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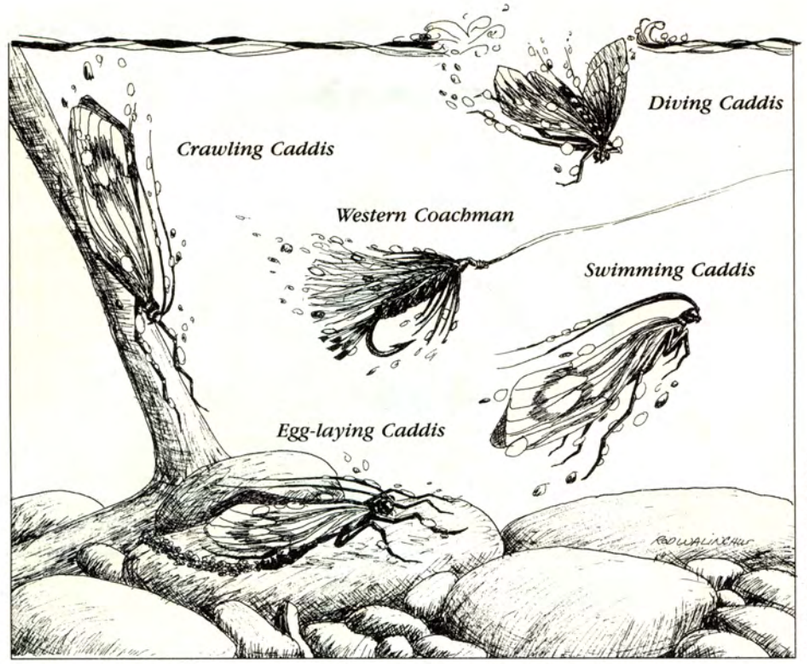
How to fish a midwater swimming caddis imitation



