

Reading Riseforms

Let the trout help you choose a fly and a technique.

CARL RICHARDS

THE SOUND OF THE BROWN TROUT'S RISE exploded in the gathering evening darkness. I was mid-June Saturday fishing Michigan's Au Sable River. The winter of 1982-83 had been the mildest in memory; spring was late, cold and very wet, and we were experiencing the first three days of hot, dry weather. The major insect hatch dates had been completely upset, and looking for a specific emergence at the normal time had become a joke.

By 9:30 that humid evening the light level was so low you could not see a small dry fly on the water, and, predictably, at that exact time small pale-evening dun spinners started hitting the surface. The riseform for this *Ephemerella dorothea* spinnerfall is a quiet dimple rise, almost invisible and inaudible over the sounds of the river. I quickly attached a #18 Dun Cream Henspinner to my 6X tippet. Looking for a spot where the pale fading light provided enough visibility, I discovered a pod of decent fish feeding quietly but rhythmically to the spinners.

After I had hooked and released brookies and brown trout up to 12 inches, it was dark and only a faint star-shine on the current gave hints of trout feeding positions. It had become difficult to cast effectively to those taking spots and totally impossible to know where the fish silently fed. Then at 10 P.M. (I checked my watch) I was startled by the splash of a large brown or rainbow trout. That fish could not be taking small spent spinners! But what? There was nothing else on the water. I unhooked my two-celled flashlight from its belt sling and played the beam on the water. The light instantly put down the small feeding trout and revealed a flat pool carpeted with tiny spent spinners. Nothing else. The trout had taken something large off the surface. Perhaps it was just a once-a-night occurrence, perhaps a big night moth.

I could see no large fly to match, so I slipped downstream to the next quiet run, hoping I'd find another pod of nice brook trout before the *dorothea* spinnerfall ended. Suddenly I heard another loud splash-rise, and then another from a different spot in the flow. Something important was happening and I knew I must find out fast what it was or miss some rare fishing—or, more important, perhaps miss the discovery of what caused those huge fish to feed so ferociously. I'd never heard such a noise, even during a *Hexagenia* rise. Besides, it was too early in the year for the Hex

hatch. I searched the stream with the light but saw nothing except a few tiny spent spinners; the *dorothea* fall was about ended.

Our lodge was nearby so I slipped downstream to the dock, which has a big mercury-vapor light capable of lighting a large area of the river almost as bright as the mid-day sun.

I switched on the light and rested, watching from the bench overlooking the river. After several moments numerous species of aquatic and terrestrial insects fluttered to the intense beam, but nothing appeared large enough to create such explosive riseforms. Then a large humming-bird-like form appeared, fluttering on the water's surface. It was a familiar form, but I could scarcely believe it! We have large stoneflies (*Pteronarcys*) in Michigan, but it was too late in the season for them, and the stream was not the type to support them in large numbers—or so I thought.

I looked down at my waders and two more of the big flies crawled up my legs. Out on the river a half dozen skimmed the surface. As I sat on the dock, dozens more floated down the stream, and I could hear large fish feeding splashily in the distance.

The fly was the same huge stonefly that is called the salmonfly out west. Our Michigan counterpart is a different species (*dodsi* instead of *californica*) but every bit as large, and in the midwest and east it is nocturnal.

Hurrying back to my room, I found a box of imitations tied for the Bighole and the Madison rivers in Montana. I selected a fluttering version, tied it on and proceeded downstream to hook and land browns I wouldn't have believed existed in those heavily pounded waters.

I had witnessed extremes of feeding that night; first, quiet, sipping rises with the fish feeding on small spent mayfly spinners then loud, splashy surface rises made by large trout striking huge egg-laying stoneflies. The night provided a dramatic lesson in why a knowledge of how trout take a natural insect can put many more fish in your net.

Reading Riseforms

TO MY MIND THERE ARE TWO main deductions that can be drawn from observing riseforms. First, and perhaps the most fundamental decision to be made: Are fish taking an insect on the surface or just under the film (but close enough to the surface so it disturbs the film)? You must be able to distinguish between a surface feeder engulfing winged

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A sipping rise, with no bubble, usually means the trout is taking an emerger in, or just below, the surface film. Inset: Head and tail rise indicates that fish are feeding on spent caddis or mayfly spinners. BOYD MARTS PHOTOS

Riseforms . . .

duns or spinners, and a subsurface feeder gorging on nymphs before they reach the film. If you can do this, you have an idea of whether to fish wet with a nymph or with a dun or spinner. That is about as basic a decision as you can make.

