

ALONG IN OCTOBER the fishing has changed in much of the West. Already most of the traveling anglers have gone home, not because the fishing has failed them, but because the weather is becoming unreliable. In Yellowstone National Park you might have snow anytime after September 1, but the early snows won't last long. In October the weather can make fishing difficult, and there can be days of freezing fly lines. It is no time for a tightly scheduled fishing vacation.

By late September conversation in the tackle shops has turned from mayfly and caddis hatches to sinking lines and big rods. Flamboyant streamers the size of starlings are shown with pride: a hundred variations on the Muddler Minnow and the Spruce Fly, and hundreds of other patterns with no classifiable parentage.

To fish these big flies you wade where it is deep and where the gravel washes treacherously beneath your cleats, and you throw clear across the big rivers to let the streamer swing down and across, past the brightly colored brown trout in their spawning dress. You wait for the urgent tug. Find the place and throw the long line and forget the tippet thousandths, for the big fellows are in no mood for nit-picking.

But something else is going on. The fish are still in the spring creeks where the temperatures hold steady. On these spring-fed streams there are cold times when you can forget the big streamers, and although #18 and smaller flies are generally associated with the insects of summer, the flies get smaller as winter comes on. They get darker, too, for the most part, and it seems the trout are more concerned with size and less with pattern than at other times.

IN THE PARK'S FIREHOLE RIVER the fish can choose their temperatures, as can the insects—anything from the icy edges of the big pools to the hot runoff from infant geysers. You weren't there in late October or I would have seen you.

The park's fishing closes with the end of October, but it makes little difference. The last time I was there on the final day, walking on snow and ice with Fred Terwilliger and Chester Marion, we saw no other fishermen. But I am still bothered about the pretty, young woman in the ski costume with the bicycle wheel. She greeted us cheerily and disappeared across the snow and toward a mountain, rolling her wheel. Certain that I was the only uninformed observer, I didn't inquire. Later I learned that neither Chester nor Fred knew what was going on. It has worried me since, but she must have been measuring a trail. Were you, lady?

The Firehole trout, never a sure thing for me, tend to feed in pods, and scaring one produces a chain reaction. It is on the Firehole that I have been completely frustrated by dimpling fish in cruising schools in warmer weather and have left them in smooth runs to go to a chattering ripple, where I'd catch a fish on a big dry and then go

CHARLES WATERMAN is a frequent contributor to FFM. His latest article, "Bass on the Bottom," appeared in the previous issue, Vol. 10, No. 7.

*Fishing the Hangy-Downys, Itty-Bittys
and other "killer flies" on the*

Western Spring Creeks in Autumn

CHARLES F. WATERMAN

back to the tough ones. My confidence would be bolstered, if not my efficiency.

On that day in the park, Chester, who caught a great many more fish than I did, stuck with a single fly, a #18 Adams, I believe. And Fred changed some but stuck to the same size.

I'VE HAD MORE of the late-fall fishing on Armstrong's Spring Creek near Livingston, Montana, than anywhere else. In a way it's typical of the limestone runs, but everything seems to come on stronger, especially since Armstrong's is so busy in summer. That, you know, is the creek that was leased through Trout Unlimited for a time. Now it's limited fishing for twenty dollars a rod a day.

There is a waiting list most of the summer, just as there is on Nelson's Spring Creek on the other side of the Yellowstone. The mountains sweep up on either side and the whitetails come down to drink in evening and morning, but in summer Armstrong's is hardly a wilderness stream, there being enough fishermen that newcomers may feel self-conscious. Its season is now open through November, though, and for much of the late fall it is deserted by anglers. When the weather report calls for heavy snows and deep freezes it is natural for trout fishermen to think of tying flies.

Armstrong's has changed, even for summer fishermen. The nature of the flies has taken on a new mix after a flood or two, and Dan Bailey's criticism of fifteen years ago is no longer valid.

"The thing wrong with Armstrong's," he said, "is that it is a straight exercise in fly presentation. The fly is a number sixteen Light Cahill, and you need nothing else."

