Our Contributing Editor is not the bungling fisherman he has claimed to be, we've decided, since he makes the same mistakes that we do. His main mistake is in talking about them. Hindsight half an expert makes, he decides.

The Things We Did Last Summer

NICK LYONS

I AM AN EXPERT IN HINDSIGHT. Ten minutes after I've left a luncheon at which I babbled and mumbled, failed miserably at comebacks and *bon mots,* I become extraordinarily brilliant. Walking home, I become like one of the other maniacs of upper Manhattan, laughing and giggling out loud to the tune of some hidden inner dialogue; my wit and courage astound me. Some people's minds work like that: ten minutes too late, at a minimum. Mine does. Always.

I'm also not bad at second-guessing a fishing season. In the late fall or dead of winter, when I've put all my rods and tackle in order and safely away, I can think of a dozen things I didn't do last summer. Worse, I know *precisely* what I should have done.

Many of these things fall into the category of tackle care, a subject I flunk regularly. The slightest piece of equipment reminds me: leaky waders, a busted leader clipper, sun glasses that should have been Polaroid. A quick look in my fish-closet and I know why my casts hooked and fell awkwardly on that last trip: my fly line has a bad crack above the loop I use for attaching leaders. Had I been *that* unconscious on the stream? Why hadn't I noticed it? And even if I had, could I have summoned the skill and patience to clip off the raw end and tie on a new leader with a good nail knot? Not hardly.

And why hadn't I rewound the frayed winding on a middle guide of my fly rod, instead of having to pull a Band-Aid off my scratched finger to keep the guide in place? It would have taken me no more than ten minutes to do at home, and I knew it had to be done.

Relics of last summer's disasters—raw reminders of my unfailing incompetence.

WHILE I'M ASKING MYSELF such embarrassing questions, I notice the fly box still in my vest, which reminds me that—with twenty good grasshopper imitations in my storage case—I took only mayfly patterns with me in early September. The fields had been full of plump, leaping grasshoppers, and I got skunked on mayfly imitations. Was I saving those Whitlock Hoppers for Opening Day?

I *can* remember a day when I had the right fly, a Hendrickson spinner, and was in the right place at the right time, and saw a fine brown tipping up ever so gorgeously for the spent naturals as they floated down. I made a properly circuitous route through the trees until I was downstream of it, waded ever so slowly into position, stripped out enough line so that I wouldn't have to false-cast more than once, did so, then leaned into the payoff cast—and got my backcast caught in the trees. An extraordinary feeling.

Why, *why* hadn't I checked behind me?

Of course those things had to do with mistakes I made *on* the water. But what about the times I never got out? I swore in print that I'd fish for bluegills in Utah with Thom Green last May—and never did. I still dream about that weedy lake I never saw, those two-pound monsters I never caught, and am still nagged with the feeling that, with a little more effort, I might have arranged my life more tidily. Two-pound bluegills were worth the arranging.

And while I was arranging, why did I sign to do a book that would take me to Japan in February, when with a little more imagination I might have found some marvelous reportorial work that simply had to be done in Chile or Argentina or New Zealand—on something, *any*thing—during *their* summer months?

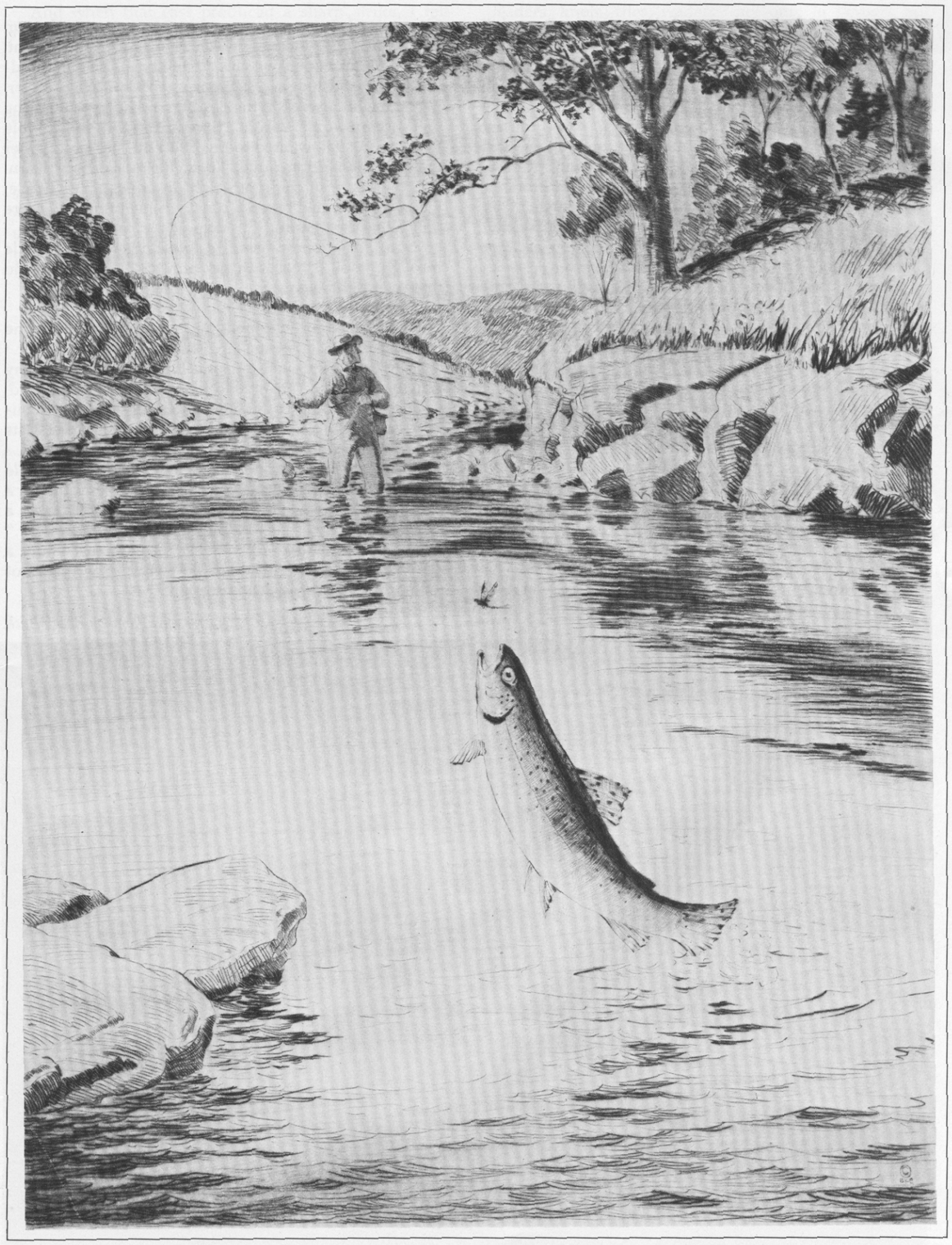
Hindsight?