Second, after you have made your discovery as to subsurface or surface feeding, there are various forms of each type of rise which may suggest exactly what the fish are feeding on. It could be small insects, large insects, fast emergers, slow emergers, flies trapped in the surface film or flies also caught in the film but which can escape quickly.

Fish act differently when feeding on all these various stages of widely different insects. There is no problem if there is only one species of flies, say Hendrickson duns, on the water and you have decided the fish are taking the duns. But suppose along with the #14 *subvarias*, you have on or in the water #18 Bluewinged olives (*Baetis vagans*) and #16 Slate Wing Mahogany flies (*Paraleptophlebia*) plus two different size caddis species (a #16 and a #22), all probable on a rich limestone stream such as the Au Sable. In such situations you may have problems deciphering which stage, which species and at what level the fish are feeding at any particular time. And what may be more frustrating: Once you figure out one feeding location and land some nice fish, the next spot downstream exhibits completely different feeding characteristics. You must re-analyze what the devil the fish are doing.

Surface Feeding

THE MOST IMPORTANT discovery to make is: Are fish feeding on the surface? Just under the surface? On the bottom? A sure way to decide is to notice if the trout leaves a bubble after the rise. If it does, then the rise is most surely a surface take.

The bubble is created by the way a trout takes a natural on the surface. As a trout ascends to the surface, it opens its mouth, allowing the surface current to flow into its mouth and carrying the insect with it. The water exits through the gill openings, and as the fish closes its mouth, the insect is swallowed and a bubble of air is expelled. That



A bubble left in the ring of the trout's rise indicates that the fish took an insect off the surface. DAVE WHITLOCK ILLUSTRATION

bubble can be spotted in the middle of the ring of the rise.

If you cannot see a bubble, but still suspect that the trout are surface feeding, careful observation can help. At such times when I observe trout seemingly feeding on the surface I watch the naturals floating down into the trout's feeding lane. If the trout rise, but no emerged dun is taken and time after time the fish boil around the surface flies but none disappears, such signs can only mean the fish are taking nymphs just subsurface and in fact not feeding on the winged duns at all.

There are numerous classic riseforms, both surface and subsurface, forms which have been studied and given various names by legendary English and American anglers. For most anglers, except the very experienced, recalling the myriad and confusing names can be a chore, so I will simply list the common forms and give important information for each.

One general rule will help you clarify the whole complex situation: The smaller or the less likely the insect is to escape quickly, the quieter the riseform. The larger or the more quickly the insect is likely to escape, the more showy the riseform.

It must be clearly understood that this is a *general rule*. It does not say all small insects elicit only quiet riseforms. A small caddis that can pop off the surface rapidly may cause a splashy rise, and a large spinner completely spent in the film in quiet water may be fed on heavily by good fish producing only quiet rings.

Subsurface Riseforms

Fish flashing. Deep in the runs I often see situations in which an abundance of mayfly duns are on the water but few fish rise. If I notice flashes deep in the runs of the main current, it's an indication the trout are taking nymphs on the bottom or just as the nymphs rise from the bottom. A weighted nymph will take trout very easily at such times.

Tailing. These are trout standing on their heads, rooting on the bottom for skuds, shrimp, nymphs or other bottom foods. Thus the tails break the surface occasionally as the fish feed. Such feeding probably occurs more often than is realized by fishermen but the riseforms are not seen because water conditions must be almost perfect to see them. Tactics: Fish a sunken nymph on the bottom that matches the hatch of the natural the trout are feeding on.

Splashy rise, no bubble. These are fish taking subsurface insects such as caddis pupa which are likely to fly away very rapidly. Tactics: Cast a pupa or nymph imitation of the natural upstream; let the fly sink and lift your rod tip as the fly floats downstream toward you, thus giving the imitation a movement to simulate swimming to the surface.

Big showy swirls, no bubble. Quite often these are medium to large fish taking a large nymph such as a Brown Drake or a Hex nymph just before emerging. Tactics: Fish a large unweighted nymph dead-drift below the film.

Bulge or hump rise or hump roll. Large fish will roll slowly with their backs breaking the surface to take a small nymph in shallow and smooth water. I have seen them do this repeatedly when the flies were small but numbered in the millions along the placid edge of Henrys Fork in Idaho. Tactics: Fish an unweighted nymph matching the natural hatching. Fish it in the film or just below it. Also try a matching



"Tailing" trout are rooting the bottom for such foods as scuds or shrimp.

soft-hackle fly fished in the same place and manner.

