

ALTHOUGH IT WAS a warm summer night, the cold waters of the limestone stream chilled me. Somewhere in the darkness below where I stood—somewhere in the long, deep pool—there was a sudden watery explosion. In the stillness that followed, the natural night sounds were the only indication of life as I fished for the big trout that had caused the commotion.

That night was a humid August evening during the dark of the moon. The cloud cover added to the pitch darkness, and the low water combined with the other conditions to make it a perfect night for pursuing large browns with a fly. Insects swarmed and hummed in the dark. Water in the riffles gurgled and murmured. Crickets chirped messages of the coming autumn and the end of summer. Instinctively I checked the leader's dropper. I had lost fish with a dropper a mite too short. A five-inch dropper would do.

It was 10:30 P.M. The fish, calmed and ready for feeding with the fall of night, had moved into their feeding lanes. Then, in the darkness of the big pool, the fish again broke water. Waiting until my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I stripped the nail knot through the tip-top and put a pair of 1/0's in motion. Working carefully and deliberately, I fished down through the pool—wading slowly, inch by inch. Browns, I knew, will feed in inches of water and can easily be spooked by careless wading.

I had fished this pool many times before, knew it well and knew the water held good fish. As a night fisherman, it's been my conviction that once you locate a good trout, you should stay with him. His feeding lanes won't change that much, and sooner or later you should be able to move him.

Drifting the rod forward and shortening the power stroke, I cast the big wets under an overhanging hemlock bough. My bulky flies sunk in the current and responded to the action of the rod tip. Suddenly they stopped. I reared back and drove the hook home. A big brown rolled on the surface, and I quickly got an angle on his head to turn him, but the fish had other plans and headed for an underwater brushpile.

Push the reel spool into your shirt, I told myself. It will give a steady, even drag; now palm the spool. It was a tip Lefty Kreh had given me, one he used for big saltwater fish, and it worked for me now. Give a trout a chance to rest, and he'll either hang you up or bust your leader up. I turned the trout again, and I could feel him tire. Keeping the pressure on the fish, I shifted the rod to the other side and got another angle on its head. Finally, I turned it for the last time. It was mine—or was it?

Finning weakly before me lay thirty-four inches and nearly sixteen pounds of brown trout. One look at its head told me my net was inadequate, made for spunky fingerlings or chunky two-year-olds, a mistake that

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As darkness falls, some fly rodders hear a different call, and the promise of catching a large trout leads them to seek

Trophies After Dark

JOSEPH HUMPHREYS

can cost an angler the fish of a lifetime. Beaching him on the rocky shoreline was impossible, however, and I quickly thrust the rod between my knees, pushed both arms under him, and heaved him onto the shore. The quest was over.

WHY WOULD ANY sane fly fisherman jeopardize his personal safety stumbling around a stream on a dark night when he could enjoy catching scrappy trout in lovely surroundings during the day? The answer for me is the opportunity to take a trophy-size brown trout, an opportunity that almost never presents itself during daylight hours.

Unfortunately, large brown trout in many streams no longer sip insects on the surface during daylight hours. Heavy and prolonged fishing pressure has altered their feeding behavior, and many have become night feeders. As a result, on many brown-trout waters angling for the large fish presents special challenges for the fly fisherman and demands a knowledge of techniques seldom associated with the daytime sport.

As darkness falls, large browns leave the deep, river holes and move either to the heads of the pools and into

Fish such as this one do not fall to the fly often, but the author's fish is a Pennsylvania brown-trout record. Photos by Paul Blankenhorn.





Some of the author's night-fishing flies. They are designed to move water when fished and move properly through the water. Large fish sense their movement and attack.

the riffles there, or to the shallows at the tails of the pools. If you are aware of this behavior, you can plan your fishing during daylight hours.

The questions you ask yourself in planning during daylight hours for a nighttime fishing expedition are: How will I fish the currents? How can I wade into casting position safely and with the least disturbance to the fish? Where are the overhanging obstructions to casting the fly, and how can I avoid them come nightfall? Many times heavy foliage masks the best night-fishing pools, and some of them are nearly impossible to fish, even during daylight hours. But these same hard-to-reach pools hold good fish because they are nearly inaccessible to fishermen, and the movement of the large browns out to their extremities as night falls makes them worth the exploration effort. In preparation for night fishing, search out locations that will permit rod movement for short roll-casts. Keep in mind which bank has the best currents, and then plan to work them slowly with short down-and-across casts that swing tight to the bank.

METHODS AND TECHNIQUES vary in night fly-fishing. Often when fishing the head of a particular pool, I'll fish the riffles first with a straight downstream cast, letting the flies swing and move in the current. Then I retrieve with a very slow hand-twist of the line and an occasional slight twitch of the rod tip. Remember that night-feeding trout are slow and deliberate in their movements. Seldom will you get a headlong rush or the explosive strike that makes daylight fishing so exciting. Sometimes as you lift your fly in a riffle, a trout

will take it in a hurry, but that is the exception. In most cases night-feeding browns will simply inhale the fly and stop it.

If you're fishing down and across a pool, swing the rod tip with the line. As in nymph-fishing technique, this keeps the belly out of the line, and it maintains a tight line between you and the fly, a necessity if you want to hook fish, and imperative if you want to feel those big wet flies bouncing on the bottom, where they should be. If you want to add movement to your flies, simply lift the rod tip occasionally. Maintain a continuous, but slow, hand-twist retrieve and swing your rod tip with your flies until they straighten out below you. When you feel that the flies have stopped, don't pick them up immediately—a good fish may have followed your fly for some distance. Gradually raise the rod tip until the flies are airborne, ready for the next cast.

