

Hopper TIME



DAVE WHITLOCK

How to get the most out of the exciting dry-fly action grasshoppers provide from July through October

It's 2 P.M., a sunny 80 degrees, windy, and there's a distinct "click, click, click" wing song coming from the golden clumps of grass and sagebrush banks of the Madison River.

A large clumsy insect flying out of control and sideways in the wind misses the waving, tall stream-side grass tops and splats down six feet offshore. Before it kicks three times, a big spotted head pokes its long snout out and the insect disappears with an audible slurp and swirl—it's "hopper time."

Hopper time is simply the best and most exciting time of the year to catch big trout with a dry fly. Here's why.

Hoppers—or grasshoppers (*orthoptera*)—are large, colorful, widely distributed terrestrial insects. As their name implies, they love hopping about on fresh grass, especially those lush, marshy grasses near and along

streams and ponds. Although they hate swimming even more than cats do, gusty winds, predators, grazing animals, harvesters, and their amorous activities often deposit them, kicking and fluttering, into nearby waters.

Resident warm- and coldwater fish like trout, char, whitefish, bass, sunfish, catfish, and carp always seem eager to gobble a hopper without hesitation or caution—especially the very largest and wisest of the fishy predators. Why is this?

After being amazed and entertained for more than 50 years of hopper time, my theory is this: Grasshoppers are large, easy-to-catch insects that must be both exciting and delicious to capture and eat. After they get large enough to eat hoppers, the fish seem to anticipate each season of hopper-eating. The adult fish generally prefer large, tasty, live foods to support their size and lifestyle.

Big, wild, super-selective veteran brown trout (from

20 to 30 inches long) that are almost impossible to fool with a fake Trico, midge, Pale Morning Dun (PMD), or golden stonefly will dash headlong from their shadowy hideouts into the shallow, sunlit water to seek and destroy a kicking hopper after it has crashed into the water. The fish take in a swoosh of wave and a glutton's slurp of water, hopper, and air.

I recall a big scar-faced male brown that lived in a rocky undercut hole on the Yellowstone Park's upper Madison for at least five seasons. I caught him four times and introduced him to Art Flick, Len Bearden, my wife Emily, and my son Joel. Each time we caught him, it was always on a #8 or #10 Dave's Hopper. Nymphs, Muddlers, Woolly Buggers, Royal Wulffs, and Parachute Adams were never his pleasure.

The last time I saw him caught (by my son Joel), he was getting old; his bright yellow, gold, and black-spot-

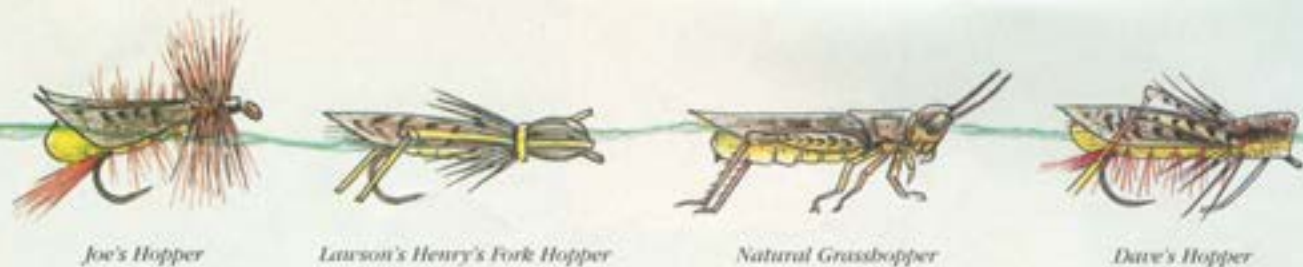
ted skin had darkened, and his once robust body had become long and very lean. I suspect that was his last hopper season. I know if he had his way, he surely moved on to hopper paradise.

The Hopper Year

GRASSHOPPERS GENERALLY have a one-year or shorter life cycle. Hopper nymphs or eggs laid in late fall are dormant through winter and become active after spring freezes and frosts stop. The nymphs eat tender green grasses and grow in proportion to the amount of food and warmth—the more there is, the faster they grow. By July, hoppers are usually through their nymphhood and begin to take on the shape, intricate coloration, flight wings, and size of adults. Males are usually more colorful and one-half as large as females, so often there are two or three sizes of the same hopper species present.



