



Part II

Midging

DAVE WHITLOCK

TROUT, CHAR, GRAYLING, landlock salmon and whitefish feed regularly on various aquatic Diptera species year-round in both flowing and still waters, from the bottom to the top. However, the most significant feeding follows certain midge life-cycle activity stages. Understanding the insect's habits and active period eliminates most of the typical midge fly-fishing frustrations of using the wrong fly or fishing it incorrectly. Often fish concentrate on specific midge stages with specific action and position.

Midge Life Cycle

MOST MIDGES, particularly the important, widely distributed order Chironomidae, annually produce as many as a half-dozen generations per specie. There may be many species in any one stream or lake. Species vary in size and color, and those over 4mm are most important to the fly fishers.

Of the four stages—egg, larva, pupa and adults—the larva, pupa and adult are significant as fish food, particularly larvae larger than 3mm and pupae. It is not necessary to get highly technical with midge identifications. Simple observation of their basic forms, recognizing specific life-cycle activity and watching trout responding to them in a certain feeding pattern allows you to cope with midging trout with a few simple imitations.

Larva

MIDGE LARVAE ARE SIMPLE segmented, wormlike forms with few identifiable appendages or gills so common in all the other important aquatic insect families. Most live

DAVE WHITLOCK is an author and fly tier from Norfolk, Ark. His latest book is the *L.L. Bean Fly-Fishing Handbook*, published by Nick Lyons Books/Winchester Press.

Midge Color & Size Characteristics

COLORS

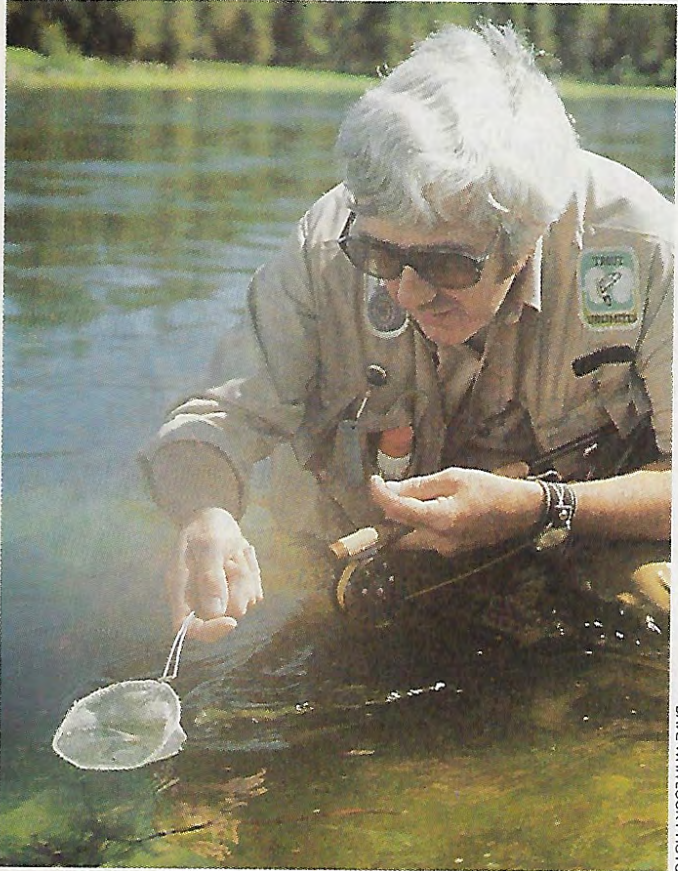


SIZES

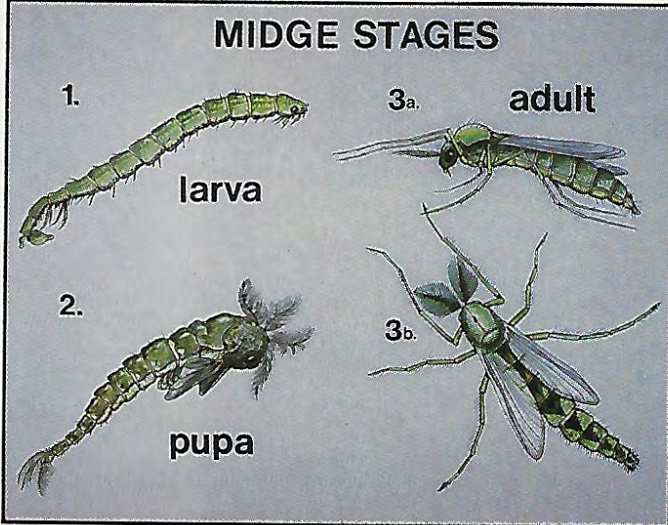
LENGTH RANGE 3 to 10 millimeters

Range mm	3	4	5	6	7	8	10 mm
Hook	28	24	22	20	18	16	14

DAVE WHITLOCK ILLUSTRATIONS



DAVE WHITLOCK PHOTO



Dave Whitlock uses an aquarium net (left) to skim midges from the water's surface. Guess work is not good enough when it comes to matching these tiny insects. To be successful, duplicate the color, size and action of the live naturals.

