

# The Final Inch

RENE HARROP

*If you're after surface-feeding trout, it is the most important part of the stream.*

SINCE PREHISTORIC TIMES man has been a hunter. Initially man hunted to survive and his standard of living was determined by his ability to use his superior intellect and cunning to outwit his prey. Success resulted from studying the habits and behavior of the animals he pursued. In a civilized world man no longer relies on the pursuit of wild animals for sustenance. Though we now pursue animals for sport rather than a means of survival, the fundamental requirements for success remain the same.

To fish is to hunt. Casting to trout feeding at the surface

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is fly fishing in its purest form. It possesses all the elements of the hunt and for the hunter of trout it can be an addiction. Dedicated anglers are known to travel hundreds and even thousands of miles to play a one-on-one game with a visible opponent. It is a game in which the trout makes the rules and has the home-field advantage.

Many trout streams throughout the country offer surface fishing opportunities but the most demanding are the clear, slow spring creeks and meandering meadow streams. Rich in aquatic stream life, these jewels seemed to have been created especially for the fly fisherman.

Trout in these waters are known for their ability to spot a faulty cast or discern a fraudulent fly. Slow currents and the

extreme clarity of the water place specific demands on the angler. Skillful, accurate casting and precise imitations are the rule but the challenges do not end there.

Keen observation and constant awareness of ever-changing conditions are mandatory. So too is a sound, fundamental knowledge of the insects—both aquatic and terrestrial—that attract trout to the surface. Observing the natural insects, both their appearance and behavior, is necessary to create imitations that trout will accept.

We've known for years that trout have a particular fondness for terrestrial insects. Wind or rain bring large numbers of ants, beetles or hoppers to the surface of a trout stream. It is understandable how such a "fall" attracts trout; less under-

BONNIE HARROP PHOTO



standable is why trout often interrupt a meal of aquatic insects to pluck an occasional terrestrial from the surface. There is, I believe, a valuable lesson to be learned from this mysterious behavior.

An insect that spends its entire life on land is utterly helpless on the water. Suspended *in* the surface of the water, an ant or beetle has no chance for escape. Trout become conditioned to recognize vulnerability in their prey and, like any other predator, take advantage of an easy catch. Effective imitations of terrestrials insects are simple, sparsely-dressed patterns specifically designed to be fished *partially submerged* in what we call the "film," more accurately described as surface tension.

Aquatic insects such as midges, caddisflies and mayflies spend all but a very brief portion of their lives underwater. Even though they leave their subsurface environment to reproduce, finding themselves on the water's *surface* may be just as traumatic for them as it is for their terrestrial counterparts.

Virtually all insects that emerge within a stream have a period of maximum vulnerability, when the emerging insect arrives at the surface. This is a time when the insect can no longer function as an aquatic creature, nor is it prepared to begin its brief aerial life.

Several factors determine the length of time an insect spends in this helpless intermediate state. Much depends on the degree of difficulty it has in freeing itself from the nymphal or pupal skin. Other factors are air temperature, humidity and the nature of the insect itself. It is also important to remember that an emerging aquatic insect meets the resistance of surface tension. A terrestrial insect is vulnerable in the film because surface tension allows it to float. An aquatic insect

is vulnerable in the film because surface tension impedes its ability to leave the water.

*Within the final inch of the stream, is where trout concentrate the majority of their surface feeding.* Insects, whether falling from above or rising from below, collect in this area and are extremely vulnerable to foraging trout. Trout feed on organisms that are most convenient. Since vulnerability is synonymous with availability, the activity that occurs in the final inch holds the solution to some of fly fishing's most perplexing problems.

### Fishing the Film

AQUATIC INSECTS have basic behavioral characteristics that determine how trout respond to them. Midges, for example, have a propensity for hatching in cold weather. This helps to explain why midge pupae (the final underwater stage) seem to have great difficulty freeing themselves from the pupal skin. Midges are small (#18-#28) and a single insect, regardless of its stage, usually attracts only very small trout. During an emergence, however, midge pupae often collect in large numbers and drift for a considerable distance just below the surface, attracting surprisingly large trout. Trout feeding on emerging midge pupae exert little energy in collecting a substantial meal. Rising in a slow rhythmic manner, they often collect several insects in a single motion. Freshly emerged adults are occasionally taken but an imitation of the pupae fished just below the surface or an emerging adult fished in the film is much more effective.