RODNEY WALINCHUS ILLUSTRATION

Odier's Caddis

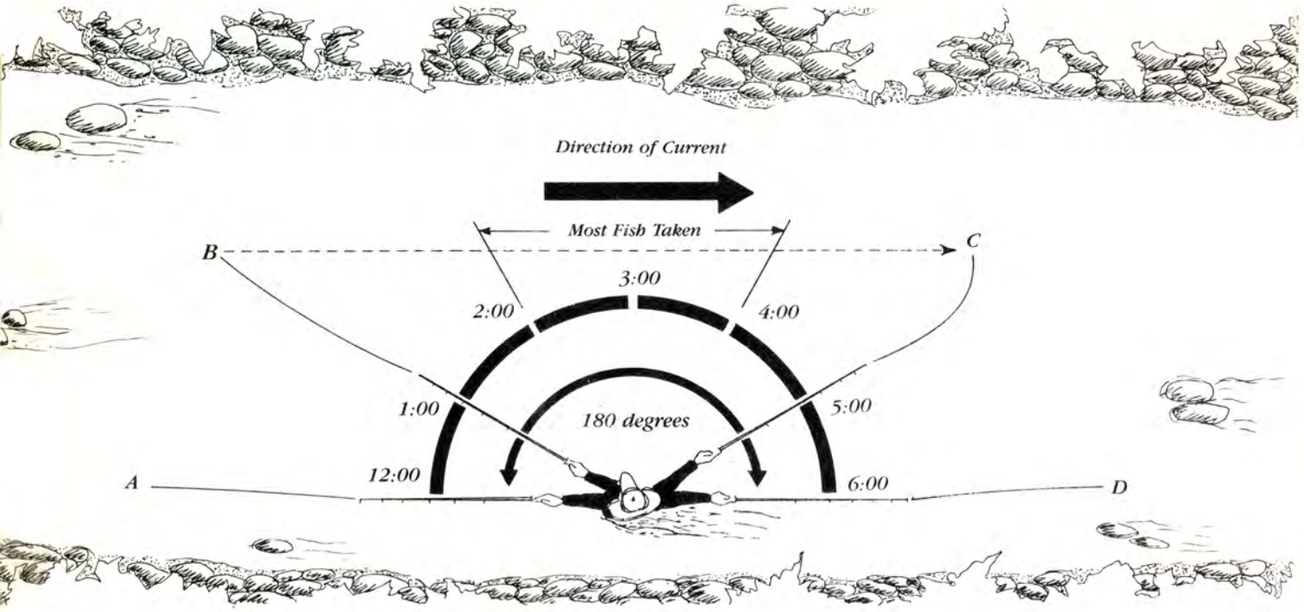
JOHN RANDOLPH

AT HIS HOME NEAR GRAND RAPIDS, Michigan, Dr. Carl Richards, a dentist, makes his evening retreat to his den, where he takes his meal and, in seclusion, begins his daily routine. He sits intently watching an aquarium fish tank. Inside the tank, little things begin to move in the stoney underwater rubble. Restless, wormlike insects crawl to the tops of the stones, then release and ascend and pause, ascend and pause, moving, as though floating, to the water's surface.

Richards searches for a tiny glint of silver that indicates an air bubble inside the skin of an ascending caddis pupa. The bubble has been described by other fly-fishing writers and by entomologists, but Richards, in his years of watching his tanks, has been unable to detect the silver glob of air. His conclusion is that the air bubble does not exist, and therefore is unimportant to the creation of flies that will take trout on Michigan's great caddis river—the Muskegon. Solving the caddis mystery is his last great quest, he says.

If anyone unlocks the remaining secrets of caddis hatches, it will probably be Carl Richards.

Richards is one of a handful of anglers laboring to discover how to create and fish flies that more effectively match the ubiquitous and massive caddis hatches of North America. Gary LaFontaine spent a de-



(A to D)is the 180 degree zone in which Odier's swimming fly can be fished effectively. (B to C) is the zone within which you should recieve most of your strikes by fish.

cade researching and writing *Caddisflies*, and he provided some answers. Eric Leiser and Larry Solomon tackled the fly-fishing Gordian Knot in their *Caddis and the Angler*, and they offered techniques to match some caddis hatches. But, as Carl Richards points out, the caddis puzzle to this day remains largely unsolved. Another angler, Georges Odier, owner of Fothergill's Ltd. fly shop in Aspen, Colorado, has found some of the answers that anglers have been longing for.

In his 1984 book, *Swimming Flies* (Stonewall Press), Odier described his fly-swimming technique in such glowing terms that in July 1986 I decided to test them with him on his home rivers, the Frying Pan and Roaring Fork rivers.

Odier claims that an experienced fisher using a Western Coachman or Rio Grande King pattern and his line-swimming technique can stand in one spot and take 20 to 30 fish when the trout are feeding on adult caddis. I did not see trout on a heavy feeding binge when I fished the Frying Pan with Odier, but the feeding I observed and the fish we caught convinced me that his line-swimming technique, used during ovipositing caddis flights, can be as deadly as fishing hopper patterns on a Montana river during a vintage hopper year.

The nature of the take that Odier's technique elicits from trout should nudge the imaginations of even the most jaded fly fishers. When the Western Coachman is presented (swum) properly, large trout seem to abandon their survival instincts, and they come up "as though on tracks" and hook themselves on the moving fly. The rise, in its compulsiveness, can only be compared to a trout's dashing rise to live hoppers.

Since 1984, I have tested Odier's technique on rivers from Montana to New York state, and on the chalk-streams of England. My discoveries create more questions than answers. The technique worked best for me on the Frying Pan and Roaring Fork. It didn't work as well for me on the Madison in Yellowstone Park (a superb caddis stream), but it worked killingly on the fast-water stretches of the river from Slide Inn to Ennis. It worked poorly on the relatively slow waters of the Yellow Breeches in Pennsylvania, and it took few fish on the main stem of the Delaware at Hancock, N.Y., despite a heavy rise of trout to riffle-water caddis during the days I fished.

Why the differences in success? Perhaps Odier explains it best. He believes his line-swimming technique imitates a swimming-caddis that trout are accustomed to seeing and chasing. On the Frying Pan and the nearby Roaring Fork there must be caddis species that swim as adults to deposit eggs (either by crawling into the water or by diving into it).