on or in the bottom or on the stems and leaves of aquatic plants. Larvae living in the bottom silt or muck are usually brightly colored due to various hemoglobin compounds in their bodies, particularly orange, red and wine-colored compounds. Midges found in plant beds are usually olive or tan in color. Some larvae in lakes swim to the surface during low light periods, especially at night. Larvae swim slowly with a whip-lashing body action.

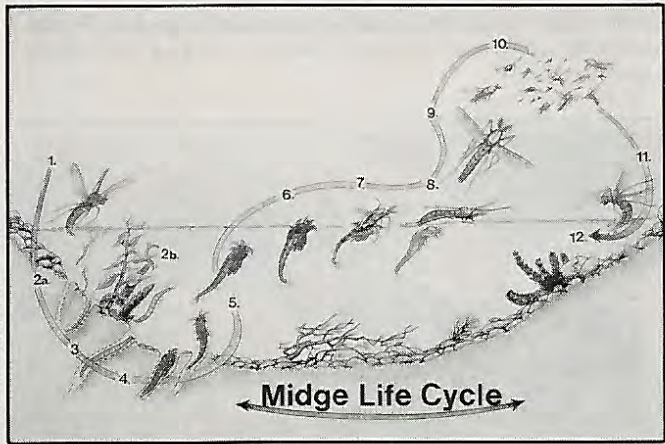
Trout and other fish eat larvae clustered in aquatic plants, on the sides of stones or logs, or cruising at the surface.

Fishing midge larval patterns in still waters is difficult and usually unproductive because it is so hard to imitate the stillwater swimming actions of larva. In flowing wa-

ters I have had success casting a weighted larva up-and-across stream, allowing it to tumble down over and below moss beds, especially where I could see trout leisurely taking unseen objects.

In clear, shallow streams like Nelson's Spring Creek near Livingston, Montana, or Armstrong's Spring Creek in the same area, I position myself above a nymphing trout and dead-drift the larva down to him. When the fish opens its mouth to take, I begin a slow strike with a slow, smooth rod lift. When dead-drifting to an unseen fish I watch the floating strike indicator on my leader for the slightest strike reaction, such as a hesitation or change of direction in its drift. The take is usually extremely subtle. When fishing larval patterns in deeper water or brisk flows I often put a tiny lead shot about six inches above the fly to pull it down to the feeding area faster.

To confirm larvae feeding don't guess at which natural the trout are feeding on. Seiner or pump the stomach of caught fish. Knowing the midge's size, shape and color is a great confidence builder for this precise and challenging nymph fishing. To be effective the larva fly needs only to be weighted and simply tied of soft, fine dubbing in the approximate color of the natural.



DAVE WHITLOCK ILLUSTRATION

Pupa

MATURE MIDGE LARVAE secure themselves to the structures they live in and develop into the pupa. In a short time, usually only days, the larva's body transforms into a form resembling a wingless adult. Its head and thorax are conspicuous with legs and immature wings tucked close to its underside. Its color resembles the larva, except for a darker head and thorax.

Mature pupae become active and begin to rise to the surface. The free-swimming pupae of Chironomidae, particularly the larger ones, are eaten by trout as they swim about. The best time to imitate pupae is when they rise to the surface in masses to "hatch." Then they suspend vertically from the surface film as they escape the pupal skin or husk to emerge as adults on the water's surface. After a major midge hatch I have seen millions of these skins floating in the lake's surface, resembling a massive grey-brown scum.

Subsurface Emerger Pupa

I FISH PUPAL IMITATIONS two ways. For the subsurface emerging pupa I use a slightly heavier than water imitation and cast it so it will sink about a foot before it comes into the view of the feeding fish. Then I slowly pull the fly up toward the surface. I watch the fish or my strike indicator to determine when the fly is taken.

For the surface-film emerger I use an unweighted imitation. The undressed imitation hangs just below the surface film suspended by my dressed leader tippet.

