

# Spring Fishing

JOHN HOLT



AUTHOR'S PHOTO

*Use the Brooks Method to get your flies to the bottom of high spring rivers.*

*Ernie Schwiebert drifts a nymph through a run on Fishing Creek in Columbia County Pennsylvania; three of the author's spring patterns, (inset) from left to right, a Matuka Spruce streamer, an olive Marabou Muddler and a sculpin imitation.*

**U**NLESS YOU ARE AN EXTREMELY TALENTED and lucky person, a good deal of what you read about early-season fly-fishing tactics will prove wrong much of the time. I've made countless unsuccessful trips to raging rivers that instead of holding lunker trout carried 150-foot ponderosa pines to a sunny Gulf of Mexico rendezvous in matchstick style.

Armed with the latest information on enticing large trout from their holding areas, I've tried everything to tempt fish in water that looked more like frigid chocolate milk than an angling "bonanza."

Working the fast-flowing sections of rivers and streams is a waste of time. Any fish, and they are undoubtedly few in number, that would hang out in something resembling the Great Flood is in severe need of career counseling.

Big fish are rarely stupid and they surely are not going to spend each spring fighting for their lives in some debris-choked, turbid torrent.

These are truisms learned over many years of futility, cloaked in soggy, frozen misery. Returning from some expeditions exhausted, waders torn, hair matted, the dog failed to recognize me.

I do not care what purveyors of high-water spring lunacy say. I would rather cast a fly on a frozen lake surface or a convenient highway than waste my time on, in or under a wild, fast-flowing section of a river gone crazy. Dodging pieces of exploding rock and spinning tree limbs or being swept downstream in frigid pursuit of the fresh-water speed record is not my idea of a good time.

Oh sure, an occasional deranged trout will hit my offering as it sails by. The fish is usually dead from drowning by the time I haul it upstream against the discolored current.

If you asked one of these early-season *experts* how many fish he actually caught and how much fun he really experienced, and if you were blessed with the good luck that comes with an honest answer, you would probably hear, "It's a hell of a lot of work for a little bit of action and plenty of frustration."

That was fine when I was chasing a good time in college, but not now when I am supposed to be having fun.

So what does the irrepressible angler do when cabin fever and the urge to wet a line become unbearable?

Fish the "calm" areas of high rivers or look for water that approximates a favorite, midseason, primetime spot. The match does not have to be perfect. Pursuit of perfection is madness. Just look for a stream or section of river that has some of the reserved, sedate qualities of summer or fall.

## High-water Angling

HIGH WATER IS TOUGH TO WORK. The fly must get down to the slower water at the bottom of the flow. When this is accomplished, the chances of tangling with a large trout are good.

Low water offers easier wading and fly presentation, frequently with dries along with increased numbers of

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## Spring Fishing



When spring fishing, concentrate on locations where the water velocity isn't so great (left). Sid Neff nets a hefty late-spring trout (below).

The Brooks method of nymphing. 1. Position yourself about 20 feet upstream and about five feet across from the run to be fished. 2. Cast the fly upstream about 15 feet and about six feet out. 3. Allow the fly to sink to the trout's level. 4. Control the slack by lifting the rod tip. 5. Pivot with the line and work the fly through the run below you, allowing the line to straighten before picking up again.

CATHY AND BARRY BECK PHOTOS



fish, although these will often be smaller than those found in high water.

When it comes to waters choked with discolored, spring runoff, "Look for fish in a location where the water's velocity isn't so great," said Joe Houston, a fisheries biologist for the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks. "Fish all of the holes and pocket water with streamers, wet flies or nymphs right on the bottom.

"In roily water stay away from the middle and upper strata—the high-velocity water," he said.

Turbidity has little effect on trout. They usually stay put if they can find a quiet spot. The one notable exception, according to Houston, is the whitefish, which move out of muddy water and into clear feeder streams.

Fish tend to be sluggish in colder water (barely above freezing), so patience is a definite plus in the early going.