That has changed, and although the Light Cahill is still a good bet, there are times, especially as winter comes on, when you'll need some very different things. Now if I had



The Firehole in October. Photos by the author.

to select a single dry for late fall it would be a #18 Blue Dun, but I'm still likely to be rooting through my box like a beagle in a brushpile. My wife, Debie, who has fished Armstrong's much more and better than I have, often uses nameless flies or nymphs that she calls Hangy-Downies or Ittie-Bitties, terminology that strains the dignity of the sport, it seems to me.

In a shakedown of her fly box I learned that the Hangy-Downy is simply her version of a midge-pupa imitation, that dark little fuzzy-wuzzy that floats, almost, and dangles its little hook straight down. The term Ittie-Bitty is more carelessly used and refers generally to a #20 hook with some dark hackle and possibly a little dubbing for a body—but anything smaller than #18 that Debie can't otherwise name becomes an Ittie-Bitty. Since she is not addicted to baby talk about anything else, I have tried to be tolerant, but when I caught so astute a hatch-matcher as Ray Donnersberger talking about Ittie-Bitties and Hangy-Downies I told Debie she would have to clean up her act. It is bad for the image when anybody over six feet three inches tall, as Ray is, takes up that talk.

It was several years ago that Debie, who often fishes Armstrong's alone, told me she had them cornered in a slough off the main creek, and that I should come out and try it. I wanted to see how it was done, so I stood well back and observed as she waded gingerly into the sinky slough and was up near her wader tops, ten feet from shore, where she took a stance as much like a heron's as a nearly submerged, five-foot-two woman can take. As the novelists used to say, silence enveloped the scene.

There was a little snow on the banks and a chill wind went through the tops of the leafless cottonwoods, but the surface of the high-banked slough was placid. It was clogged with algae, floating and sunken, willows and various grasses the biologists have been vague about.

There was one other fisherman on the creek that day, a friendly stranger I hadn't seen until he came by and saw Debie on point in the slough. She must have looked lost and forlorn.

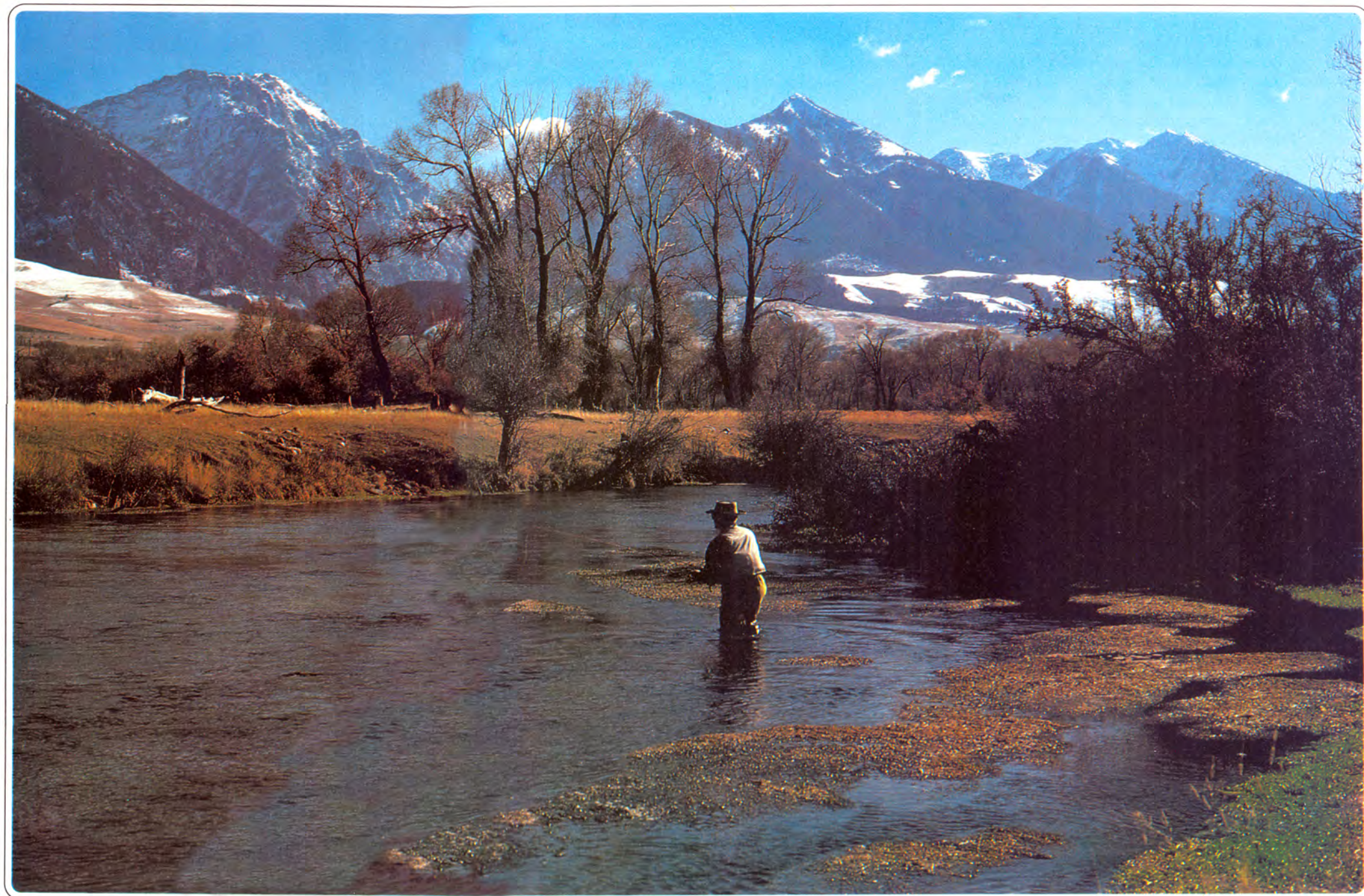
"Lady," the stranger said shyly, "you can't catch fish in there. You should go over where the water runs fast. That's where you fish for trout."