The subsurface emergent pupa works best just before the hatch gets heavy or when the fish seem to be rising and rolling just below the surface. I find the surface emerger the best fly choice when I observe the fish at the surface with its nose and dorsal fin and tail tip in sight for a few seconds.

Like the larva imitation, a fly with a simple, thin, soft, dubbed abdomen and enlarged thorax, the right size



DAVE WHITLOCK PHOTO

Midge life cycle (top): larva-2a, 2b and 3, pupa-4, 5, 6 and 7, adult-8, 9 and 10, egg-laying adult-1, 11 and 12. Midge larvae clinging to a rock removed from the stream bottom (above).

and general color of the natural, fished properly, is consistently effective for me, especially for pupae from 3mm to 8mm (#16 to #28 hooks). I detail larger pupal imitations to simulate the naturals closely.

The Adult

THE EMERGENCE OF ADULTS on the surface is usually followed by a short period of adjustment as they prepare to fly. New midge adults often buzz in tiny circles or skate and skip across the surface on practice take-offs. Midge adults have two, clear, separated wings that lay flat over their sides and back. The wings are usually shorter than the insect's body. Their six legs are long and frail. Males of Chironomidae have prominent plume-like antennae. In flight most make a distinct buzzing sound similar to mosquitos. Look for sizable adult mating swarms over or near the water. They are good indicators of how significant the daily hatches are.

After mating, adult females return to lay their eggs on the water's surface or below it. However, most fish, particularly larger trout, seldom do much feeding on the adult stages, especially if there is much effort involved. When the water moves fast, wind scatters the insects or they are small and few in number, it's a poor time to fish midge adults.

When adult insects are from 8mm up to 20mm (#8 to #16), most fish work harder to gather even a few surface-floating adults. Another good midging opportunity occurs during cold, slightly breezy weather when there is a dense hatch. These conditions often raft chilled adults into large pods or rows, and big fish get serious about eating these small adults (3mm to 6 mm).

Smaller adults (#18 to #28) may be successfully imitated by simple tailless, high-floating, hackled dry flies. For grouped or clumped small adults I suggest the peacock herl, palmered hackle "clumper" or Griffith's Gnat. When larger midges (#8 to #16) are active on the water a sparse long-hackled parachute-type fly or long-hackled variants work very well.

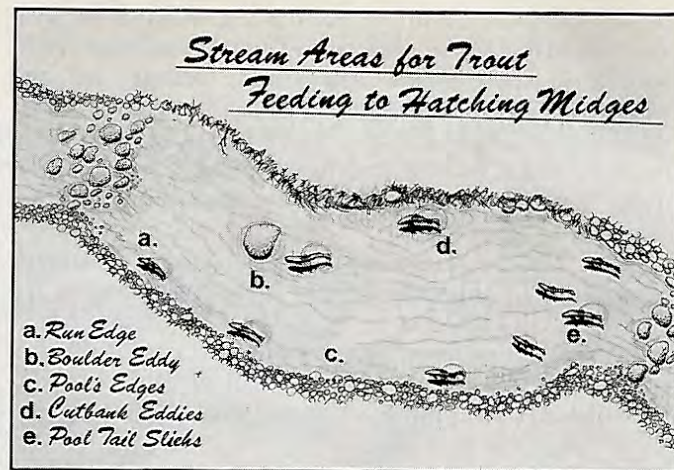
Generally, adults are most effective fished still or dead-drifted on calm surfaces. Occasionally, twitching or skating works for the larger sizes. The real trick to midging success is putting the fly very close to a midge-feeding fish.

Midge Fly Presentation

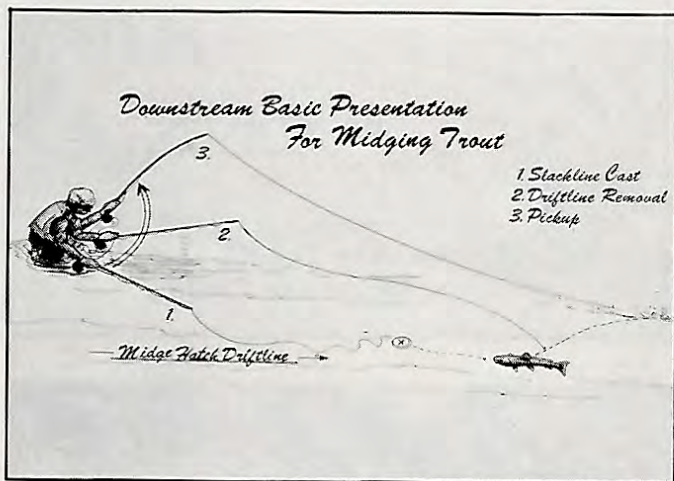
FISHING MIDGE IMITATIONS effectively and efficiently go hand in hand. Because most midges are small and very abundant, fish quickly become grooved on a narrow feeding lane or path. You must put the imitation often and correctly as close as an inch away from this feeding lane to expect success. It is difficult, but it's part of the challenge and sweet reward of this special opportunity.