The impression your pattern makes on the water's surface should mimic the natural. Brian Okiefe photo. Dave Whitlock inset photos.



Joe's Hopper

Lawson's Henry's Fork Hopper

Natural Grasshopper

Dave's Hopper



Whit Hopper

Schroeder's Parachute Hopper

Muddler Minnow

Gartside Pheasant Hopper

DAVE WHITLOCK ILLUSTRATIONS

In July, August, September, and October, hoppers are mature and abundant and attractive to "hoppertunists," since the major aquatic insects have already hatched. Hoppers love sunshine and air temperatures above 70 degrees F. In most places that means they'll be more active between 10 A.M. and 6 P.M.

Big trout set their alarm clocks to wake up about 11 A.M. for the day's hopper banquet. Mating, which occurs from mid-summer to early fall, increases the hoppers' activities, including their traipsing along the tops of the high grasses and weeds or flying in search of the lady hoppers. It's these conditions, especially if there's a gusty wind, that cause a lot of hoppers to jump, fall, or fly into adjacent streams and ponds.

These unexpected swims are not fatal for most hoppers, as they are usually able to quickly kick back to the shoreline. But if a hoppertunist detects them, they likely won't make it to dry land. If they are unlucky enough to land in waves, swift riffles, or rapid water turbulence, they often become sub-



For the best results, choose a grasshopper pattern that closely matches the size, shape, and underside color of the natural hoppers that the fish are eating.

merged and are then consumed by hungry fish holding downstream.

Those hoppers that mate and survive their land and water predators lay their eggs at the base of grass clumps, in dung piles, or in soft soil. Some die, but usually not until winter freezes them. A few adults burrow into warm, composting humus or dung piles where they escape freezing to death. In some areas, this adult survival is significant.

Spring's warmth hatches the eggs that were deposited in the fall, and a new life cycle begins. The freshly hatched hopper nymphs develop as weather warms and meadow grasses grow. When these nymphs reach about 1/3 to 3/8 inch, they become large enough for fish to eat. However, it's usually July or later before they are large enough to really be significant to large fish.

RECIPE



DAVE'S HOPPER

HOOK: TMC 5263, barbless, #4-#14.	RIB: Brown or cree cock hackle.
THREAD: 6/0 and 3/0 nylon, color of hopper's body.	UNDERWING: Light natural gray deer hair dyed the wing color (usually pale yellow).
CEMENTS: Dave's Flexament and Zap-A-Gap.	WING: Speckled turkey, peacock, or turkey feather.
BODY FOUNDATION AND SNAG GUARD: Mason hard mono nylon the diameter of hook wire.	REAR KICKER LEGS: Cock pheasant tail quill barbs (ring-neck or golden pheasant).
TAIL: Short, stiff, natural brown deer hair dyed red.	COLLAR AND HEAD: Short, well-marked natural and natural yellow deer hair.
BODY: Polypropylene yarn the color of the underside of the abdomen. Yellow is the most popular color.	

The Dave's Hopper and Whit Hopper are my favorites. My choice for the best all-around hopper is the Dave's Hopper. Over the years I've found a #10 Dave's Hopper with a yellow body, pale yellow underwing, and speckled brown wing, with either a red tail or red calves on the kicker legs, to be a favorite design in both North and South American hopper areas. The Whit Hopper has a more distinct profile, is less wind-resistant, and has a more realistic design than Dave's Hopper.

Flies and Tackle

ADULT GRASSHOPPERS ARE LARGE, colorful, very animated, and unique insects. Imitating them has been an interesting challenge for many fly fishers. There are probably at least two dozen effective and popular fly designs across North and South America.

Patterns. The classics are Joe's Hopper, Letort Hopper, Gartside Pheasant Hopper, Muddler Minnow, Dave's Hopper, Whit Hopper, Lawson's Henry's Fork Hopper, and Schroeder's Parachute Hopper.

When I began hopper fishing back in the early 1950s, the Joe's Hopper was the most popular. But, to me, the Joe's Hopper was tough to cast into strong wind and really twisted my leader. My friend Joe Brooks said he preferred using a Muddler Minnow for imitating hoppers.