The hog-wallowing nymph. My own name for a phenomenon I have seen repeatedly on big spring creeks of the West, it describes a situation in which an enormous emergence of small mayflies is in progress, and big rainbow prowl the shallow quiet water near the banks and wallow, feeding in water just deep enough to cover their backs. The trout move very slowly, with their dorsal fins, backs, and tips of tails breaking the surface, but not their mouths. They are feeding on nymphs just under the surface, often taking ten or more at one gulp. Occasionally one fish will lift and take a surface fly, but very rarely, and by far the majority of insects are taken subsurface. Tactics: Also fish the unweighted nymph of the same size and color as the natural, fished in the film or just beneath it. In this case you must lead the moving trout in an attempt to cast the fly just ahead of where he will be when the fly lands.

Surface Riseforms

(Please recall that there will usually be an air bubble present in the ring of the rise, and, if you look closely, you should see floating insects disappear, the tip-offs for surface rises.)

Quiet dimple or soft swirl. Almost noiseless, dimple riseforms associated with small, spent spinners or spent microcaddis caught in the film and fish feeding in quiet

currents. Tactics: My technique is to use a hen-spinner that matches the hatch in progress or quad-spinner that matches it. Fish the fly flush in the film.

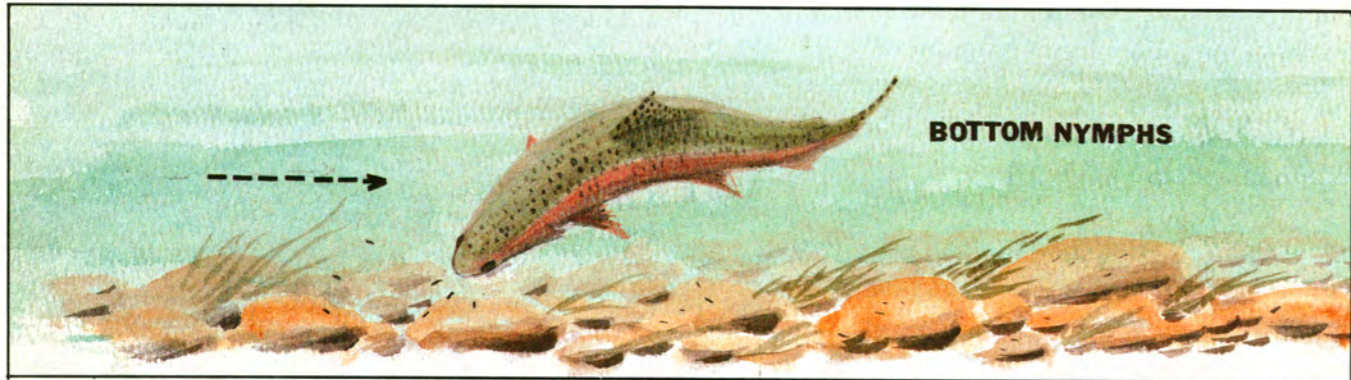
Big, showy swirls. Typical of large duns being taken by large fish. Tactics: Use an imitation of the natural, such as a large paradrake. Fish the imitation dry.

Splashy swirls. Often fairly small fish make a lot of noise, disproportionate to their size, when they dash up, take an emerging caddis, turn and dash back to a holding position. Large fish moving out of a station to feed on a sparse emergence will also exhibit this riseform. Tactics: I prefer a heavily hackled pattern, such as a hackled caddis or a Henryville, fished dry.

Head and tail rise. Usually seen when medium to large fish are feeding in slow water on flies such as spent caddis and mayfly spinners caught in the film. Tactics: Again, I use the hen spinner pattern or quad-winged caddis, fished in the film.

Jump rise. Typical of trout feeding on fluttering, egg-laying insects such as stoneflies or caddis, and also on emerging caddis that burst rapidly off the water. Tactics: A Henryville or heavily hackled stonefly or caddisfly pattern is called for. In the case of the caddis I prefer hackle palmered from the tail up.