I'm flush with it.

And while I'm thinking of dates and trips, wasn't it idiotic to arrive at Martha's Vineyard the week of the hurricane, which scattered all the blues and stripers into deep water for precisely the three weeks I was there? Jack Koontz, who's so knowledgeable he'll be guiding out of Menemsha next summer, told me the blues were so close to shore people were catching them on handlines as they bashed schools of baitfish onto the beach. Even *I* could have caught them on a fly rod then. Had I been there.

The stripers did come in close one morning; I could see them rolling gently, about forty feet from shore. Why was that the *one* morning I didn't bring my fly rod? And even if I had, could I have clunked those big saltwater poppers out far enough without yet being able to manage a decent double haul? Not hardly, indeed.

That phenomenon of arriving too late or leaving too early is one that I've studied with exceptional care. It's common to the sport, of course, but I seem to get more than my share of it. Several summers ago, a seventeen-pound trout was caught on a fly not ten feet from where I'd fished in Henrys Lake for five days in a row, the day after I left. I should have been on the Beaverkill the day



Reproduced from an etching by Churchill Ettinger

before, on the Delaware a week later, on the Battenkill last year, on the Madison a week ago. It's maddening.

So, thinking about it all in the most scholarly fashion, I've evolved the Lyons Vacation Factor, which may well be my only contribution to the lore of angling: make your reservations six months in advance, based on last year's reports; pay a deposit on them; then, at the last minute, show up a week early or a week late. It costs more but if you, like me, already spend several hundred dollars for each fish you catch, and don't catch many even at that price, what can you lose? Of course, the Lyons Vacation Factor may not work if you are not Lyons: no one is quite so rotten at foresight.

I'm so rotten that I once waved pleasantly to a very serious and intense young man in a car as he pulled away from a motel in Maine we were both stopping at. I saw some rods in the back of his car, and a trout sticker on his window, and, with a smile and a trusting heart, wished him good luck. He merely frowned. Then his wheels spun and he raced off.

Shouldn't I have suspected something fishy?

Why would a fellow brother of the angle act so strangely—unless, perhaps, his wife had just called to say the house had burned down and he'd better hurry home and forget his dreams of fishing for smallmouth?

Then I went to the back of my own car and discovered that the bastard—may his leaders rot—had swiped one of my best fly rods. My only consolation is that the rod had my name engraved on the butt; maybe that scowler has unwittingly acquired some of my luck, too.

OF COURSE I'M NOT ALWAYS AS WRONG-HEADED as I seem determined to try to be. I was staying with Phil Wright, who runs an expensive but perfectly marvelous guiding-tackle-and-lodging establishment in Wise River, Montana, for a week in September and he kept insisting that I learn some decent curve casts and the double haul. I, as usual, wanted to be off on the Big Hole rather than on his casting pond. I'd come to fish, not learn. The fish were in the river, right in front of his house; Doug Swisher had taken a nineteen-inch rainbow there only a few days earlier.

"Sure I'm a lousy caster," I told Phil. "But I muddle through. Look, I feel it in my bones: I've got to get to that river right away. It's like a drug. I can manage."

Wrong again, Lyons.

I would have been wiped out—that night and for the next five days of my trip.

Thankfully, Phil insisted, and I grumpily took off my waders and followed him to his fishless casting pond, where, to my astonishment—and under his really superb tutelage—I learned to make respectable curve casts and broke the double-haul barrier.

"See. You're not so stupid, Lyons," I thought a couple of days later, when the casts proved indispensable on a Beaverhead River float trip with Phil. "It merely takes a little careful planning. A bit of patience. Foresight." And I double-hauled a positively brilliant cast under a low dead willow. "You don't do *everything* wrong. Not with proper coaching. And foresight."

Photo by Ron Winch.



And when that cast produced a sharp strike, I felt right cocky about myself.

But then I asked myself soberly: "Then why didn't you come to Montana in June, when the stoneflies were on, learn the double haul *then,* so you could have gone to the Vineyard in September, when, *as everyone knows,* the big ones are in and close—and you could have used the double haul?"

To which there is only one answer, the answer to all such visions in hindsight: *Maybe next year.*

And thinking of next year, which is already upon us—at least the resolution time of it—I've determined to be wiser. Here are my resolutions:

1. Be sure to check *all* equipment carefully—lines, leaders, knots, flies, waders—not only in January but before each trip. Stand in waders in bathtub.
2. Be sure to take what is necessary.
3. Go to Utah.
4. Begin to plan now—with pennies and brochures—for a trip some day, somehow, to New Zealand.
5. Forget the Lyons Vacation Factor and get best local advice.
6. Don't trust scowling fishermen, even scowling fly fishermen unless you have actually seen them lose a three-pound trout.
7. Practice the double-haul in Central Park all winter; be oblivious to possible onlookers.
8. Tie a piece of string around finger *now*—and leave it there until the spring.

The Things They Did Last Summer

We observed, with mixed reactions, that Mr. Lyons didn't make as many mistakes "last summer" as his regular literary confessions might suggest. To fill out the facts of the fishing life to readers naive and otherwise—who assume that "the experts" flail away flawlessly—we have asked more than a few fly fishers of our acquaintance who have acquired deserved reputations for skill, honesty, trustworthiness and reverence—to search their souls of last summer and comment briefly upon the errors of their ways. THE EDITORS.

