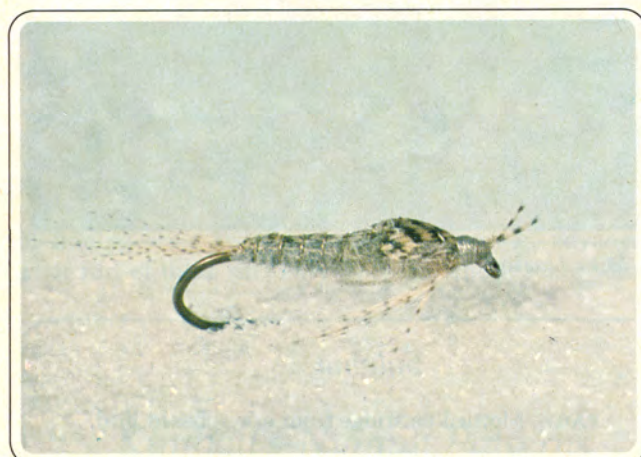


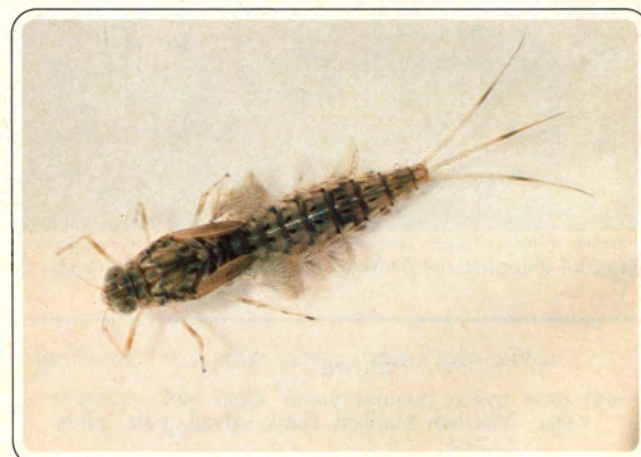
The author's imitation of the Western Green Drake nymph, for which the pattern is given at the end of this article.



This is the natural counterpart of the fly at left. Note the generally dark coloration.



This is an imitation of the Gray Drake nymph (Siphonurus), also tied by the author.



A natural Gray Drake nymph.

A Brown Drake adult. All photos by the author.



A Brown Drake Spinner, tied by the author using hackle fibers for spent wings.



An introductory look at three of the West's most famous hatches—the Green, Gray, and Brown drakes

The Western Big Three

BARRY PARKER

A SANDHILL CRANE flew over the river, heading for the opposite side of the basin with slow, steady beats of its large wings. Its raucous cry startled me, pulling my concentration away from the surface of the water.

I watched the bird briefly, then back to the stream where a growing number of rings marked the start of a spinner fall of some of the largest mayflies I'd seen in the West. Even some of the smaller dimples on the surface were surrounded by waves that gave evidence of the bulk of the fish that had caused the riseforms.

It was one of those magic moments on the stream for which the Western big three are famous. I don't mean three trout streams, but rather three mayflies found in various areas of the West, which can produce fishing that borders on the unbelievable. If you aren't familiar with these flies, you should be. Here's a basic introduction to them so you'll recognize them when you meet them on the stream, after which meeting they may fill your daydreams with rising trout.

The Gray Drake

I'LL BEGIN with the Gray Drake hatch. My first experience with this hatch came several years ago early in June. The evening was brisk and clear. I had tied on a

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dry fly, but the rises were few and I was working hard. In two hours, with a little luck, I had somehow managed to land two oversize minnows. As I concentrated my efforts on a rise below me, I noticed someone slip into the stream off to my left. I casually watched him out of the corner of my eye. His first cast brought nothing. He cast again. This time the water below him came alive—he had hooked a sizable fish. I watched as he landed it. Soon he was hooked into another, then a third.

I was feeling more than a little envious and started to wonder what he was using—certainly not the fly that I'd been fishing! I didn't dare ask him, inhibited by a misplaced sense of self-respect, but I decided to congratulate him at least.

"Looks like you're doing okay," I yelled. He began to wade toward me.

"Why don't you try one of these," he said, handing me a large gray nymph. He then briefly told me how to fish it. I thanked him and enthusiastically tied it to my leader. Out it sailed in a 45-degree downstream cast. The nymph had barely disappeared beneath the surface when I felt a sudden bolting jerk. Almost as suddenly as the fight began, it ended. My line went limp—I had lost him. When I reeled in I found that I had also lost my nymph.

Being too embarrassed to ask for another, I tied on something else and began to fish again. Naturally, I hoped he had seen me lose it and would offer me an-

other. I was lucky. Within a few minutes he began to make his way toward me again.

"I see you lost your nymph," he said. "Do you want another?" I tried not to look too eager, gladly accepted it and soon had it attached to my line. From that moment I had some of the best fishing I had ever experienced, having fish on until it was so dark I had to leave.

