell-like and act as a covering for the wings while at rest and as body armor.

The various species range in color from almost black through dark brown, olive and tan to bright green. In size they range from one-half to two-and-one-half inches. They often assume the predominant color of their surroundings so that a species that might be green in a cornfield could be yellow in dry grass.

The most important group to the angler are the *Acrididae*, or short-horned grasshoppers, which include most of the hoppers found in fields and along roadsides from mid-summer until fall. Two species in this family, the *Romalae microptera* in the South and the *Brachystola magna* in the West, are among the largest North American grasshoppers, growing to as much as two-and-one-half inches, or about as long as a #1 streamer hook. However, the pygmy grasshoppers, or grouse locusts (family *Tetrigidae*), are usually between one-half and three-quarters of an inch long.

Meadow hoppers (subfamily *Conocophalinae*) are about five-eighths of an inch long and greenish and are found in wet, grassy meadows and along the margins of ponds and streams. Shield-back hoppers (subfamily *Decticinae*) are usually an inch or more long, brownish



in color and are found in dry woods and adjoining fields.

There are local variations both in the species present and in their coloration. Hoppers that live in rocky terrain with a predominant growth of sage may be bluish gray, but those that inhabit the borders of hardwood forests can be almost black.

MANY ANGLERS TELL STORIES of trout hitting pieces of bark when hoppers are on the water. This may or may not be true, but the feeling is prevalent that when fishing to hoppers any large, clunky fly will do the trick. Many fly fishermen who pay close attention to caddis and mayflies and imitate them carefully still believe that a hopper is a hopper. Some anglers don't even



Matching the color of the natural (above) can be critical to successful hopper fishing. Photo by Boyd Marts. Variations on the hopper (below). Photo by Scott Roederer.

in every conceivable size and color, and who would never think of matching a #20 blue dun hatch with, say, a #14 Adams.

Hopper flies come in a wide variety. Often the head is made of deerhair, one of the best uses for this versatile material. The wings are usually quill sections, and the bodies are dubbed. Legs can be made of clipped

carry hopper patterns but rely on an unweighted and greased Muddler Minnow, which works well when the size and color of the Muddler happen to be close to that of the natural.

Those who do carry hoppers usually keep one or two in a corner of the odd box. These are often the same anglers who carry dries and nymphs

hackle stems, bunched pheasant-tail barbules or a simple flaring of the first bunch of deerhair from the head.

The one advantage that hopper flies have over many other imitations is that they feel like the genuine article. Whether it's this effect or the extreme desirability of hoppers as a food source, a fish that hits a hopper fly is usually hooked.

As with other imitations, it's better to try for a general impression of the insect than a sculptural likeness. The Letort Hopper is one of the simplest patterns around, with a dubbed body, flared deerhair wing and clipped-hair head. It is also one of the most effective, especially in the smaller sizes.

On the other end of the scale you'll find such realistic creations as the Whitlock Hopper and a disturbingly realistic item tied by Kenn Ligas of Boulder, Colorado. These have the disadvantage of greater wind resistance, but they are proven fish getters.

More important than the actual pattern are the size, color and floating qualities of the fly. Flies should be tied with the most buoyant materials available, and a good dose of fly floatant doesn't hurt.

Commercially tied hopper patterns come in an acceptable range of sizes, from about #14 all the way up to some monsters tied on #1 and #2 streamer hooks. Caddisflies from any given hatch may range between two or even three hook sizes, and hoppers usually exhibit an even greater variation in size. For this reason three or four sizes of hopper will cover most situations. However, this is not the case with color. Commercial hoppers are predominantly yellow; green ones are rare, and very dark brown ones almost impossible to find.

As with most fly patterns, the correct size is more crucial than the right color, but there are many times—for instance early in the summer when the new growth is still brilliantly green—when a yellow hopper won't produce, but a green-to-olive one is just the ticket. Later in the year when the same growth is parched brown, the opposite may be true.

HOPPERS ARE NOT THE LEGENDARY "drives-them-wild-and-you-can-catch-them-on-anything" bug. Feeding to grasshoppers is usually a leisurely affair appropriate to the hot summer afternoons when it's at its best. Like most other terrestrials, hoppers occasionally find themselves in the water, where their size and frantic struggling make them particularly attractive to trout, panfish and bass.

In the height of summer trout tend to feed most heavily from early evening into the night. They rest and digest during the early-morning hours and feed again approximately from dawn until the day warms. Insects are also active during these two periods, due perhaps to the mild temperatures. And these are the most comfortable times for the angler to be on the stream.

From mid-morning until evening the fishing slows to a crawl, and streams and lakes that were speckled with rises seem deserted, devoid of fish life. While some fly fishermen probe the pocket water with attractor

dries or drift nymphs through the deeper pools, the hopper fisherman prowls undercut, grassy banks, watching for the telltale swirls of hopper-feeding fish. Both trout and bass become sullen during this time of day, and it takes a worthwhile morsel to break their trance. Off the bank hops a grasshopper.

HOPPERS ARE MOST ACTIVE during the heat of the day, when caddis and mayfly activity falls off—a nice arrangement for fish and fisherman. Even on a calm day they end up in the water with surprising regularity, and when there's a stiff breeze blowing, you can get a virtual hopper fall. The ideal situation is a grassy field bordering an undercut bank where the current is relatively slow. A rise to hoppers is not regular, and you may have to study a stretch of water for some time to locate a feeding fish—a leisurely and enjoyable pastime on a droopy afternoon.

Once you locate a likely fish, you use standard dry-fly tactics—with one exception: It's perfectly acceptable for the fly to hit the water with a good slap. It's a good thing, too, because the size, weight and wind resistance of hopper flies can make them devils to cast, especially on the light rig you're likely to be carrying in anticipation of the evening rise.

Twitching the fly can also bring great results, but don't overdo it. A dunked live hopper can cause quite a commotion. While it drifts it will try to jump or fly out of its predicament, but it won't swim. Twitching a fly without dragging it means that you'll be fishing a fairly short cast. Although your fly can make some noise, it's best to keep a low profile and use all the stealth you can in stalking close to the fish.

And don't rule out the dead-drift. When live hoppers are dropped in the water (another way to locate fish) they will often lie perfectly still. A standard dry-fly presentation with a hopper can be deadly.

Rather than work a piece of water thoroughly, as you would with a nymph or searching dry fly, try casting a few times to a likely looking spot and then moving on. Hoppers present the fish with a one-shot opportunity, and if it's going to take, it will quickly. When you fish hoppers it's the middle of a summer day, and trout won't be cruising the shallows or lying in a fast current waiting for insects. Slow currents running in protected, preferably shaded places are lies where big fish are often found, and the big-fish/big-bait theory will often become a self-fulfilling prophecy for you when fishing hoppers. A fat brown that can't be bothered with even a fair-size mayfly will sometimes move for a minnow-size hopper.

In larger rivers and lakes you'll be working a fairly thin strip along the bank, but on smaller streams where nothing is very far from shore, you can work the water as you normally would with a dry fly.

Fishing a hopper is a good way to prospect water during that slack time between the morning and evening rises, but it's more than just an idle pastime. With the right fly patterns and a little careful observation you might find yourself taking the best fish of the day. 🐟

FLY FISHERMAN®

LATE SEASON · 1980

July-September · \$1.95

Salmonfly Hatch • Nymphing Spring Creeks • Pack Rods
New Fly Knot • Small Streams • Low-Water Troutng



024 14323
y Fisherman

07