First, try to get as close to the fish as possible so you can make the shortest, most delicate and accurate cast possible. Current and wind drag can easily destroy any chance you might have of maintaining the right lane and fly movement! The tackle I recommended in Part I and the fly designs described here will give you the best chance to present properly and take midging fish.

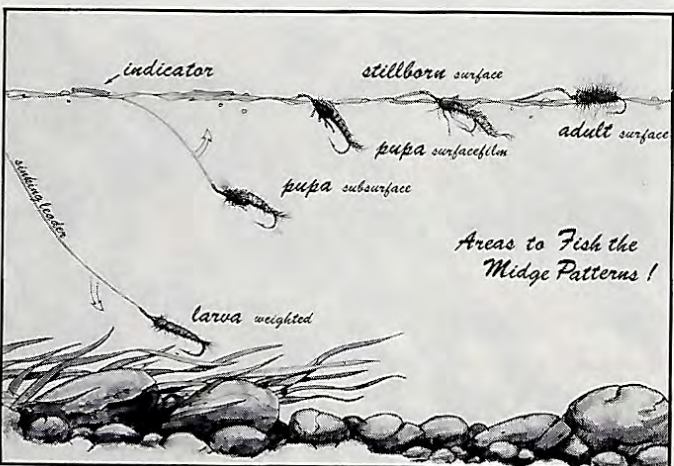
To avoid wind drag on very slow or calm water cast a



Don't waste time fishing midges in unproductive water. Presence of swarming adults over the water's surface is a good indicator of a significant hatch.



A slack-line cast into the fish's feeding lane is mandatory for proper presentation of these minute flies. Pick up line only after fly has drifted well past fish.



Midge patterns are effective from top to bottom. Strike indicators/locators help you to keep visual contact with flies tied on hook sizes as small as #28.



A Whitlock midge pupa suspended below the surface film.



The Whitlock midge larva pattern is a perfect duplicate of the natural.

tight loop, low, side-arm cast. Four or five weights and shorter leaders are best for this breezy stillwater midging. Get the fly close to and ahead of the cruising fish.

Down-wind presentations work almost as well. Just be sure to check the cast a bit to obtain a fair amount of leader tippet slack. The down-wind approach has one major disadvantage. It is harder to accurately hit that narrow feeding lane accurately with the slack-leader presentation.

Flowing water midging, especially during hatches, nearly drove me nuts for years. Using upstream or up-and-across-stream presentations, all I did consistently was put fish down. Then, after learning techniques of downstream dry- presentations on Silver Creek, Nelson's Spring Creek, Henry's Fork and the Firehole, I tried these techniques on midging trout that winter here in Arkansas. They worked much better on the midging trout in the Norfolk and White rivers than anything I had seen.

The downstream presentation permits exact feeding lane fly positioning without the fish seeing or hearing the line and leader come down on the water... factors almost always responsible in my earlier midging failures. If drag does occur it is the best kind, slow upstream drag, which

is not nearly as suspect as fast down or across drag so typical of across-stream presentations.

Whenever possible I use a direct downstream presentation to trout I can see eating larvae or rising to pupae or adults. It allows me to get very accurate feeding-lane natural drifts in the shortest span of time without putting many fish down. Best of all, it catches more selective fish.

Keeping very low, I slowly wade or creep downstream as close as possible to fish I see working midges. I take great care standing in or wading across the feeding-lane flow, which might disrupt the drift of naturals, putting down or moving the feeding fish. I measure the distance to the fish with a cast off to its side so the midge imitation will extend about three feet below the fish's larvae feeding position or surface rises. With this measured amount of line and leader I make a cast a few feet upstream of the feeding fish. If I miss the lane with the cast I correct by using my rod. I maneuver the fly into the lane before I permit it to drift downstream at the fish.