## The Brooks Method

PRESENT THE FLY over and over a likely holding area. If there is a fish hiding in shade or cover, eventually the sight of a Muddler Minnow cruising past its range of vision (limited though it is at this time of year) will be too much to resist. Sometimes a dozen or more casts are needed to goad the fish into striking.

To get the fly down to where the fish are use "the Brooks method," invented by the late Charlie Brooks of West Yellowstone, Montana, for deep-water holes like those found in the Madison River. Brooks consistently caught large trout (over five pounds) with his technique, one that is difficult to master, but once learned, is efficient and less tiring than other approaches.

In abbreviated form the Brooks method is as follows:

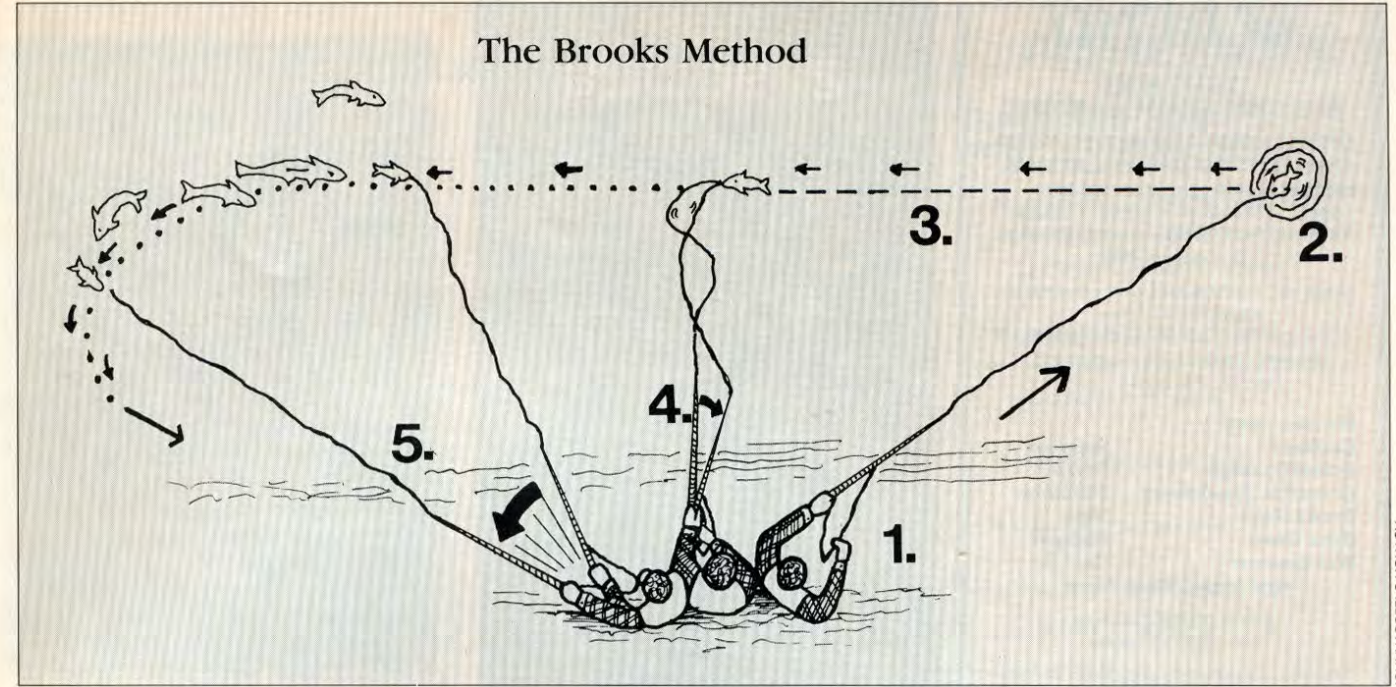
Leaders are from four to six feet long with tips of .010 to .012 inches in diameter. You need the tippet strength to hold onto big fish in big water. Leader shyness is not an issue here.

A moderately stiff, 8'6" rod handles the work load. (I've been using an ancient Fenwick glass rod with sound results.)