That lunker Beaverkill trout was not
the only one on the stream under surveillance.
I should have known that Poirot would know.

ART LEE

IN ANY GIVEN ANGLING SITUATION, doing something you know you shouldn't and figuring that you'll "get by" can develop into an error of major proportions. In my own case, that occasionally happens through the simple laziness to which we all succumb now and then. The following incident took place at the end of last summer and is a good example of what can happen.

Toward evening there was still no breeze. The day had been clear and very hot. Most of it was spent with my waders pulled down reading the swan song of the great Hercule Poirot in the shade of a poplar. I'd looked up from the book to check the surface of a long eddy on the Beaverkill, but nothing moved in the August heat. When the last chapter closed on the little detective's life, however, I surveyed the eddy again, a little sadly, and found some trout beginning to rise.

The river was holding a good level, the result of heavy rains on the fringe of a hurricane, and despite oppressive afternoons, fair hatches of small sulphur *Caenis* could be depended on each evening. The rising fish were small—typical plantings of the previous spring—but they were fish, and after all, had I not just lost a longtime friend? They would provide some consolation.

I tied on a 6x tippet of French monofilament (Poirot would have liked that), very strong for its diameter, and a blonde soft-hackled fly I fish in the film to represent a range of tiny emerging mayflies. My rod was 7½ feet, the line a #6 floating double-taper. I waded carefully into the pool directly opposite the head-and-tailing trout, standing quite still awhile to allow my wake to subside. I began to cast.

The fly lighted softly about four feet ahead of a sipping fish. It took, which was no surprise. The little flys are wonderful. Soon, I'd released a nine-incher, in good condition for that time of year, and was casting again without drying my fly.

There were four trout working within easy reach, and I'd caught three and was about to cast to the fourth when something impelling caught my eye. Just below me there was a big swirl tight to the bank, the kind you seldom see during any season. My initial feeling was that a big trout had taken an emerging *Caenis,* and I edged slowly downstream. Abreast of the fish, I waited a moment before I cast. When I cast, nothing happened. Another cast. Not a sign. I rested the spot and tried again. The trout didn't come.

The fish had itself a dandy spot, a small backwash cut into the bank by a flat rock, probably tipped into the river as the ice went out. The water slithered around it, sucking feed behind it—a natural place for a fine trout to hold. After thinking things over, it was clear the trout wasn't taking emergers. It had shown only once. Fish feeding on them generally establish a rhythm and stick to it throughout the hatch. By late August, however, water below the banks is alive with little baitfish [illegible] are the young of the year. They're a favorite food for large trout; the process of survival is still new to the baitfish, and there remain plenty of them stupid enough to flaunt themselves within easy reach. Such easy pickings provide more food for energy expended than the *minutae* drifting on top.

I selected a Black Ghost streamer in size 12, then gathered in my leader and removed the little fly. I hesitated and that's

when I made a big mistake. Fishing almost every day, all season long, should not jade you if you really love it. At times, however, you do get lazy, careless, or both. You become like the man who fixes rotary lawnmowers for a living. Show me one not missing fingers.

I knew very well what I had to do, but simply didn't bother to do it. Instead, I tied the streamer to my 6x tippet, soaked the fly in the water swirling around my waders and stripped enough line to reach the bank. Making just one false cast, in order not to dry the fly, I shot it up against the bank behind the rock. I didn't let the streamer settle but began stripping it back at once. First came a swirl, then a wake as big as a beaver's, and finally the strike. The strike didn't resound back through the rod like it should have. Rather, it was one contracted tug I barely felt. The fly was snatched from the tippet as if cut by a razor. Two seconds later I stood calling myself unprintable and well-deserved names.

I should have placed my leader with a heavier one, or at very least, cut the one I had on back and add a 3x tippet. Instead, I rationalized my laziness. "I'll have to go ashore," I had mused, "and that might scare the trout. By the time I get back, it might quit feeding. Besides, this stuff is strong. You could hang yourself with it." And so saying, I did!

If Hercule Poirot, my companion of the afternoon, were still around, he would certainly have observed, "*Mon Dieu,* Arthur. It was but so obvious. Could you not see it?"

"Of course I could see it, Monsieur Poirot," I would have to answer. "Trouble was—I did not perceive it."

Art Lee is FFM's East Coast Field Editor based in New York's Catskills from which he offers sound angling advice between bouts with Agatha Christie.

Limit your methods, limit your catch.

GARY LAFONTAINE

MAYBE I LEAN TOO MUCH on streamer and bucktail patterns. Certainly I depend too much on one favorite technique of fishing them. I like to present the fly broadside to the trout, bouncing it feebly down with the river current in the stuttering drop of a wounded minnow. It is effective and I also feel it's the best single way to fish a bucktail, but I made the mistake of building up such a blind confidence in this technique that I stopped experimenting with other methods of minnow imitation.

All last summer I kept hearing about how effective it can be to move a bucktail fast across the surface. Artist-angler Bill Elliott sketched out the details of a 60-trout day on an Eastern stream. Bob Jacklin touted a skipping retrieve as the trick for waking up the Madison River browns. Doug Swisher, explaining his favorite way of using a Matuka streamer, recommended downstream mends of the line to speed up the swing of the fly. Norm McCandless sent me a picture of a 22-inch rainbow from California's Feather River, noting that "a Plain Jane with a humping retrieve drove fish wild."

In spite of the advice from these experienced fly fishermen, I continued to stick with the "wounded-minnow" method of slow presentation, because most of the time the teasing fly scored admirably on trout. At spots where it failed to do well, I changed location instead of trying different techniques.

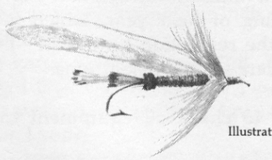
But when Ross Emerick asked questions about fishing a bucktail, I advocated a many-sided approach. "When a fly imitates a baitfish," I said, "it has to move like one. Work it slow, work it fast, but make it look like something in trouble. Just keep experimenting until trout start chasing it."