"Oh," said Debie. "I was just looking here a little."

The man went on, and things were quiet again until Debie said something that sounded like "Aha!" from back where I was standing. Then she flipped a #20 Jassid into an open spot in the algae and did the heron thing again. A dimple showed several feet from her Jassid, then another dimple two feet from it, and then a dimple where her Jassid had been. She set the hook and a two-pound rainbow jumped, trailing algae on the leader.

"Man, they're sure tough to land in all this gunk!" Debie remarked.

DURING WARMER WEATHER the spring-creek muskrats know their place, and although they sometimes pass your waders in submerged security they seem to have no objection to your presence. But come the busy winter preparations of late fall they lose patience with the occasional fisherman and are inclined to surface and glare at you when you



On streams such as Armstrong's Spring Creek, shown above, late-season fly-fishing is often a mayfly puzzle.

clomp into one of their established travel routes. They also slap their tails on the water like miniature beavers.

The mallards are more plentiful but wilder than those of summer. In late fall they are likely to be migrants who have already avoided numerous duck blinds on their way south, and they aren't sure of the difference between a rod and a shotgun. Sometimes they come sweeping down the creek only to tower when they see you, and

sometimes they pass over high, twisting their necks for a better assessment.

There was a time when you could set your watch by the hatches on the spring creeks, especially during the summer months. They're less reliable now, but there are more fish caught, I'm sure, because there are more careful nymph fishermen. When the late-fall chill arrives things become more complicated, hatches evidently keyed to the frequent weather changes.

Although we smugly classify the riseforms* and have little difficulty telling whether a trout is gulping a big floating dun or simply waving his tail while pursuing a

doomed nymph, it can get a little touchy when the procedure changes every few minutes.

Last fall Debie and I went to a spring creek when there was a foot of snow on the ground and made a scientific observation that there were some small mayflies that could be almost matched with a #18 Blue Dun. Standing comfortably in water only a little over knee depth, I began catching fish so regularly I regretted the lack of an audience. Then I quit scoring completely. The hatch had thinned, but there was still an occasional Blue Dun, a condition that usually causes eager fish to gulp at the last of the crop.

"They aren't taking drys now," Debie called from somewhere behind me. "Put on a Hangy-Downy."

So I fumbled in the fly box and, as usual, more than half of the little spring-loaded lids popped up at once, and one unidentified masterpiece was whipped into oblivion by a chill breeze coming from the mountain peaks. But I found a little midge pupa thing with a white head and a hook that would hang down and served it just below a ripple, where the dimples were thick. Not only did I hook a brown trout immediately, but he took with the same dimple that had been showing up all over the place. That, to me, is better than having a splashy strike, because it shows that the fish accepts the fly as a routine course and not as something unnatural. Doesn't happen too regularly with me. I caught a couple of rainbows and thought I was looking good again, but my action stopped, and Debie announced she was catching fish with a deeper nymph.