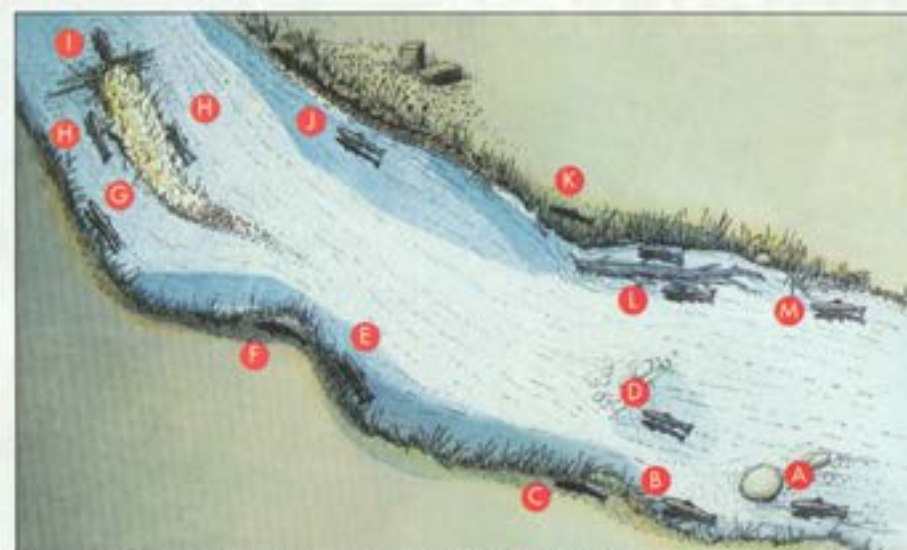
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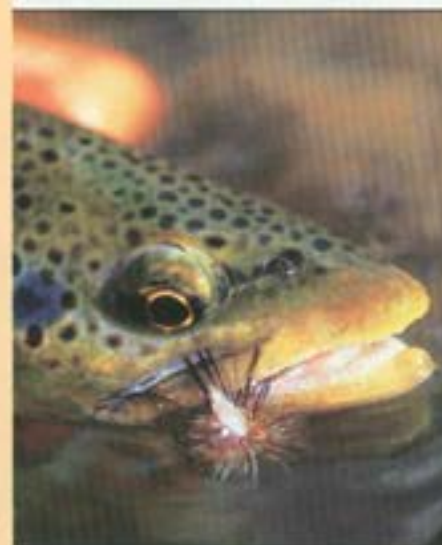
WHIT HOPPER

HOOK: TMC 5263, barbless, #4-#14.
THREAD: 6/0 and 3/0 nylon color of body.
CEMENT: Dave's Flexament and Zap-A-Gap.
BODY FOUNDATION AND SNAG GUARD: Mason hard nylon mono about the diameter of hook wire. Size #10 hook: .015"; size #6 hook: .019".
BODY: Elk rump hair color of the hopper's abdomen.
RIB: Wire or monofilament.
UNDERWING: Light-colored, natural deer hair dyed the color of the underwing.
WING: Mottled turkey, peacock, or turkey feather (secondary wing quill section).
REAR KICKER LEGS: Grizzly neck hackle dyed the color of the legs and trimmed to the leg shape.
HEAD AND COLLAR: Short, dark, well-marked natural and natural dyed pale yellow deer hair.
ANTENNAE: Brown or grizzly neck hackle stems.

[The origin, history, material selection, tying and fishing techniques of these two hoppers are available on a fly-tying video from Dave Whitlock. To order a copy, contact Dave Whitlock, P.O. Box 319, Midway, AR 72651, or visit your nearest Umpqua Feather Merchants dealer. THE EDITORS.]



The most likely spots to find hopper time fish include: A. Behind or beside boulders. B & C. Below and under undercut banks. D. In pockets of deep water. E & F. Below protruding banks and their undercut ledges. G. Along banks with high grass. H & I. In front of and around grassy islands. J. Along newly harvested hay meadows. K. Under undercut banks with trees, stumps, or roots. L. Along downed trees, limbs, and log jams. M. Below fallen trees where the current slows.



It did cast and fish better than Joe's, but its underside didn't look right, so I took ideas from both designs plus a fly of my own and created the first Dave's Hopper. I kept improving it over the years, and it has worked like magic for me wherever I've used it in North and South America.