Porpoise roll. Often seen when large fish feed leisurely in slow currents on big spinners. The roll also occurs when trout feed on large spent caddisflies (after egg-laying) and



DAVE WHITLOCK ILLUSTRATION

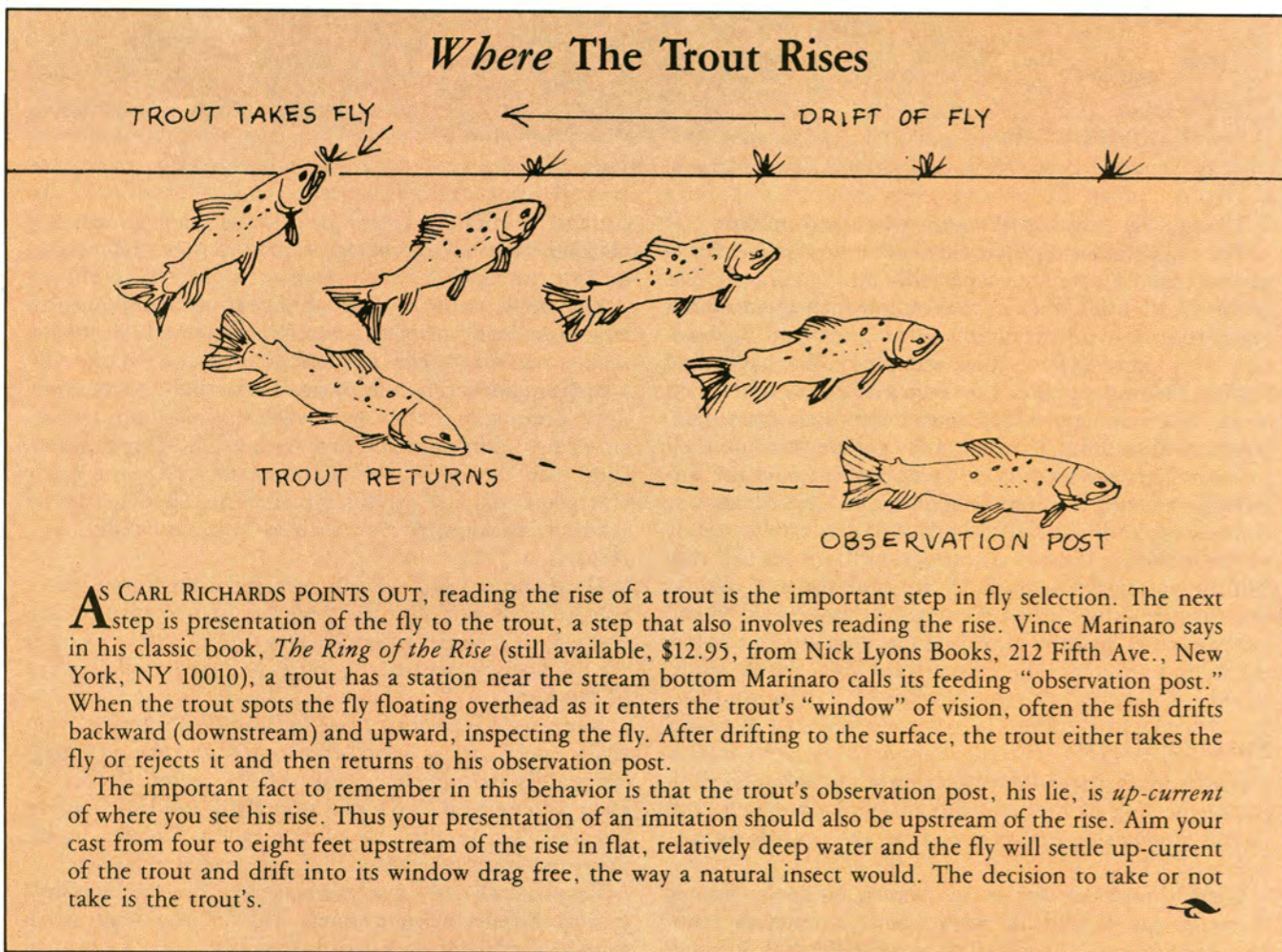
As the trout feeds on bottom nymphs, its flanks will often "flash" reflected sunlight.

mayfly spinners. Tactics: The old standby quad-wing caddis or hen spinner pattern tied to the appropriate imitation and fished dead drift.

Refusal rise. These are fish coming up to look at your fly, sometimes even splashing it, but on closer inspection, refusing it. If this happens to you a fair number of times, change flies quickly to something a little different and more realistic. Tactics: I should note that I prefer fishing no-hackle patterns when trout are feeding on mayfly duns no larger than #12. When the trout are feeding on duns larger than #12 I use the Paradrake patterns. I might add that I almost

always wade downstream and fish down and across when dry-fly fishing. It's so much easier to cover water and in fishing long, drag-free floats.

Knowing the riseforms has allowed me to recognize the changes in feeding and, most important, the changes during a complex hatch where four or five insects are on the water all at the same time. It has allowed me to get a reasonable idea of which stage of which insect the fish are taking. There are many instances when a thorough knowledge of riseforms has helped me put more fish in my hand. I'm sure it will do the same for you.



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