When fishing the subsurface pattern I grease the leader to control fly depth and to act as a strike indicator. The surface pattern imitates a partially emerged adult with the pupal skin

still attached. I lightly dress it with floatant and fish it as a dry fly. I impart no action to either pattern.

Adult midges trapped in the film also attract trout. I use a simple pattern consisting of only a slender fur-dubbed body and tiny slips of mallard quill tied along the sides for wings. The fly floats low and is difficult to see, but it's a deadly pattern.

Caddisflies probably are as important to trout as any of the other aquatic insects but the fish usually take them in the larval and pupal stages well below the surface. Caddis pupae are active swimmers and seem to experience little difficulty in shedding their pupal skins. They are strong flyers as well and usually become airborne more quickly than other aquatic insects. There is still a time during emergence, however, when caddis pupae experience a short period of immobility near the surface. The freshly emerged adult must penetrate the surface tension before it can take flight. Trout react quickly to capitalize on this brief opportunity. Even though unintentional, the momentum of the take often creates an almost explosive riseform. It is easy to misinterpret such a rise as an indication that the trout is taking fully emerged adults. A sparsely dressed emerging pattern fished in or just beneath the surface is the proper choice, however.

Emerging caddis patterns should be sparsely tied on light-wire hooks. Dressed lightly with floatant, the fly can be dead-drifted in the film. Left untreated, it can be cast *downstream* several feet above a feeding trout and allowed to sink beneath the surface. As the fly approaches the trout, lift the rod tip to raise the fly back toward the surface about a foot upstream from the trout's location. When the fly reaches the surface,

a small wake will appear. This is the signal to lower the rod tip, allowing it to drift naturally just under the film. This technique works well when trout are keying on the pupae at a lower depth but intercepting them near the surface. The rising imitation will attract the trout's attention at the proper level and the natural drift that follows will put the fly in the trout's feeding lane.

After mating, when the insects return to the stream to deposit their eggs, caddis adults become an available food source.

Adult caddis are often quite active on the surface. Many imitations of this stage are high floaters that allow the fly to be manipulated to ape the skittering and fluttering behavior of the naturals. Splashy surface rises occur when trout feed on these mobile insects. Keep your eyes peeled, however, for slow, subtle rises amid the frenzy. Dying caddis lying spent in the film are difficult to spot and often go undetected by many anglers—but not by the trout; often the largest fish feed on spent caddis.