Ross and I picked out different pools on the Boulder River and began casting our bucktails. We separated during the afternoon, as I moved around more and more in search of trout.

I worked a usually productive flat, methodically probing each line of drift. I threaded my fly through places where I knew fish were holding, but even my best efforts only fooled a single 14-inch brown.

Ross came down from above and asked, "Mind if I fish this pool?"

"It won't do any good," I assured him. "I've covered it already."



Illustrations by George Shortmeier

His cast was already on the water and he started stripping it back. A large trout bolted up from the bottom and grabbed the bucktail halfway across. "Are you sure?" Ross grinned.

I helped him net the 19-inch fish. "Maybe they'll start hitting now," I said.

"They've been hitting all day."

He fished the rest of the pool with his fast-stripping technique, moving a #6 Dark Edson Tiger in sharp bursts just under the surface. He caught three more decent browns from the area and drew flashing strikes from four others.

I vowed then to avoid angling ruts. I promised myself to watch out for any technique that had become a comfortable crutch; such as my overuse of the downstream presentation of a dry fly or my overuse of jumbo weighted nymphs.

I further explored the technique of the "fast" bucktail that fall, mimicking the frantic speed of a scared baitfish. I discovered that the ploy worked well on flats or pools where the fly—visible to a trout from a distance—zipped toward a holding position, but that it worked poorly when pulled away from the predator.

There was a problem with this method, this trick for goading trout into the flurry of a competitive kill-instinct—I found myself skipping past unsuitable (for *that* technique) stretches of water or forgetting to give the "slow" retrieve, my old favorite, at least a chance on the trout. But at least I'd gotten some variety into my technique, and that was most important.

Gary Lafontaine has written for several years in FFM on his angling experiences in Eastern and Western waters, and is the author of Challenge of the Trout, *reviewed elsewhere in this issue.*

If an angler is going to think big, he's got to think ahead.

JOHN MERWIN

THE DEGREE OF SURFACE DISTURBANCE made by a rising trout is not necessarily any indication of the size of the fish. When trout are taking small flies in smooth water, the smallest dimple may have been made by a four-pounder instead of a four-incher. If you can't actually see the fish, there may be no way to tell. That fact has been relatively well publicized, but the consistent taking of small, dimpling fish on light tippets and small flies can lull one into a false sense of security with no contingency plans for playing a good fish.

As in many streams around the country, the *Tricorythodes* (a very small and abundant mayfly) hatches are the mainstay of summer fishing on Vermont's Battenkill. Generally starting in mid-July, the flies are an early-morning hatch and come off in quantities sufficient to attract substantial numbers of trout. I fished this hatch extensively last summer and found it necessary to use about 40 inches of 7x tippet and #24–26 flies to take fish consistently. I also found that the hatch can attract exceptionally large trout that require forethought to fight successfully in this log-strewn river.

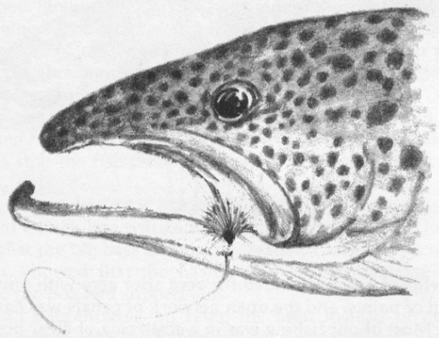
Early on an overcast August morning, I stood at one end of a large, shallow eddy, casting 20–30 feet toward the small and gentle dimples marking rising trout. Through a long succession of sad experiences, I'd developed the knack of setting extremely small hooks *gently* on the strike, and so I was avoiding the customary practice of breaking off the 8–9-inch brookies that were providing the sport that morning.

The early-morning light hit the flat water at an extreme angle, making even polarized glasses useless as an aid to seeing beneath the surface. But there was no difficulty—every strike produced a small brook trout that thrashed about briefly before I gingerly led it in on the fine tippet.

I released the third or fourth small fish, dried the tiny fly and cast once again. Once again, a delicate sip by an unseen fish. I set the hook gently as before. Some slow and ponderous force took the line into deep water and then remained motionless. I applied as little pressure as any angler can apply when in a state of absolute terror. The fish, although I still hadn't seen it, was obviously large. If I had seen it on the take, I'm sure I would have broken it off, but I didn't and fate still had us joined together in unhappy deadlock. The fish swam very slowly about 30 yards to the end of the pool, stopped, then returned again and again lay near the bottom without moving.

I had plenty of time to think because the fish wasn't moving and I couldn't make him move without the danger of popping the tippet. I had *known* there were large fish here. I had *known* that they'll sometimes take these small flies on the surface. But because I'd been occupied with much smaller fish, I'd given absolutely no thought to what I'd do in this water *if* I hit a good one when using fragile terminal gear. On very light tippets, such a fish can only be landed by a long wearing-down process. That means not panicking the fish. If I splashed around and headed for a better position, the fish would panic. I stayed put.

For half an hour, the fish alternately rested and swam slowly about the pool. Because I remained motionless, except for manipulating the rod and line, the fish occasionally



passed near my feet—the broad head and sinister-looking kype of a big brown that as much as called me a fool as it passed in the clear water.

Finally the fish tired of playing me, trebled its speed, went through a logjam and was gone. If I had been only half as foolish, the game plan for fighting such a fish would have been a matter of forethought.

I would have been between the fish and that logjam. But I hadn't asked myself the simple question, "What'll I do if I hook a good one here?" So I paid the inevitable price—the same price to be paid by any angler without a game plan when he encounters the possibility of a good fish.

John Merwin is FFM's Managing Editor, who only fishes in the very early morning before the telephone starts ringing.

I had just the tackle for those deep-running blues in the tidal-flow. I should have brought it with me!

LEFTY KREH

ONE THING MOST FLY FISHERMEN LIKE about bluefish is that they never meet a blue that isn't hungry. And perhaps the most consistent method of taking them on flies is in a chum line. The problem remains, however, that you still have to put the flies where the fish are. I know this, but was reminded the hard way last spring when I fished at the mouth of the Potomac River on Chesapeake Bay with Captain Bruce Scheible, my son Larry, and his friend, Robin Unfried. Robin had never caught a bluefish on a fly, although he had taken many trolling or casting to breaking fish. He had high hopes of taking some on this trip.