On reaching home I immediately went to work tying up several similar imitations. I lacked some of the components needed for an exact duplication of the fly, but did the best I could with what I had. I was sure it would work. When I reached the stream the next day, I tied on one of my own imitations. After a half hour of casting I could hardly believe it—not a single hit. Something was wrong. I decided to tie on the original nymph.



Illustration by René Harrop

Bang—first cast and I had a fish, almost like magic. A few more casts and I had another. The fish could actually distinguish between this imitation and mine.

I carefully compared them. My imitation had a slightly different color wing pad and a slightly different tail; the body colors were the same. The fish, however, could tell the difference, and mine was the one they didn't like. Later I acquired the proper material for a more exact imitation and since that time have found this nymph to be extremely effective. I have, in fact, modified it over the years and now have an imitation that I believe is even more effective than the one given to me originally. [Fly patterns are included elsewhere in this article. THE EDITORS.]

The nymph worked so well that I was immediately curious about what it imitated. I began to investigate and, sure enough, soon found some large gray-brown naturals. At that time I had only a casual acquaintance with nymphs and I had no idea what they were called. I now know that they are of the *Siphonurus* genus. There are several species in the West, and one of the

most common is *Siphonurus occidentalis*, or the Gray Drake.

The nymphs are usually found in medium- to slow-moving streams. One of their favorite spots is the muck and debris in the slower water near the edges. They are powerful swimmers and become particularly active just before emergence. If you look carefully in the shallows, you can sometimes see them darting back and forth. Imitations can be fished with a similar darting motion, but I find they are almost as effective with little or no added motion. I prefer a slack-line, 45-degree downstream cast. Let the nymph sink, then as the current swings it below you, it rises to the surface, much as the natural does. This is usually when a fish hits it, so be ready.

One of the things I particularly like about this hatch is its length. It can extend from early June until well into July. In my area of eastern Idaho, it occasionally lasts into the first week of August. The peak seems to be in early July. One way to estimate the activity—assuming you don't see any adults—is to look carefully at the wing pad of the nymph. Just prior to emergence it becomes dark—almost black—in color. In a random sampling of nymphs during June, for example, you may only see a few with dark pads. By early July, however, most nymphs will have dark wing pads. I've found this to be a useful guide.

If the nymph is that good, surely an imitation of the adult must also work well. It is a good fly, but I don't sing its praises quite as loudly, because I've never had the same success with it that I have had with the nymph. It is large and relished by the fish, but I haven't seen the dun create extensive activity because of its sporadic emergence. But again, it is good and worth trying. Several excellent commercial imitations of it are available, and all of them seem to work quite well (i.e., Gray Wulff, Irresistible).

The Western Green Drake

THE GRAY DRAKE may not create a feeding frenzy, but there is a drake that does, and I'm sure it needs no introduction—the Green Drake (*Ephemera grandis*). Is there a fisherman alive that hasn't heard of the Green Drake hatch? I doubt it, and it deserves its fame. [Readers should realize that the author is referring to the Western Green Drake, and not the fly that goes by the same name on Eastern waters. The Eastern Green Drake (*Ephemera guttulata*) is of a different genus and is a very different fly in many respects. THE EDITORS.]

The appropriate nymph also works well for this fly, but the real star is the adult. The hatch begins about the third week of June, depending on the weather. The first few days are usually slow, with only an occasional dun seen fluttering about, but things soon pick up. Activity increases rapidly and seems to peak over a period of two or three days. The best time to be on the water, of course, is these two or three days. With a good imitation you can literally land dozens of fish (well, at least quite a few) in the 14- to 18-inch class, with a few even larger. I have heard of people landing and releasing



The slower edges of Western waters are prime areas for prospecting with a *Siphonurus* nymph when the adults are due to hatch within a few days. Photo by Dave Engerbretson.

more than thirty a day. Of course, a good imitation is a must. With a poor one, you'll be likely to land none.

The first time I fished the hatch, I went down to the stream like a conscientious angler, plucked a few duns from the water and carefully examined them. Bright green with yellow stripes; I had just the material with which to tie them. I made several that evening and was ready the next day. The hatch began on schedule. Out went my line, cast after cast. The fish were rising everywhere, practically knocking my imitation over to get at the naturals. They never made a mistake—not even one! They completely ignored my imitation.

I picked up a natural to compare it to my fly. The problem was staring me in the face. In my haste to get the exact size and shade for the body, I had neglected the wing. I had used deerhair, and deerhair is much lighter than the dark-slate wings of the natural. My fishing was ruined for that day, but I soon corrected my mistake.

I'll try to summarize a few important things to remember about this hatch. First, be sure you have a good imitation—#10, bright-green body with yellow stripes, and a slate wing. There are a number of commercial imitations available, but it's best to tie your own. Then you're sure. Second, concentrate on the

rises. Set your fly down upstream from a recent one, then as it passes over the fish give it a slight twitch. This twitch is tricky, but it's effective.