The most important characteristics of a hopper pattern are:

1. Low wind resistance and the ability to strike the water with a distinct "splat" or "plop" sound.
2. The ability to float low in the surface film.
3. A strong body and leg profile when viewed from below.
4. A color pattern and size of the most abundant hoppers in the area.
5. A snag guard to protect the hook point.
6. Good visibility in the surface film.

Tackle and Tips

Tackle. Hopper imitations on typical trout and bass streams and ponds are usually best presented and fished with 5- to 7-weight outfits. I find the following combination works well: an 8 1/2- to 9-foot, fast-action, 6-weight rod with a floating, weight-forward bass-bug taper and a 9-foot, knotless bass-bug leader with a 3X or 2X tip. This combination can present hoppers in windy conditions

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to the shoreline hopper banks. Presenting hopper flies correctly, that is, with accuracy and loud impact, and then hooking and controlling large trout, requires a setup similar to this.

Several years ago, I designed a 6-weight bass-bug-taper fly line for smallmouth bass; it's the best hopper line I've ever used, because it presents them well whether I'm wading or floating. In windy conditions, I can get pinpoint accuracy when using the required straight, curve, and skip-cast hopper plopping.

Two quick bits of advice on tackle: 1. For 100 percent knot strength at your tippet and fly knots, coat both with Zap-A-Gap cement as you draw each tight. 2. Use a Duncan loop knot for tying on the hopper. It's a great knot that allows the hopper to look and move in a more natural way. After you've tied on the

hopper, put a coating of floatant on top of its head, collar, and wing so it will float low, like a live hopper.

Diving Hoppers

HOPPERS OFTEN SINK if they land in rough, rapid, or swift riffle water. Big trout, smallmouth bass, and channel catfish know this well. To take advantage of this situation, use a weighted hopper or add split-shot or Twist-ons at about 18 inches above the fly. I prefer to weight the leader because it allows the hopper to float a few feet before the weight pulls it down. This way you can fish both levels with one cast.

Try this method when there are large rocks, logs, or deep cutbanks and eddies that big fish can hide under. Cast well above them and get the hopper down. Twitch it a little occasionally; otherwise, fish it like a nymph. If the hopper fly has a snag guard, I let it drift beneath

and back under logs, root clumps, undercut banks, and ledges. The trout, bass, catfish, and carp I catch on this method are usually large. The diving hopper method is also a secret weapon when big stoneflies are on the surface, especially in the heavily-pounded Madison, Big Hole, Beaverhead, Missouri, Yellowstone, Green, and Gallatin rivers.

Stillwater Presentation

I HAVE HAD EQUALLY good success using hopper flies on stillwaters such as beaver ponds, farm ponds, sloughs, and lakes. At El Saltamontes (in Chile), there are lots of spring-fed sloughs they call *lagunas* in the middle of the ranch hay meadows. These *lagunas* consistently produce some of the largest browns of the season—on Dave's Hoppers.

Presentation is basically the same. Slap the fly down near the upwind



I BELIEVE A HOPPER with a snag guard enhances the fly's potential to be fished more effectively. With a snag guard, it can be hopped off banks or cast over or close to bank structures such as roots or logs. Any bullet or sloped deer-hair-head hopper can be made weedless by simply gluing a simple guard strand of heavy monofilament to the head with Zap-A-Gap. (See illustration.)

HOPPER SNAG GUARD

1. Cut a one-inch strand of nylon monofilament about the diameter of the hook wire or slightly smaller. I recommend using Mason hard monofilament for best results.
2. Put a small drop of Zap-A-Gap cement on the nylon strand end. Push it into position on the underside of the hopper's head.
3. After the cement sets enough to hold the strand in place, add a second small drop to its base. When it sets hard, trim the strand slightly longer than the hook gap and bend a small foot on the strand end.



Timing and careful presentations make hopper time more successful. Cast hoppers with a splat upstream along the bank, dap them downstream, or present them across and downstream.

TECHNIQUES, TIMING, AND PRESENTATIONS

HOPPER TIME BEGINS with selecting the right place at the right time. That's usually a flowing water with lots of shoreline bordering grassy meadows, especially if there are overhanging grass and undercut banks. The best streams are usually narrow. In North America, prime time usually begins in late July, peaks in mid-August through mid-September, and ends by mid-October to November. In South America, the hopper season begins in late January, peaks in mid-February to the end of March, and finishes by April's end.

Timing. On sunny, windy days, begin fishing around 11 A.M. and continue through 5 P.M. After the sun starts down, hoppers become inactive and hoppers know that.