A 20- or 30-foot sinking tip line is fine for riffles and pocket water, but for fast, deep currents a fast-sinking line such as a Scientific Anglers Hi-Speed Hi-D line is a must to sink a fly to the bottom quickly and keep it there.

You can also use weighted flies and/or lead on the line. One way to attach the lead is to wrap fuse wire about a foot and a half from the end of the leader, butting it against a blood knot. You can also attach a small lead sinker to an untrimmed end of the blood knot and tie it in place with the legendary square knot. Casting

## The Brooks Method



with weighted flies or lead requires patience and caution to preserve ears, eyes and thinning hair.

How much weight to use depends on water conditions. Larger nymphs and streamers are buoyant by nature and need a number of turns of lead wire to sink them rapidly in a strong flow.

I feel that strike indicators are optional (I'm an admitted heretic). Close attention to the end of the line and to slight vibrations bordering on the subliminal all add up to that sixth sense we hear so much about. For many anglers, however, strike indicators lend an extra dimension in detection, an increase in subsurface information. A small two-inch tuft of brightly-colored yarn tied at the end of the line with 4X leader material in a clinch knot works well.

Back to the Brooks method. Establish your position 20 feet upstream and five feet from the edge of the run to be fished (phase one).

Your first cast should be about 15 feet upstream and six feet out (phase two).

Learning to control the slack as the line comes opposite you takes practice, but at this point the fly should be on bottom (phase three).

To quote from Brooks' book *Nymph Fishing for Larger Trout*, the control phase (phase four) is "as fly and line move downstream, the rod tip is also lifted so that only a slight droop is in the line between the rod tip and the water."

In the fishing phase (phase five) you pivot with the line, keeping a slight droop in the line to keep the fly working along bottom. Too tight and the fly lifts; too much slack and you miss strikes. At the end of the cast wait several seconds for the bow in the line, caused by underwater currents, to straighten.

Strike by sharply stripping line with one hand and raising the rod with the other.

The pickup and following upstream cast (one mo-

tion) is the most difficult part of the method. Raise the rod parallel to the water until it is shoulder high, extending the line hand toward the stripping guide. Then strip down toward the hip with the line hand while backhanding the rod upstream as Brooks says, similar to a "tennis backhand." Stop the cast just as the rod tip points slightly upstream of straight across from you.

After a half-dozen or more casts, strip off five more feet of line and repeat the procedure. Strip line off in five-foot increments until you reach the limits of your ability to control the slack—between 30 and 40 feet.

There is no substitute for onstream practice—lots of it. After a number of seasons using this method, I still frequently resemble a slightly crazed, whirling dervish with arms, line and fly dancing to their own peculiar rhythm around my head. But, I have caught some large trout with the Brooks method.

## Spring Patterns

SOME OF THE BETTER PATTERNS (tying instructions follow) for this type of fishing are the Partridge Sculpin, Brooks' Assam Dragon, the Muddler Minnow and variations, Matuka Spruce, Box Canyon Stone nymph and the Troth Bullhead. All of these patterns should be weighted and large—#4 and up.

Spring is also a good time to experiment with those seemingly bizarre patterns that would never see the light of day under *civilized* circumstances, as long as they are tied large.

Although trout appetites are on the upswing during this spring period, it still seems likely that many strikes are the result of a territorial imperative, the protection of a defined space, rather than from a feeding urge. This defined space in a stream narrows the choice of fly somewhat. A five-pound cutthroat will not be aroused by a #16 Hare's Ear.

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Trout and other gamefish respond to external stimulation slowly in the early season. A retrieve (when fishing downstream and not using the Brooks method) that is just fast enough to give the illusion of life is all you need. Faster and fish will ignore the offering. Patterns worked slowly with a steady line stripping often produce surprising results—submerged trophy tree roots, sunken sticks, and every now and then a very large trout.

Patterns wound with silver or gold tinsel and fished in deep pools around structure work well, especially on bright days. The sparkles of light from the metal surfaces seem to draw striking responses from trout.

The effects of the sun on clear days is one of the glaring differences between early-season and summer angling. The heat of the sun, a detriment in the warm-water days of August, is an asset in March, April and May. As the water warms, insect activity increases, and the water's turbidity offers fish concealment.