On the three-hour trip down from Baltimore, I told both of them about how many fish they could catch. Captain Scheible usually anchors on the Middle Grounds, a fabulous mesa or plateau in the middle of Chesapeake Bay.

The Middle Grounds furnish cover and food for menhaden, a small fish that occurs in incredible numbers in salt water and supplies a main source of food for bluefish. Schools of them sometimes blanket the water, and if bluefish feed heavily on them down deep, so much oil from their bodies rises to the surface that it produces a telltale slick visible to someone who knows what to look for.

The fall before this trip I had fished with Captain Scheible and had boated more than 100 blues on fly tackle. With all of the discussion to get their imaginations and juices flowing, Larry and Robin could hardly contain themselves.

Captain Scheible believes in using fresh chum, and we made a stop along the way to pick up two orange crates of menhaden from a netter that had just plucked them from the water.

We anchored near two other skippers and saw the occupants of both boats busy fighting bluefish that ranged from five to nine pounds. Bruce began to ladle the chum into the water.

Larry let Robin and me start with the fly rods as he moved to the bow and cast a plastic-tail jig of about a half-ounce. Letting it sink deeply, he would begin a slow retrieve and on every other cast he was into a nice fish.

Robin and I were rigged with high-density shooting heads and five-inch Lefty Deceiver flies, a set-up I had done well with the year before.

However, I failed to realize this was a spring-tide week, and the current was flooding up the Bay so fast that our lines, instead of sinking, streamed out in a flow. We simply couldn't get the fly down to where the bluefish were supping in the chum.

I stuck with the fly for sometime but was forced finally to switch to ultralight spinning gear to score. I really enjoyed myself but knew that we had failed with flies, simply because I had brought the wrong gear.

Two weeks later I went down with another group—this time I carried both high-density and lead-core shooting

heads. Tossing the lead core about 100 feet, I would count to about twenty and begin a slow strip. About every other cast produced a strike.

That experience made me realize again that you should carry several types of sinking fly lines with you when chumming for bluefish. I don't think I'll make that mistake again.

Lefty Kreh is widely acknowledged as one of the country's top authorities on fly tackle and saltwater fly-fishing.

It wasn't that the water was fished out. It was just that my casts weren't!

C. BOYD PFEIFFER

IT WAS ONE OF THOSE MINUTES IN LIFE that I wish I could live over. I saw the flash of the big largemouth as it turned on the weedless streamer—just as the fly left the water on its way toward the backcast.

The bass looked dark yellow, golden almost, in the tannin-stained waters of the Maryland Eastern Shore pond where I fished that summer day. I remember, as the rod slowed in my hand, thinking that the bass would go four or maybe five pounds. The backcast died and the line fell into the lily pads behind me, the fly and leader a tangled heap. Who could continue a cast under the frustration of that moment—the foot-stomping angler, dumb enough to pick up for another cast when so much good bassy water remained between the fly and the boat?

Unfortunately, it is easy to get into sloppy habits during a day's fishing and to ignore that last twenty feet of retrieve, especially when the fishing is consistently good along the weedy shorelines, in among the pads and in the open channels of the ponds and rivers of the Eastern Shore. But the lesson learned was a hard one, since the bass that might have hit the fly—had it been retrieved another two feet and ten seconds—could have been the best in a month of fishing.

And it was an especially hard lesson since the solution is so easy. Whether fishing popping bugs, Keel flies, streamers, wet flies or a weighted marabou shaked wormlike along the bottom, largemouth are just as likely to hit at the rod tip as they are when the fly first touches the water.

Fishing out a fly the whole length of the cast is essential to taking bass. There are some tips to fishing out a cast that will make fishing more effective—that will assure more solid hookups and prevent tangles or lost fish in the middle of the fight.

First, make a long, straight cast toward the target. Make sure that any excess line not on the reel is coiled loosely on the boat deck or a clean patch of shoreline, so that it won't get tangled in weeds or other tackle should a bass hit and make a run.

Retrieve slowly, stripping in line with your line hand and across the index and middle fingers of your rod hand for immediate line control when a bass hits. Make sure that stripped-in line clears all brush, boat hardware or tackle, should a bass hit and run.

Perhaps the most important tip when fishing out the entire cast is to keep the rod tip pointed toward the fly so that a hit can be translated into a solid strike immediately. Don't fish with the rod held high, off to the side or with slack line; it can result in a lost fish, particularly when a bass hits near the boat.

Take particular care if a bass hits near the end of the cast, since there is little line and leader out to absorb the shock of the strike. To set the hook on a strike in close, strip back rapidly with the line and lift the rod simultaneously, but be prepared to allow the line to run. Don't try to hold any bass with a *light* tippet, or any large bass with *any* tippet, against the jumps and runs that follow the strike.

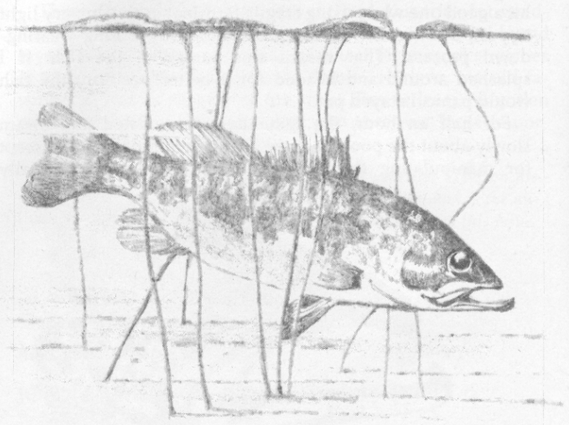
Following my own advice after losing that lunker to a short retrieve, I immediately switched to fishing out each cast of the shallow dark water on the Eastern Shore pond, hoping for a repeat performance from another five-pounder. I did land a couple of bass and finally boated a two-pounder that hit when the leader butt was in the tip-top of the rod to prove that fishing out each cast does work the way the textbooks describe it. But the five-pounder that might have been remains etched in my memory as a constant, painful reminder to fish out each cast—especially for bass.