### Mayflies in the Film

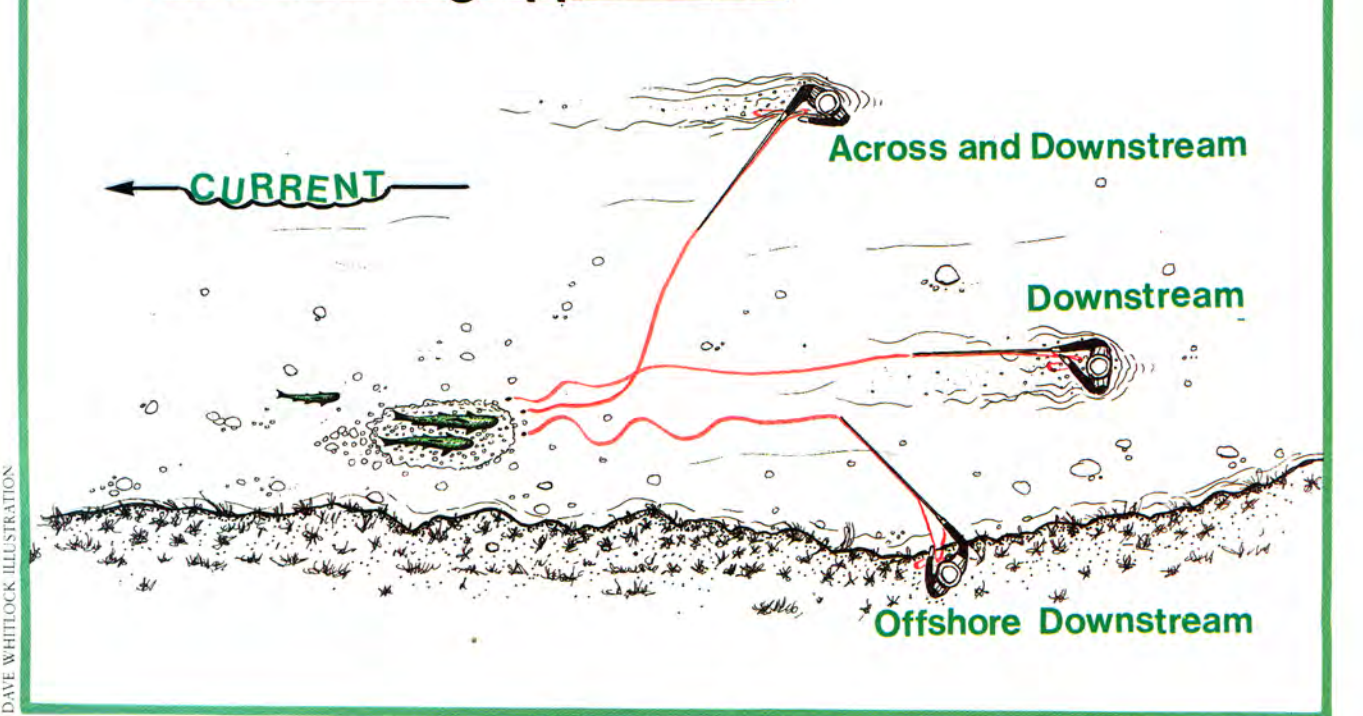
MAYFLIES ARE THE ARISTOCRATS of aquatic insects, fragile and graceful creatures considered synonymous with clear streams, delicate dry flies and rising trout.

Mayflies, in contrast with midges and caddisflies, lack the larval stage in their lifecycle. In its aquatic state an immature mayfly is called a nymph. The adults resemble miniature sailboats and are a familiar sight to most fishermen. This stage

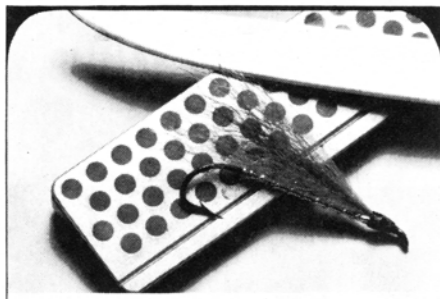
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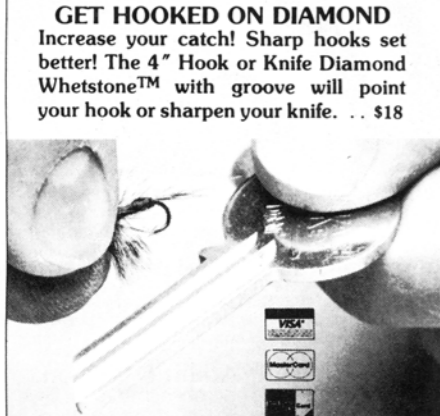
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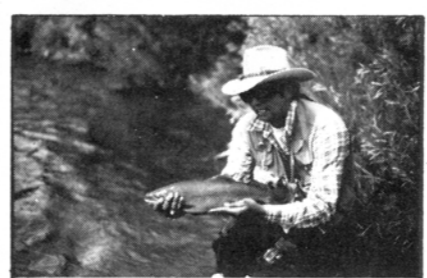
**Final Inch . . .**  
*Continued from page 41*

of the mayfly's lifecycle has probably inspired more fly tiers than all other trout foods combined. But fully emerged mayfly adults, duns, are not nearly as important to trout as most anglers believe. This is particularly true on extremely fertile streams like the Paradise Valley Spring Creeks in Montana or the Henry's Fork of the Snake and Silver Creek in Idaho.


Mayfly hatches are heavy on these famous waters and large populations of trout grow big and fat on a diet more often associated with similar fish. Understanding the mayfly is the key to fishing these difficult streams successfully.