Low, quiet waters do exist during spring. They are hard to find, but your chances of success and survival on them are infinitely higher than on the roaring, liquid death trips described in "pre-season angling reminiscences." (These articles are often accompanied by photographs of the author or a casual and expendable acquaintance gingerly stepping into a river-gone-berserk. This intrepid soul's face does not bear an expression of joy, only fear and the realization that another, perhaps fatal, quest is in the works.)

How do you avoid such calamities? Any stream offering deep holes, undercut banks, deadfalls blocking the water's flow, and moderate riffles is ripe for exploration. The holding water is typical, though sometimes discolored, of what one would expect during the halcyon days of summer.

This makes more sense than fishing the haystacks created by snowmelt, water that looks more appropriate for floating a Grand Canyon rafting trip than for fishing a delicate fly.

Insects and Approaches

WHILE NOT ABUNDANT, there are periodic hatches of mayflies and caddis flies in the early spring. In northwest Montana, for instance, a white to dusky-blue mayfly ranging in size from #12 to #14 provides plenty of action on warm afternoons.

A reasonably sincere effort to match size, shape and color will fool most of the fish most of the time. They have not seen much in the way of food for several

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months and a budding feeding urge causes some older, crafty fish to abandon impulsively their competitive edge.

The Adams, Elk-hair Caddis and attractor patterns like the Royal Wulff (sizes 12 through 18) all work well in these conditions. The Goddard Caddis, with its high floatability, is another good choice.

Even though fish are sluggish in spring, low water conditions call for a careful approach. Most of my angling is done on those first, glorious, crystal-clear days of the season. (The idea, once again, is to have fun, so forget those wet, sleety days and stay home reading a copy of Robert Traver's *Anatomy of a Fisherman*.) A six-foot silhouette lurking over the edge of a bank with rod in hand is a dead giveaway, even to semi-comatose trout. Keep low and stay quiet.

Spawning Fish

REMEMBER ALSO THAT in this early-season period fish have not moved far from their winter, safe-water holding areas. The first few hundred yards of creek or river, either down from the outlet or up from the inlet of a lake often hold more fish than the rest of a stream. Rivers, deep pools and undercuts may hold fish at any time of the year, but the choice spots are near outlets and inlets.

Also, many rivers are migration corridors for spawning fish. Unless a person is on a first-name basis with this type of water, his chances of finding his quarry are remote.

A good example of this is the Flathead River in Montana. Bull trout, cutthroat trout and kokanee salmon begin their spawning runs downstream in Flathead Lake, a huge freshwater lake. These fish frequently travel more than 100 miles to reach their chosen spawning grounds. Finding fish in the main river under these conditions is virtually impossible. But once the fish have moved into feeder streams and lake outlets, the amount of water to be explored diminishes dramatically.

"Cutthroat take an average of 45 days to reach spawning grounds (in the Flathead drainage)," Houston said. "They may average three miles per day (upstream movement), but some fish may go up to 15 miles per day and some may not move at all."

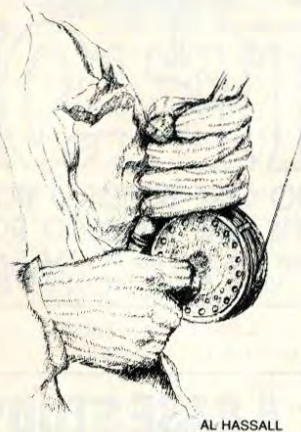
"Cutthroat and rainbow move on the rise and fall of (water) temperature, with most of the movement coming between noon and 5 P.M. I suspect the same is true of bull trout."

The urge for migrating fish to reproduce is an overwhelming one. At movement times fish rely more on fat reserves than on active feeding for energy. They are moving upstream for one reason: to perpetuate the species. In the case of bull

trout, once the feeder creek is reached, the fish may linger for up to a month at the mouth of a stream to pair up.

Instead of searching a large river (fishing the water) for constantly moving fish, I probe specific spots. Even in spring creeks, finding where the fish are holding is the first step before the match-the-hatch game begins. Pocket water, possibly holding several good fish, gets my early-spring attention.