C. Boyd Pfeiffer, formerly outdoor editor for the Washington Post, has written extensively from his Maryland base about fly-fishing in the East.

I was in double trouble. I should have read my books instead of just writing them!

MARK SOSIN

IT'S EVEN MORE FRUSTRATING when you know better. Bill Dance and I were working the lily pads for largemouths on one of his favorite lakes near the Arkansas border. The lily pads were exceptionally thick at that time of year, and the entanglement of stalks, stems, leaves and debris resembled a miniature jungle such as the Mata Grosso in Brazil. There were bass wherever the pads tapered out to a point, but the



fields of green extended for acre after acre with only a handful of points, and the open network of canals was narrow.

Most of our fishing was in a scattering of clear pockets that were totally surrounded by pads the size of elephant ears. The technique was to cast a top-water offering or a swimming lure into the opening and work it slowly, giving the bass a chance to attack from the fringes. While Bill methodically fished his bait-casting outfit, I chose a fly rod, because with it I could drop a popper into these pockets easily and with a reasonable degree of accuracy.

Before long, I fell victim to the distance trap. Watching those tight loops reach out in the air made me forget that I was fishing and that casting was only a means to an end. Almost without thinking, I kept stripping more line off the reel and started reaching for the distant pockets, patting myself on the back when the bug landed on target and cursing when I missed and had to yank the bug free of a pad.

I was concentrating on the casting and not the fishing, so I began to miss strikes. Instead of controlling the line in my left hand, I let it fall freely, straining for maximum distance. That meant there was slack line on the water and the bass would inhale the popper and reject it before I could recover.

Ignoring the fact that my casts were too long, I tried to compensate by getting set before the bug landed on the water. When a strike came, I reacted too soon in most instances and again missed fish. Once in awhile, my luck would change. The problem then was that there was no way to lead the fish out of the pads and we had to move the boat in. That had the marvelous effect of disturbing the fishing for fifty yards or more in all directions.

Sitting down, I began to analyze what I was doing. At the same time, I hastily tied on a different top-water bait. The fly rod is a deadly tool in lily pads if it is fished properly. Instead of long casts, the trick is to make short, accurate ones so that the line is under control when a fish strikes. Also, with a long line you are more likely to miss the opening in the lilies, hooking a pad instead of the bass—which you spooked. By pulling on the line, you can compound the mess by turning the leaf and letting light suddenly filter into the dingy world under the pads. Anyway, shaking the stems or the leaves doesn't usually help. The other advantage of a short line is that it is easier to get the fish out to you instead of forcing a boat through the growth to recover a long line. Every time the boat moves in, the fish may move out.

When I finally began to pick my spots carefully and started working a much shorter line in the closer pockets, my success ratio changed. Until then, most of the fish had been of average size and I was still searching for the trophy that Bill assured me was there.

I HURRIEDLY TIED ON a fresh bass bug, because out of the corner of my eye I had spotted the tip of a log puncturing the surface of one opening, and I automatically aimed for a spot beyond the wood so that I could work the back, side and front of it on a single cast. Anticipating action, I stood poised and somewhat tense. Beyond the log, the pads moved suddenly and the water bulged. The strike was not the explosive variety that is characteristic of smaller fish, but an authoritative slurp that pushed the surrounding water up a few inches and created a deep depression in the middle.

There was weight on the other end when I struck, and the rod jerked forward when I clamped down on the line in an attempt to stop the fish from crocheting my leader around the log.

Then, as quickly as it started, it was over. The sickening feeling of a slack line twinged my stomach muscles and I was certain that the big bass had cut my leader. Closer inspection, however, showed that the hastily tied knot connecting the leader to the bug had slipped out!

If I had concentrated on tying the knot instead of other things, it might not have happened. Of course, all of us have had knots pull out and it is part of fishing, but when you have written a book on knots, it is not only frustrating, it is downright embarrassing!

Mark Sosin is an FFM Contributing Editor, has written extensively about saltwater fly-rodding, but is equally proficient on a trout stream or bass pond.

How my "trusty Eveready" shed new light on the hatch I thought I was matching.

CARL RICHARDS

I KNOW BETTER. I really do! If only I could learn to conquer my impatience and listen to my own voluminous advice to others, I would raise a hell of a lot more fish. I *am* impatient, there's no getting around it, so I suppose I'm destined to repeat the same stupid mistake, year after year, hatch after hatch, until someday, hopefully, I learn my lesson.

It happened again last summer when Dick Pobst and I were fishing Michigan's Muskegon River on a warm evening in August. The river at this point is very wide, forming a deep pool with a bar running up the middle from the riffle below. As the currents gather at the tail of the pool, hundreds of rainbows congregate to feed on the nightly hatches.

Every year the Department of Natural Resources plants thousands of steelhead smolts in this river, some of which remain in the stream instead of quickly running down to Lake Michigan. The river is incredibly rich in insect life, and the fish can grow by an inch per month. By August and September the fish may average fifteen inches, with many going over eighteen inches. This makes for very fine dry-fly fishing indeed. Strangely enough, this stream is not heavily fished in the summer and we normally have the pool to ourselves.

Dick and I followed the path through the white pine forest to the lower riffle, found the bar, and waded upstream so we could cast to the rising rainbows in the deeper part of the pool. I noticed the naturals were a rather small species, a #20 with a yellowish-tan body and a brown wing. These fish see numerous caddisflies every day and are feeding in slow-moving water. They are as selective as any trout in any river I've ever fished. I tied on an appropriate imitation and promptly began hooking fish. There were plenty of naturals coming off, but it was still early and relatively few fish were rising. I would locate a good fish, cast three or four feet above it, and as the fly approached the taking position, give it one or two slight twitches. It was almost always effective.

As the evening drew on, more and more fish began rising until, just at dark, the entire pool was dimpled with feeding fish. The rainbows were in their nightly feeding frenzy. This, of course, is the most difficult time to fool trout because they "have the color," as the English put it. There are so many naturals, they know what to look for in size, color and silhouette.