As a rule, mayfly nymphs are not as strong as caddis pupae and their transformation into the adult stage is much slower. This trait helps to explain why larger trout seem so fond of even the smallest mayflies. It is common to find trout in excess of 20 inches sipping mayflies #20 and smaller, but large trout simply will not come to the surface for small mayflies unless there are a lot of them. Neither will they expend the slightest amount of energy on a tiny fly if it is about to escape.

Emerging mayflies not only experience considerable difficulty shedding the nymphal skin but also in penetrating the surface tension. A conventional Hares Ear type nymph tied on a light wire hook and fished just under the film works well when a trout is feeding beneath the surface. An emerging pattern such as the Swisher and Richards Stillborn imitates a mayfly adult partially emerged from the nymphal shuck. Dress this pattern with floatant and fish it in the film.




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ing track of the fly. It also increases your odds of getting an accurate and natural presentation. Greasing the leader to within a foot or two of the fly will help you detect a strike or you can try a fluorescent yarn strike indicator.

Select your equipment to match the situation. A light, 8-foot rod with fairly crisp action is my personal choice. A high quality, smooth-running reel with 50 to 100 yards of backing is an asset in handling long power runs and protecting fragile tippets. High-floating fly lines in the 3- to 5-weight range make excessively long leaders unnecessary. Ten- to 12-foot leaders are easier to control and are usually long enough to avoid spooking the trout.

It has been my experience that a presentation in which the fly precedes the leader is most effective when fishing to trout feeding at the surface. When I have a choice, I usually like to approach a feeding trout from upstream because I can mend the line and manipulate the fly in a variety of ways that are impossible from a downstream casting position. By bending at the waist and keeping a low profile it is often possible to approach within 20 feet of a surface feeder. Just remember to move slowly and with great caution regardless of your approach direction.

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Freshly emerged mayfly adults seem to require more time on the surface waiting for their wings to dry and rise into the familiar upright position. Floating nymphs and short-winged emerger patterns sparsely dressed and fished low in the film duplicate the appearance and behavior of a freshly emerged mayfly dun in this vulnerable position.

The mayfly dun's difficulty in leaving the surface and its weakness as a flyer cause it to remain on the surface a long time. Low-floating patterns with upright wings such as no-hackle and clipped-hackle thorax patterns imitate full emerged duns. These flies offer give the fish an uninterrupted view of the body, an important factor in slow, clear water.

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After mating and upon returning to the water, mayfly spinners deposit their eggs and quickly die. With their wings spread, the dead and dying insects have completed their lifecycle and lie motionless in the film, often nearly invisible to anglers. When an emergence and a spinner fall occur simultaneously, trout often choose the spinners.

**Final-Inch Strategy**

FLIES FOR FISHING the final inch are difficult or impossible to see, but there are several ways to solve the problem. Fishing as close as possible to the trout is an immense aid in keep-



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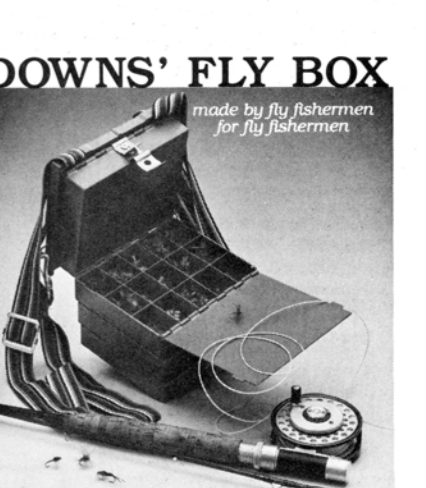
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Treat each trout as an individual and with respect. A wild trout is a worthy opponent so study it carefully and take nothing for granted. When you have located your target fish quarry, observe what is going on around it, then plan your approach. Stalk it cautiously. When you have reached the point of attack, lock into that trout and that trout only. Do not allow yourself to become distracted by other trout or other anglers. Study the water to determine what it might be taking then study its feeding behavior. Do not be discouraged if it does not respond to your efforts right away. Sometimes a 100 or more casts are required before you find the right combination. When you cannot find the right combination of correct presentation and proper imitation, the trout wins. Its ability to beat makes fly fishing the challenging game it is.

A trout stream holds many secrets. To unlock these secrets we must have knowledge of what goes on in the streams we fish. If our objective is a trout feeding at the surface, the secret is in the final inch.

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