Once you have covered an area by working the riffles and pocket water at the head of the pool and the shallow flats at its tail, you may be tempted to move on to another pool. I try to cover no more than three areas in one night, however, and I fish each area thoroughly. I fish through the tail of a pool two or three times, then I sit on a rock and have a cup of coffee or sandwich, resting the water for another run. Oftentimes I have struck good fish in the last pass through a pool.

WATER TEMPERATURES ARE extremely important to trout fishing, whether it's day or night. And night fishermen who are unaware of this temperature effect on angling are limiting their chances of success. Many streams

have marginal temperature regimes for trout, and as the sun warms the water during daylight hours, the trout migrate to find comfort, and in some cases survival. What this means for the night fisherman is that he should find and fish the cool-water spots in the stream or he should work the deep pools where the water stratifies and the deeper water may be ten to twenty degrees colder than the surface.

As night falls the surface-water temperatures cool. On many occasions upon arriving at a stream at 9 P.M. I've found water temperatures at seventy degrees Fahrenheit or higher. But by midnight the water temperature has dropped five degrees and the temperature change has stirred sluggish trout into feeding activity. Seldom have I found large fish feeding at night in water exceeding seventy-five degrees, and if they feed at all, it will be in the riffly water, where they have more oxygen than in still water. Ideal feeding temperatures range from sixty-five to seventy degrees, but the optimum temperatures for feeding trout lie between sixty and sixty-seven degrees. On many night-fishing excursions I have done poorly before midnight, and then after a coffee break, which allowed time for the water temperatures to drop two or three degrees, I caught fish.

DON'T EXPECT INSTANT success when you begin night fishing for the first time. As with other fishing techniques, preparation, practice and experience on the stream are necessary to acquire the skills of the sport. In the end, perseverance—the traditional character strength of all effective fly fishermen—is your best asset. The nights I've gone fishless far outnumber the successful ones.

Looking back over my experience with night fishing, I find that I have had little success when moonlight was on the water. The darkest phase of the moon is best. But if you have to fish on a moonlit night, your best bet is between 3 A.M. and 5 A.M., the period when the moonlight is of lowest intensity. Also, on those moonlit nights I try to fish the heavily shaded patches of water. I've taken fish in moonlight, but it's the exception. Other conditions that seem to turn off the trout at night are cold winds or heavy fogs.

An understanding of how large trout feed is another aspect of behavior that may help you in your night fishing. I've found that when the big trout feed they consume large things, such as ten-inch suckers, eight-inch trout, crayfish the size of young lobsters and other handsome mouthfuls. The feeding spree of a large brown trout may last for only a few minutes, but during that brief frenzy he may grab enough food to keep his stomach contented for a long period. The feeding behavior of the large trout—their preference for large foods—is what makes them vulnerable to large artificials, such as big streamers.

On large streams or rivers it takes time to locate specific feeding zones. For instance, there may be definite characteristics that attract the large trout, such as a particular riffle or a snag at the head or tail of a pool, and you will have to spend time searching for these stream

features, as well as the trout that use them, as part of your night-fishing planning during daylight hours. Study the broken water and the pockets and know how to get to them safely when you cannot see but must feel your way.

This preplanning for night fishing is absolutely essential, both to your success at night and your physical safety. If you don't know the water and surroundings, pitch-black conditions are a poor time for exploration. So wade pools when you can see; get the feel of, and learn, the bottom—where the drop-offs are and what the shorelines are like for night walking. Look at the shorelines and analyze them for casting. Ask yourself how much line you will need to cover an area and how you can position yourself to cover the water most effectively when casting to the feeding lies that you will fish come darkness. Once you have determined where the overhead obstructions are, such as hemlock boughs, ask yourself how tight your casting loop must be to shoot back under them. Notice also the submerged cover that lies close to the currents, for a trout will use the cover for overhead protection during daylight hours, and he will run to it on that first charge after accepting your offering.

Of course, the same lessons in daylight preparation can be applied to your night-fishing equipment. I check my flashlight batteries, fly boxes, terminal tackle and knots. If preparedness is important during daylight fly-fishing, it is doubly so in darkness.

My fly-rod choice for night fishing is a rod long enough (eight to nine feet) and with sufficient backbone to lift a pair of 2/0 wet flies skyward and control an ample length of line for casting. I use an eight-foot graphite and a six-foot leader tapered from .019-inch to a ten-pound-test tippet. At night fish aren't leader shy, so why risk losing a trophy?

As for flies, I've already mentioned that the streamers speak to the large fish. I also believe that if you want the big trout then you need a fly from #4 to 2/0. Experience tells me that the #6 to #8 flies are fine if you want ten-inch trout, but for the big trout you need the big flies at night.

Perhaps as important as the fly size is its design. I build two characteristics into a fly for night fishing. The fly must move water, and it must move properly in water. The reason for these two characteristics in fly design is that fish *feel* movement in water. They are sensitive to the movement through the shockwaves that the fly transmits to the water when it is moved. Once they sense the movement of the artificial, the trout will instinctively move to it. When they see life-like movement through the water, they strike.

The night I took my large brown was the conclusion of a quest for a trophy fish. Perhaps the night-fishing understandings and techniques will lead you on the same quest, and to a similar conclusion. Anyway, they will give you a feeling for the night fisherman's world. Few fly fishermen are called to this aspect of our sport, but for those who try it the trophy fish are their reward.

FLY FISHERMAN[®]

LATE-SEASON • 1979
Volume 10 • Number Seven
July/August • Price \$1.75