"Just any little old dark nymph about a foot down," she said. So I switched over and did what I am worst at—passing a nymph down with only the leader and a few feet of line out. The trout took it. Then they seemed to lose interest once more.

That was when Debie announced they were taking drys again. After that I began to pay more attention myself. It is my guess that the patchy patterns of trout feeding in late fall may be a result of less available food. The fish take advantage of anything that shows, even though it's usually small. The things found in the gullets of those fish certainly appear unimportant.

If you walk for several hundred yards along a well-populated creek with cold weather coming on you may find trout doing several different things, the hatches being so local that it isn't a matter of the flies simply moving downstream or upstream. A particular hatch may never extend more than a few yards, and the flies from it may peter out within so short a distance that fish a hundred yards below may never get into it at all. They could be busy with something else anyway.

Even with persnickety fall fish there can be instances of big trout feeding impetuously, generally in fast water. I had a frantic session some years back with some good rainbows that were holding just at the foot of a rocky rapids, almost a falls. All day I had been nursing small flies and nymphs over stubborn rainbows, browns and cutthroats, and anything larger than a #18 would cause a whole stretch to go dead. Maybe the fish mistook it for an osprey.

Anyway, as I stared at the little torrent that came down with a visible slant over small boulders, I happened to see a broad side turn just where the water flattened out. Somehow, throwing a #20 Jassid into such a maelstrom didn't seem right, as I have trouble believing a fish can find such an item in whitewater. So I put on a big, ragged hairwing Royal Coachman and slammed it into the froth. Of course I broke off the fish, but he smacked it as if he had been covering a hatch of Royal Coachmans all day.

So with quivering fingers I yanked off what was left of my 6X tippet and tied on another big fly. It is hard to believe there were so many good trout jammed into that

small sector of the creek. They were around two pounds apiece, much larger than anything I'd been fishing over that day. They struck violently at almost any big dry that came over that rapids, and it made no difference if it were partly drowned.

Now, here we have a bunch of rebels striking things that had no resemblance to anything that had hatched there for weeks as far as I know. Twenty feet below that noisy little torrent the fish were dimpling sedately and would flee in horror at the sight of a #10 spectre. But as long as you threw into the fast water those fish were ready.

This, of course, is common in warmer weather. Fast-water fish are notably easier to take, partly because there's no time to be particular and partly because the visibility is poor. But in warmer weather there's the occasional big insect, even if there's no regular hatch of it. I can't explain it so well in cold weather.

Incidentally, most of the creeks retain most of the submerged vegetation of warmer weather, although emergent things are beginning to fade with the frosty nights. In late spring or early summer there isn't nearly as much growth as there is in late summer and fall, of course.

The snowfly, which is a midge, used to draw considerable publicity for cold-water fishing, and although I wouldn't know how to actually match it in size there's no doubt trout do feed on it, and a very small dark fly is likely to succeed when snowflies are plentiful. On a good fishing day last fall there was a foot of snow, and near the water the snow was speckled with snowflies. If you kept your fly as small as possible and quite dark you could catch fish.

On the bigger freestone Western rivers where the season is open all winter, anglers tend to count snowflies and talk learnedly of snowflies. But they fish with big, weighted nymphs on the bottom. Although this is dredging, and the fish themselves may be a bit sluggish, it is a happy antidote for cabin fever.

LAST FALL THE HEAVY SNOWS came early, and after they had lain along one spring creek for more than a week, there was no trace of fishermen's tracks except ours. There were rises during periods of snow, and there were periods of sunlight, although the sun was already a bit low at noon. There was undisturbed snow on a stile, and once a hunter passed us with snowshoes strapped to his back.

It was a little like an empty stadium in a way. You could picture the anglers that crowded the creek earlier in the year. But there were stronger images of a few who have really fished the creeks in late fall. I recall the day after Thanksgiving when I saw the late Merton Parks standing waist deep in Armstrong's Creek. His guiding season was over, and he was fishing for fun, some enormous snowflakes swirling about him, alternately hiding and revealing him.

"This is one of the best times of the year," he said. "The fishing seems best when there isn't much of it left."



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