Suddenly, although I was casting over steadily rising fish, my "deadly" pattern became worthless. Oh, I had all kinds of excuses. It was dusk, the drift was slightly off the line, too many naturals on the water to compete with my artificial, I could not see accurately enough so I was missing strikes, and so on. After much wasted fishing time, I finally forced myself to take the time to check the water with a flashlight.

Sure enough, the hatch had switched just when the light had become too dim for me to notice the change. The most numerous insect now was a #16 olive-bodied spent-wing caddis, a huge fly compared to the #20 I had been using. I switched to a #16 imitation and was soon into an eighteen-inch rainbow. All that wasted time just because I was too impatient to stop fishing for a few minutes and check the water.

I have advised people many times to check the emerging insects closely, especially at dusk and especially if the pattern you think should work does not. When fish are rising, don't waste time on an artificial that doesn't work. Give it a fair try, then switch. It's good advice for everyone, including me—although, next year I might be too impatient to heed it.

Michigan angler Carl Richards achieved national prominence several years ago with the publication of Selective Trout, *which he co-authored with Doug Swisher.*

I was hopping-mad, becalmed amid an ocean of trout by my "fickle friend, the summer wind."

CHARLES BROOKS

THE SIMPLEST MISTAKES can be the easiest to make—and the most disastrous. All anglers fall into that trap now and then, regardless of how much experience they've had. That which lingers most lastingly in my memory took place last summer when, in terms of tackle and flies, I put all my eggs in one basket, lugged the basket over the backcountry hills, and found that the "eggs" were rotten when I finally got to where I intended to fish.

It was August, and at 7,000 feet, in one of those beautiful alpine meadows that flank many of the streams in Yellowstone Park, the grasshoppers were filling the air with the rattling crackle of snapping wings. Not a breath of air stirred; the nearby pool was like glass.

On leaving the car to hike over the intervening ridges to the stream, I had done something I seldom do Because I was recovering from knee surgery and not in good shape, I had come to the stream carrying just my rod, a level floating-line that I use only for fishing hoppers, and a box of hopper patterns. Upon hearing and seeing the hoppers cavorting along the meadow, I was relieved. I had brought the right medicine.

When I eased up to the bank at the foot of the pool and peered upstream, I was delighted. At least a half-dozen 18–20-inch trout were drifting lazily about on my side of the pool, some in easy casting range. This was going to be a ball.

The first cast changed all that. When the heavy line, leader and big #6 hopper came down on the mirrorlike surface, the trout disappeared as though they'd never existed. Muttering about beginner's nerves (I've only been fly-fishing 45 years), I moved out and up to the next pool . . . and repeated the entire performance.

Realizing I was up against a serious problem, I took time out for some observing and thinking. All up and down the stream it was the same—the pools were like glass and large trout were loafing along about a foot under the surface. Obviously, the 20–25-foot casts I had tried would not work. My leader was only 7½ feet; the level line was coming down too close to the fish.

I stalked the next fish, a small one of sixteen inches, and cast short and behind him, stopping the rod high so only the fly and the leader would be on the water. When the hopper pattern hit the water with a soggy spat, the yearling departed like last week's paycheck. Try again.

I switched to my smallest hopper pattern; I could do nothing about the leader, I hadn't brought any tippet material.

The next three hours were an exercise in frustration. I stalked and cast to perhaps forty trout and interested only one. That one swam over, looked at my hopper and swam off, shaking his head. Then he turned around, came back, looked bug-eyed at the hopper from an inch away, and swam off again. That was as close as I came all day.

I had made several cardinal mistakes. I had put all my eggs in one basket, betting everything on the hopper pattern. But I had forgotten to check the wind. When the wind doesn't blow, there are practically no hoppers in the water. Also, I was fishing a heavy line and short leader—good medicine for fishing a hopper pattern *in a wind,* but murder on a still, sunny day.

But the biggest mistake was in leaving myself no options. I had brought only one pattern, no leader material, and had not even worn waders so that I could get into the water and lower my silhouette to get closer to the fish.

When I joined the friends who had come with me and who had fished the stream two miles farther up, I found they, too, had made the same mistakes that I had and had caught nothing.

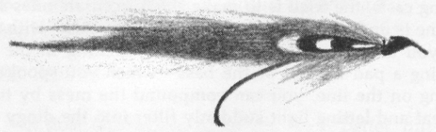
It was a good lesson—one I thought I'd learned twenty years ago—go prepared for anything, and never, never bet on a trout behaving as you think it should.

Charles Brooks is the author of three excellent books on fly-fishing for trout in Western waters.

The fish were doing their part—but to quote the famous Bacall-to-Bogie line: "It's even better when you help!"

DAVE ENGERBRETSON

THE BOX CANYON STRETCH of the Henry's Fork of the Snake River is heavy water. It tumbles and slides over boulders and dances across sparkling riffles as it plunges toward the famous Railroad Ranch section of the river, and as with most big Western rivers, it contains holding water for some truly outstanding fish. While I had been enjoying a pleasant day



taking a number of small rainbows, there was always a lunker in the back of my mind.

Thinking of a big fish, I had rigged with a stout leader and tied on a big #6 Casual Dress Nymph, which is my favorite "searching pattern" in this type of water. I knew the smaller fish would hit the big fly with abandon, but also I wanted something large enough to attract the monster I was really after. The Casual Dress seems to represent a variety of large, dark stonefly nymphs and is usually an ideal choice when "prospecting."

After an hour or so of fruitless casting, I found myself becoming a little careless. I was moving too rapidly, casting poorly, and merely fishing by rote when I was quickly brought to my senses by a sharp tug on the fly. My reflexes, by then sluggish, responded too slowly and I missed another small rainbow. But the action was enough to revive my flagging interest, *and* as I began to fish more carefully again, I was rewarded by another bump on the *drifting* nymph. I responded with a twitch of my wrist and missed another fish, this one possibly a little larger than the first.