As the natural floats along on the surface it's in danger of being eaten, so it tries to get into the air as soon as possible. It can't do this until its wings are dry, and it helps them along by occasionally twitching them. I don't know how many times I've seen a natural twitch one second only to be eaten the next. There's no doubt—the twitch excites the fish.

As I mentioned earlier, an imitation of the nymph is also excellent if used at the proper time. The best time is just prior to the hatch, but sometimes it's best to leave it on during the early part of the hatch.

The nymph emerges by making a sudden dash to the surface. As it rises to the surface, it is carried downstream, sometimes into the mouth of a waiting fish. Once on the surface it rapidly casts off its nymphal shuck and leaves it behind. It's interesting to see these cast-off shells; they don't float, rather they move downstream underwater, usually a foot or so down. I've found them to be a good indication of the time and intensity of the hatch. On many occasions I've stood in the stream and watched thousands of them pass me in the current. At times I've wondered how the fish man-

Big Three . . .

age to pick out a live nymph from among them. But, of course, it's easy to see how they do. The live ones move, often against the current; the cast-off shells just drift. So the proper motion is important when you're fishing the nymph. Again I have found a slack-line, 45-degree downstream cast to be particularly effective. Let the nymph sink, then rise to the surface as it comes below you. The 45-degree upstream cast is also good, but be sure you give it motion through the water. If the fly just moves along with the current, the fish are apt to ignore it.

The nymph is dark brown, and this, of course, should be the color of the imitation. But be careful. If you turn it over, you'll notice its belly is maroon. This is what the fish sees as the nymph dashes to the surface. It's a good idea, therefore, to add some maroon to your imitation.

The Brown Drake

THE THIRD OF THE BIG THREE is the Brown Drake (*Ephemera simulans*). I first encountered this hatch several

"Big Three" Nymph Patterns

THE FOLLOWING are three very simple nymph patterns that I've used successfully to imitate the mayfly nymphs described in the accompanying article.

Gray Drake

HOOK: #10 3XL.

BODY: Dubbed muskrat.

TAIL: Wood duck (or imitation).

LEGS: Wood duck (or imitation).

WING CASE: Wood duck (or imitation).

Green Drake

HOOK: #10 3XL.

BODY: Dark-brown dubbing, maroon mixed in.

TAIL: Brown hackle fibers.

LEGS: Brown hackle fibers.

WING CASE: Dark-brown quill section.

Brown Drake

HOOK: #10 3XL.

BODY: Tan fur dubbing.

TAIL: Wood duck (or imitation).

LEGS: Wood duck (or imitation).

WING CASE: Wood duck (or imitation).

BARRY PARKER

years ago on Idaho's Silver Creek. It was about mid-June; the sun was setting. I had fished all evening with moderate success and was about to pack it in for the day. I suddenly noticed a few extremely large flies fluttering over the surface.

I decided to wait a little while longer to see if a hatch would materialize. I was totally unprepared for what happened in the next few minutes. The few fluttering flies became hundreds, then thousands. There were so many flies around me that I had to keep my mouth closed for fear of eating a few.

The fish began to gorge themselves, as I hastily grabbed one of the naturals to see if I had an imitation close to it. It was tan with dark-brown stripes. I had a fly of the right size (8), but not quite the same color. I tied it on as quickly as possible and began to cast. The sun had set and I knew it would be dark soon.


The slurps of feeding trout were now clearly audible. It almost sounded as if there was a bunch of pigs below me. Using a slack-line downstream cast, I let my imitation float into the series of rings. At first they seemed to ignore it, but as it got darker I got more and more hits. Finally it was so dark I could hardly see. For a while there was still an occasional splash, then the fish stopped. As I made my way to the edge of the stream, I groped around for a few naturals to take home with me.

The next day I tied several imitations. There were both duns and spinners on the water, so I tied imitations of both. As sunset approached on the following evening, I was ready. Along they came, right on schedule.

I later found out that this was the Brown Drake hatch. It usually begins late in June and extends well into July. It occurs on many types of rivers, but there is a requirement. There must be sand or silt of the right consistency on the bottom of the river. The nymphs are burrowers; they dig themselves in for protection, and because of this, they are difficult to find.

A few days after encountering the extensive hatch mentioned earlier, I sifted the bottom. To my amazement I didn't find a single Brown Drake nymph. Yet that same evening they were there again by the thousands. I later discovered why; they were burrowed so deep in the sand that I just didn't dig deep enough.

The body of the nymph is long, slender and usually yellowish tan in color. There are extensive gills along the sides. It is, in fact, quite different from most other nymphs.

Imitations of the nymph are extremely effective just before the hatch. I usually fish the nymph until sunset, then switch to the adult imitation. 

[Readers seeking additional information about these hatches may wish to check the following books: *Selective Trout (Crown)* by Doug Swisher and Carl Richards; *Hatches (Comparahatch)* by Al Caucci and Bob Nastasi; and *Nymphs (Winchester)* by Ernest Schwiebert. THE EDITORS.]

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