Emily and I fished Chile's hopper-paradise lodge, El Saltamontes (The Grasshopper) in mid-March two seasons ago. Anglers there fish almost exclusively with hoppers. I've never seen a river so full of big browns that were so totally hooked or spoiled on hoppers as this place. It became easy to understand why, once we walked along the meadow banks of the river. Hundreds of hop-

pers emerged from the grasses like huge, flushing coveys of quail. It seemed like half of them landed in the water. Sometimes the lodge has horseback riders travel along the banks to chum the waters with hordes of hoppers.

I got up at daylight on several days and walked the waters up- and downstream from the lodge while the other guests were waking up and enjoying coffee and breakfast. I couldn't raise a decent fish on any fly I tried. It just seemed as if there were no fish in the stream.



Whitlock Bass Hopper

Then, at 11 A.M., the river's browns suddenly materialized—everywhere, even on shallow open gravel bars. At the same time, the wind began to increase—5, 10, 15 miles per hour—and suddenly the hoppers filled the air and then the

browns' stomachs. What an incredible sight, even to this old hopper-time veteran! Hundreds, thousands of hoppers were along the meadow shorelines. I even saw browns leaping up on the banks, cherry-picking clusters of hoppers off the grass stems.

Then, at 5 P.M., just as suddenly as it had started, it stopped. And I mean stopped. For several days, I fished until dark, while the other guests were visiting, laughing, and enjoying cocktails, wine, and hors d'oeuvres, but I caught no fish over eight or ten inches on anything, including hoppers, nymphs, and streamers.

I've never seen such numbers of hoppers or experienced such fantastic hopper fishing as at El Saltamontes. The browns average 17 inches, and we got fish up to 25 inches every day. In fact, I landed an old, dark, scarred, hook-jawed 27-incher that strongly resembled the old Madison River hopper-eater that I mentioned earlier. Could it be that he'd died and gone to this real hopper heaven at El Saltamontes?

Presentations/Angles. There are three techniques I find most effective to present hoppers.

1. **Upstream bank casting.** Quietly stalk your way along the bank and make sidearm casts upstream. This is probably the most consistent way to take the big bank feeders. Stay quiet and low and wear clothes that blend with the background. Make 20- to 25-foot casts. Make two or three presentations right next to the bank, and then two or three farther from the bank. Then move up about 20 feet and repeat. If you only move up a couple of feet, you run the risk of casting short of the next area's undisturbed trout. This short casting can either scare fish or cause them to turn and follow the fly, and then they are able to see you below them.

2. **Downstream bank dapping.** Quietly creep up to the bank's edge and, with just the rod tip and leader, dap the hopper down hard on the surface, pause two or three seconds, then begin twitching it toward shore. Try two or three presentations, then stop and creep back up the streambank. Move down to next likely-looking spot and repeat the downstream-dap presentation.

3. **Across and downstream presentation.** Wade or float into position across and above the bank—about 30 to 40 feet away. Present the hopper three or four times close to the bank and out 5, 10, and 15 feet. Allow it to dead-drift or twitch it. Then move to the next good spot.

Don't wade up- or downstream close to banks where trout or bass are waiting for hoppers. They'll hear and see you and dive for cover, or dash out to open, deep water. I made that mistake for years and it was always costly.

shorelines, let it rest for three or four seconds, then occasionally twitch it (1-inch moves) three or four times, and let it sit for about ten seconds between moves.

I'm amazed at how big catfish, largemouth bass, and carp respond to hoppers fished on summer farm ponds. I guess they, like stream trout and smallmouth, have learned how wonderful hoppers are to eat.

Hopper time is a super opportunity from about mid-July until October to enjoy some of the best dry-fly action for big fish across North America, from Maine to New Mexico. If you want more hopper time, fly south to Chile when the snows are blowing across the frozen North American landscape. For more information on fishing in Chile, contact Mike Michalak at The Fly Shop, 4140 Churn Creek Road, Redding, CA 96002, (916) 222-3555.

Most likely, Emily and I will see you on one of the great hopper waters come next hopper time.