After I had missed four fish in succession, I became a little tense but blamed the problem on the long period of inactivity during which I had lost my edge. Making a mental note to relax, I dropped my big Casual Dress a few feet upstream from a large submerged boulder. My jaw dropped as I saw the shadow of the big fish before I actually felt the take. And now thinking about it, I can see it all happening in agonizingly slow motion.

The great fish slid from beside the rock with an almost leisurely turn and sucked in the fly. My arm came back; for an instant I felt his heavy mass push into the current, felt one sweep of his broad tail, and then nothing. This was *the* fish, and I had blown it!

I trudged back to the bank and reeled in my line in disgust, so shaken up that I couldn't seem to hook my fly in the keeper ring. Then I did a double-take. The fly had no point! It was broken off cleanly up near the bend! And yet I knew that I hadn't hit the fish hard enough to break the hook.

Then, as they say, the awful truth dawned. This was why I had missed so many fish earlier. The hook had been broken all along—along with one of my cardinal rules. *I had failed to check my hook after missing a couple of fish that I should have taken.* I had no idea when or why it had broken. Maybe I had scored it with the tying vise or broken it off on a snag. More likely, I had hit a rock on a sloppy backcast earlier in the afternoon when I was so careless in my fishing.

I don't know how many times I have stood in front of a class of beginning fly fishermen and patiently explained the importance of checking the point of your hook after you've missed a fish or two. But I didn't do it myself, and it cost me a good fish. Don't make the same mistake!

Dave Engerbretson is FFM's Rocky Mountain Field Editor, a fine fly tier, rod builder and angler who also handles a college professorship on the side.

That "last-one-for-the-road cast" can lead down the primrose path to disappointment or disaster.

C. HERB WILLIAMS

ONE MORE CAST. There probably isn't a fisherman who hasn't said those words at one time or another. I know one who made one more cast into the fading light of day—and hooked the state record steelhead.

However, there are times when one more cast alongside a small stream in mountainous country can mean disaster. I found this out recently when that last cast was like nipping on a bottle—each cast, like each taste, called for another.

This went on until suddenly I realized the day was gone. I was forced to quit because I'd hung up on a tree I couldn't see and it was too dark to tie on another fly. Even so, I didn't realize how dark it really was until I stepped into the brush and trees. The water in a stream picks up every possible bit of reflected light, but the trees absorb it.

We have many such wilderness-type streams throughout the West—in the Olympics, Cascades, Sierras and throughout the Rocky Mountain states. These delightful smaller streams are isolated, and the farther you get from a road or camp, the better the fishing. This isolation offers that intangible bonus, the delight of being alone with woods, water and fish.

But the solitude had a different feel that evening when I stepped into the woods. Suddenly it was easy to get turned around in the dark. My imagination pictured black bears close by. But these hazards were only in my head. The real problem was the obstacle course I faced when I had to strike out though that thick brush in the Stygian blackness.

I snagged my waders on a branch, stumbled and fell into a wild berry bush with thorns half and inch long. The two large gashes in my waders were easy to fix, but finding all those pin holes from the brambles was a distressing trial-and-error business.

Later, when I finished patching my boots, they looked as if they had a bad case of acne. The next time out, a wet leg told me I had missed a hole or two.

Even a flashlight can't protect you completely, for its thin beam can't be everywhere at once. It can turn a small roughness in a path into something that looks like a big hole, or make a big hole or root seem like a slight irregularity.

So in the coming year I'm going to time how long it takes to walk into a stream and then use my watch to decide when to quit and head back. When the minute hand moves inexorably around to quitting time, I'll reel in. That way I won't have a patching job to do on my waders, I won't risk a turned ankle or a broken leg, and I'll be able to see all the hazards that could mean a broken rod.

Well . . . maybe I'll reel in. When you stop to think about it, if you use self control, just one more little cast won't make that much difference as darkness falls. Or will it?

Herb Williams is a prominent outdoor writer based in the Pacific Northwest.

Don't count your hatches before they're hatched. Check the thermometer, not the calendar.

RON CORDES

ONE OF NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S seasonal highlights is an excellent Salmon Fly hatch which generally begins during the latter half of May. Coming at the close of a long winter and seemingly longer run-off, this hatch heralds the beginning of an anxiously awaited trout season. As such, it is frequently so eagerly anticipated that even the most experienced angler can let his excitement hamper careful forethought and preparation.

At the appropriate time last spring, I grabbed my gear and drove the five hours north to my favorite stonefly river. The river was not as high, cold or roily as I thought it would be, however, and a relatively unproductive afternoon ensued, during which time I saw far fewer adult stoneflies, even fewer big trout, and far more empty nymphal husks than I had expected. This indicated that the main period of hatching activity was over. The hatching cycle was already on the downswing far earlier than it should have been. I had missed the prime angling period by weeks.

Why had the hatching cycle shifted to begin at a significantly earlier date? At first blush there was no reason to think that the hatch would not occur at the same time it had in recent years. But yet it didn't.

Stop now for a moment to think about how you characterize the chronology of your favorite hatch. The odds are that you specify a date. For example, you might say that "The stonefly hatch generally begins around the twentieth of May." However, what you really mean, and what I forgot to consider, is that "Generally around the twentieth of May the *water temperature* is appropriate." The water temperature! That was the key, not simply the time of year.

The prior winter had been unusually mild, with a relatively small snowpack. An early spring prematurely released the smaller quantities of water trapped by the meager snow. Thus the cold runoff entered the river earlier than normal, in smaller amounts, and for a shorter period of time. Consequently, the temperature of the river was significantly higher when I arrived to begin my fishing than it would have been under what I might refer to as "normal conditions"—those I had unavoidably become accustomed to year after year.

The stoneflies responded to the *temperature* at which their hatching activity normally begins. Unfortunately that response occurred a couple of weeks before I had expected it to, and it left me with a fishing experience of far lesser magnitude than I had hoped for—an experience that I could have avoided had I kept in mind the temperature factor, as one always should when planning to fish a specific hatch of any fly anywhere in the country.

Ron Cordes is FFM's West Coast Field Editor, was recently admitted to the California Bar, and now divides his time between trout and torts.

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