How It Works

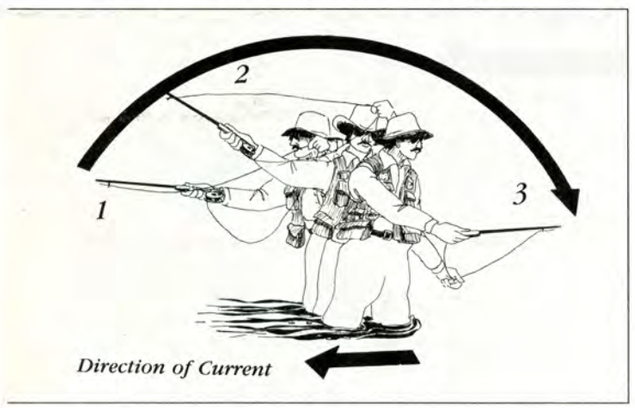
USING THE FLY LINE to swim a fly is an ancient technique, but Odier's peculiar use of the line, fly, leader, and lead weight is innovative. He attempts to create the right prey image, one that trout are accustomed to spotting and chasing in the mid-depths of their stream. Odier theorizes that the sight of the egg-laying, swimming caddis triggers a strike response from trout. Judging by my success with the technique and the testimony of his guides who use the technique, he has discovered an extremely deadly fly presentation. His estimates of 20- to 30-fish afternoons are accurate.

To fish the fly effectively, Odier prefers a thin-walled graphite rod. The Odier Nymphing Rod (a 9-foot for a 4½-weight line) that he codesigned with rodmaker Harry Wilson of Scott PowR-Ply has a unique construction: The butt section is built on a 5-weight mandrel and the tip section on a 4-weight mandrel, creating a rod with fast tip action, sensitivity and butt strength. Overall, it provides the ultimate in lightness and sensitivity. Although the Odier Nymphing Rod has that superb delicate feel that all nymph and wet-fly fishers look for, any standard 8½- to 9-foot (5- to 7-weight) graphite rod can be used for fishing the Odier technique.

Rigging the necessary lead to the leader is quick and easy. Using lead is critical to nymph-fishing, and proper casting and swimming of the line and fly are essential to the success of Odier's technique. Here's how the technique works.

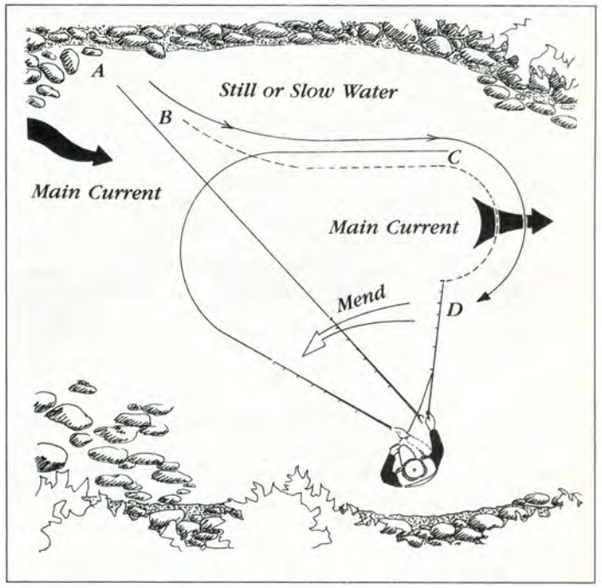
About 18 inches above the fly, attach Twist-ons to the leader according to stream flow and turbidity (the faster and more turbid the water, the more Twist-ons needed), using crimping scissors to snug the Twist-on tightly so it will not unwrap. This technique works best in riffle waters, especially those fast-moving riffles pocketed with boulders, small standing waves, and their downstream vees of seam and pocket water.

Odier uses a water-haul cast to load the rod and cast the floating weight-forward line. The result is a fast-line cast upstream to a one o'clock position—assuming that 12 o'clock is straight upstream from where the angler stands (see the accompanying illustration for a graphic depiction of the clock). To make the water-haul cast, allow your line—40 to 50 feet of it—to drift downstream until it is straight below you. Open the arc of your casting stroke by extending your arm out and downstream toward the fly. As you come forward with your casting arm, the line's weight and water-drag on the line loads the rod. As you stroke the rod forward, haul on the line with your line hand. The drag on the line, together with your hauling, quickly loads the rod down into the butt, and the line slings in an extremely fast cast, shooting upstream to the target.