Walker's Cay Chronicles

LAST SEPTEMBER, Flip Pallot and I stayed at Five Rivers Lodge and did a Walker's Cay Chronicles episode on fishing Dave's Hoppers in Montana along the Beaverhead, the Big Hole, and some spring creeks. It aired February 8, 1997. Watch for a replay on ESPN later this year, or call Five Rivers Lodge, (800) 378-5006, for a copy of this remarkable hopper-fishing program.

DAVE WHITLOCK is a FLY FISHERMAN Editor-at-Large. He lives in Midway, Arkansas.



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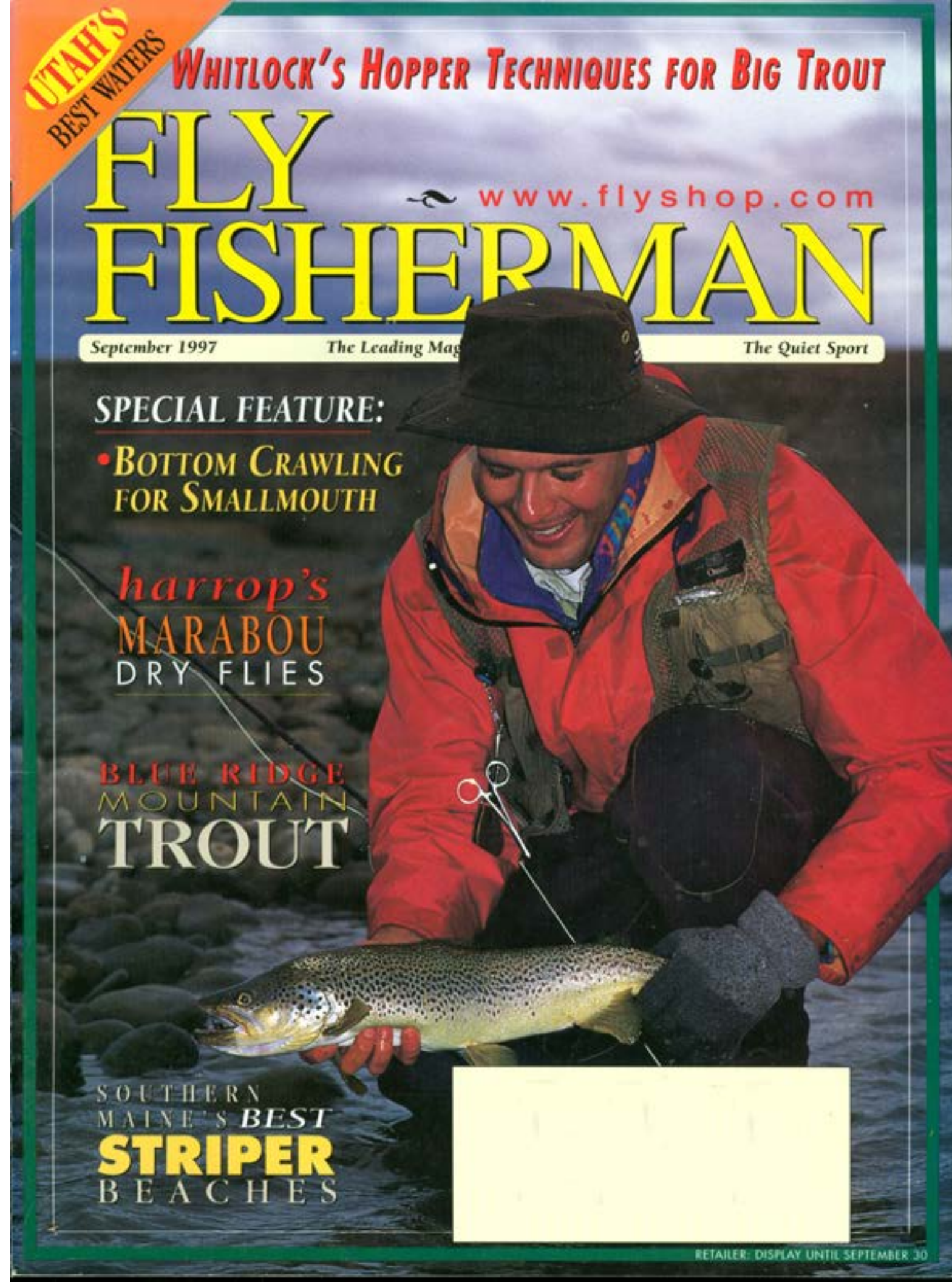
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