The advantages of fishing low-water areas while rivers are full of spring runoff are these: ease, comfort, increased chances of survival, simplified fly selection and less need to cover water. Spring is a time for action and reflection, and with a little persistence and understanding, spring fishing can provide the chance to connect with big fish and the satisfaction of succeeding at a demanding challenge.



AL HASSALL

### Partridge Sculpin

HOOK: Mustad 79580, sizes 2-4.  
 THREAD: Brown.  
 RIBBING: Oval gold tinsel.  
 BODY: Dark brown wool yarn.  
 WING: Tie in a single brown partridge tail feather. Strip the fibers from the area that contacts the body.  
 FINS: Tie in a brown partridge feather at each side. Tips of these feathers should curve outward.  
 HACKLE: Spin on a collar of dyed brown deer body hair. Clip on top and bottom so the hair has more of a flair to each side.  
 HEAD: Spin on dyed brown deer body hair and clip to shape.

### Assam Dragon

HOOK: Size 4, 2x long.  
 WEIGHT: Lead wire, 12 wraps.  
 BODY: Natural brown fur similar to seal on the skin, one-eighth inch wide, three or four inches long.  
 HACKLE: Brown dyed grizzly, long and soft.  
 THREAD: 3/0 brown Nymo.  
 NOTE: Tie in hackle by the butt with the

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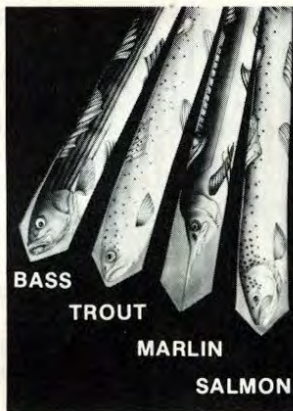
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wrong side toward the eye of the hook.

### Muddler Minnow

HOOK: Mustad 9672, sizes 2-4.  
 THREAD: Brown.  
 TAIL: Mottled brown turkey quill section.  
 BODY: Flat gold tinsel.  
 WINGS: Tie in a small bunch of brown and white bear hair. Hair should be mixed. Mottled brown turkey quill sections are then tied in on edge over the body. Wing should only extend to the bend in the hook with the hair portion extending to the center of the tail.  
 HACKLE: Spin on a collar of natural deer body hair.  
 HEAD: Spin on natural deer body hair and clip to shape.

### Matuka Spruce

HOOK: Mustad 79580, size 4.  
 THREAD: Black.  
 RIBBING: Oval silver tinsel.  
 BODY: Rear half red floss; front half peacock herl.  
 WINGS: Badger neck hackles.  
 HACKLE: Badger tied on as a collar and tied back.

### Box Canyon Stone nymph

HOOK: Mustad 79580, sizes 2-4.  
 THREAD: Black.  
 UNDERBODY: Two pieces of lead wire equal in diameter to hook wire tied in at each side of hook shank.  
 TAILS: Dark brown saddle hackle stems tied in at each side. Tails should be equal to length of body only. Exclude thorax and head in this measurement.  
 RIBBING: Dyed black flat monofilament.  
 BODY: Dubbed black synthetic fur.  
 WINGCASE: Natural dark gray goose quill section tied in over thorax.  
 THORAX: Dubbed dark brown synthetic fur.  
 LEGS: Dark brown hackle wrapped through thorax. Trim hackle barbules from bottom.  
 HEAD: Dubbed blackish brown synthetic fur.

### Troth Bullhead

HOOK: Mustad 36890, sizes 3/0, 2/0, 1/0, 1.  
 THREAD: Black nylon, size D.  
 TAIL: Skunk tail hair (mostly cream).  
 BODY: Cream angora yarn.  
 BACK: Black ostrich herl tied in at the shoulder and at the bend of the hook.  
 COLLAR: Natural deer body hair left mostly on the top and at the sides.  
 HEAD: Natural deer body hair, the top darkened with a felt-tip pen and compressed and trimmed to a flat sculpin shape.

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