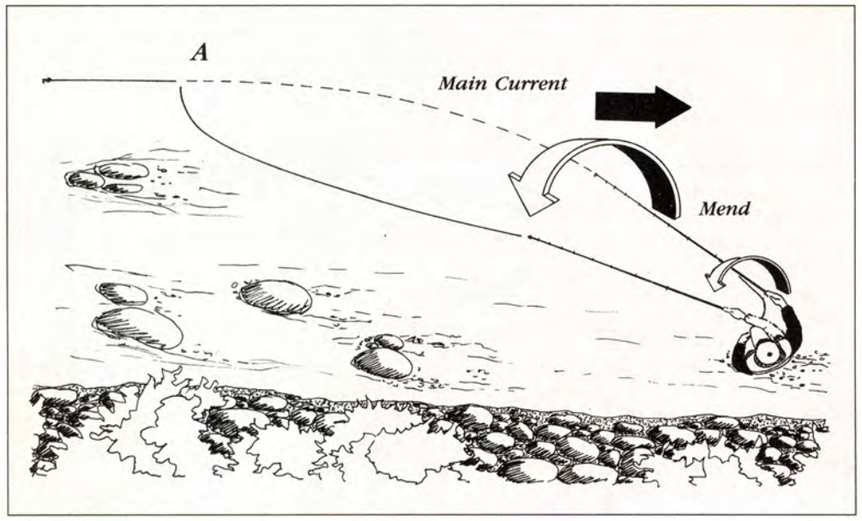
The Overhead Cast: With your line hanging directly downcurrent below you, and your rod held horizontal with the water, lift the line out of the current and, accelerating the line with a strong single haul, stroke the rod to 11 o'clock and stop it. Point the rod tip in the direction you want the fly to land and allow the line to shoot out through the guides.

When you are fishing across the main current to slow water, your fly is dragged naturally by the line from A to B. Mend the line hard upstream (C) to let the fly swim across current in a tight arc. The line A to D represents the travel of the fly from splashdown to final standstill.



As you add weight to the leader,to open your casting loop, you should decrease the speed of your wrist snap in stroking the rod (The more lead you use, the more open your casting loop should be). You can use this water-haul, open-loop cast for all of your weighted-nymph fishing. The cast is called "chuck and duck" by most fishermen, and there are those who recommend wearing a football helmet to escape injury to the head and neck. I prefer to turn the flap down on the back of my up-downer fishing hat, to protect my neck, and I bend at the waist as the cast comes forward. I also debarb the hook. (A debarbed hook comes easily out of human flesh, but removing a barbed hook can entail agony.)

When the fly (a #10 to #14 Western Coachman or Rio Grande King pattern) lands, make one hard mend upstream (two if the water is fast and turbid). The mend allows the fly and line time to sink in their downstream drift. If your cast lands close to the one o'clock position, the line should begin to swim the fly across-stream and upward in the water column by the time it reaches the two o'clock position. As the line drifts downstream toward you, strip hard with your line hand. The hard strip should become a long, hard haul if the water is fast. Stripping does not keep a tight



You allow the fly to sink to its proper swimming depth by repeated the repeated upstream mending shown above. Mend by quick wrist rotation, simultaneously releasing slack line from your left hand (for right-hand casters).

line, but it does remove enough slack to keep you in touch with the fly.

When a fish strikes, strip-strike by lifting the rod tip and hauling down on the line. The dashing strike is usually so swift and so committed that rising trout hook themselves.

You should receive most of your strikes in the zone from two o'clock to four o'clock, but if you do not get a strike, allow the fly to continue its drift downstream until it reaches the end of its swing. Then let it swim there for several seconds before beginning the next water-haul cast. During heavy feeding periods, trout often take in any or all zones of the swing—from two o'clock to six o'clock.

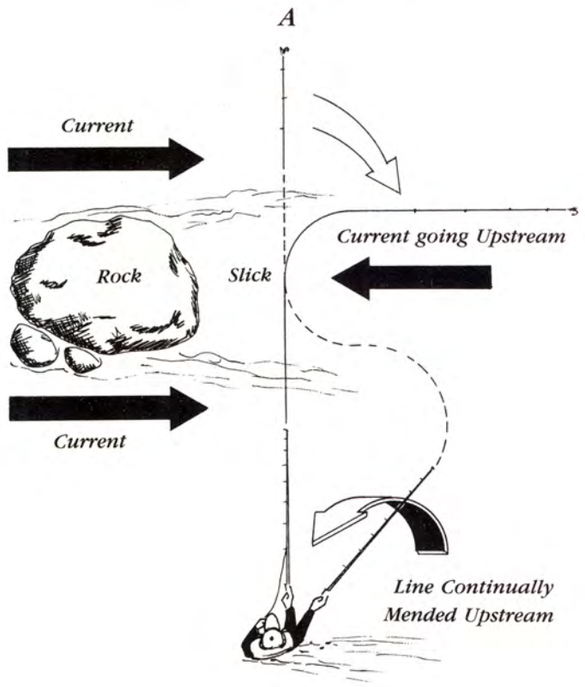
In the Odier technique, casting, mending, and stripping control are the key elements to presentation, and all are essential to creating the prey image that trout expect to see in the mid-water portion of the water column.

Where To Fish the Odier Technique

RIFFLE WATER is the high-catch water for the Odier swimming-caddis technique. When reading the water, Odier looks for the upper end of a vee of riffles, usually created by an underwater boulder or shoal. He approaches from below and casts upstream about 50 feet to his target area. Then he works successive casts downstream through the riffle area, adjusting his Twist-ons wherever necessary to achieve the right sink rate on the fly. When feeding is heavy, such riffles hold pods of fish, and the fast-paced action Odier describes in his book usually occurs in such hotspots.

Long, relatively deep, dark-water slots alongside riffles hold large trout. When feeding begins on the Frying Pan, you can see dorsals and tails moving above the water as the fish move to take swimming caddis. It can take an hour or two to carefully work a 200-foot riffle, and at such times one can expect slashing strikes on every other cast.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ROD WALINCHUS ADAPTED FROM *SWIMMING FLIES* BY GEORGES ODIER, STONE WALL PRESS, INC.



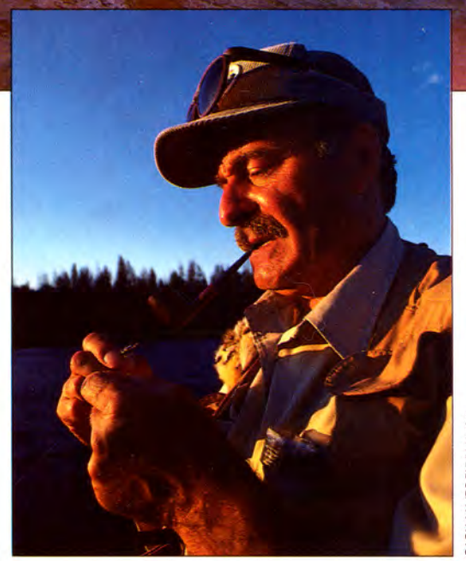
When it's taken by the current, the fly swings from A to B, where it remains still. By pulling the line gently, you can move the fly upstream at the edge of the slick.

GEORGES ODIER PHOTO

I'm still exploring my Pennsylvania rivers for their caddis potential using the Odier swimming-caddis technique. When exploring waters with the Western Coachman, I ask: Does the stream have large caddis hatches? If it does, I attempt to time my fishing to the onset of caddis egg-laying. It can be difficult to determine if egg-laying has begun, because some caddis species simply crawl down the bank or a downed tree limb and into the water. Others dive and swim to bottom to begin egg laying. Commencement of egg-laying activity may not be at all obvious. The only way to test the water for an emersion (as opposed to an emergence) is to fish the fly. If trout are on the take, the action will be swift and furious. As Odier points out, if you do not get a take in the first three or four casts into good riffle water, then the fish are not feeding on swimming caddis.

To give the Odier technique a proper try, simply keep a few Western Coachman patterns (#10 to #14) and Twist-ons in your vest. When fishing a known caddis stream on an otherwise slow day, simply tie on, twist on, and fish the water. One afternoon of success should convince you of Odier's discovery. It has convinced me. Georges Odier has unlocked at least one caddis mystery for us. We await others to come from Carl Richards.

JOHN RANDOLPH is editor and publisher of FLY FISHERMAN.



JOHN RANDOLPH PHOTO

Georges Odier demonstrates how hard and fast he must strip to keep up with excess line as the fly drifts downstream toward him on the Frying Pan River near Basalt, Colorado. Rapid line manipulation is critical to successful fishing of his mid-water fly-swimming technique.