Next, I lower my rod and arm to allow the fly to drift naturally right at the fish. If the fish takes the fly, I continue to lower the rod, then I slowly and smoothly raise the tip to set the hook. A quick, hard strike pulls the fly out of an open mouth, but the slow, smooth strike allows the fish to close its mouth. The little hook pulls down into the mouth or jaw hinge without breaking the leader tippet or tearing the hook out.

If the fish does not take the fly, I mend the line just a bit to my side, making the fly and leader drag and swing to my side of the fish before the line floats over it. With a back-hand pickup I slowly and quietly slide the leader and fly up and away from the water. With the same backcast I make the next downstream presentation with the fixed amount of line and leader.

I can usually make a number of presentations to a fish before it becomes suspicious and moves. If there is a feeding rhythm by all means try to time it and present your fly accordingly. The odds are against you in midging, so take every advantage you can to improve them. The fish may be looking at ten naturals circling your imitation.

For the past two years I have been using two or three flies on my tippet when the midge hatch is heavy and the naturals are small. I have had a significant increase in takes and few problems with this method, especially if I do not make unnecessary false casts. I tie the droppers about six inches apart on three-inch dropper tag sections using Double Surgeon's Knots.

Indicators and Locators

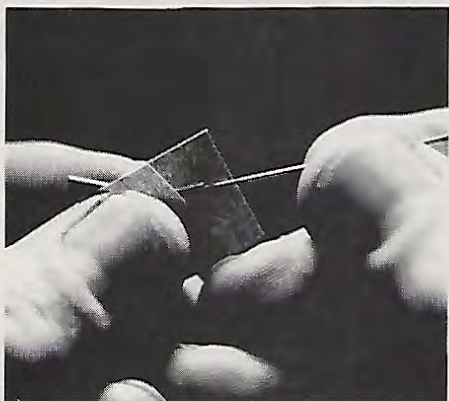
THERE IS ONE OTHER important midging trick. Seeing tiny, dark flies on the water 30 or 40 feet away is difficult at best and often impossible. I have no confidence in or get much pleasure from casting and fishing a drifting fly I cannot see. It drives me nuts if I cannot locate and read my fly and drift. Incorporating simple, high-visibility strike indicators on the leader's tippet is the solution.

I use a 3/8-inch section of 3-, 4-, or 5-weight fluorescent-orange floating fly line or a 1/4-inch tuft of fluorescent

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Keep spare strike indicators in your vest by mounting them on sewing needles stuck in a matchbook.



Make your own strike indicator by threading a short piece of fluorescent fly line on a sewing needle. Pull leader through indicator with the needle.



Grease indicator with fly floatant to insure it will float and remain visible.

junction. Either will serve as midge fly position locators or strike indicators when kept floating with paste floatant. What fantastic aids they are in putting pleasure and confidence into fishing tiny midge patterns. Most midge fishing, except deep-water larva-fishing techniques, requires greased lines and leaders. These colorful indicators work perfectly with them.

I thread the small fly-line section onto the leader tip or tippet with a dull-pointed

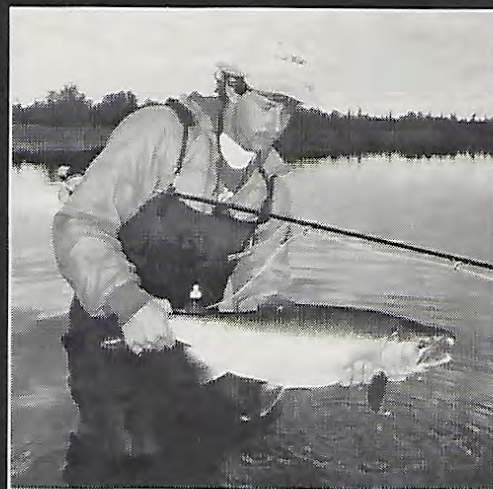
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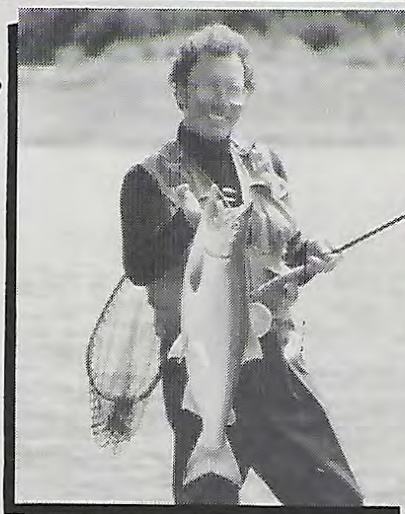
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size 9 or 10 needle. The yarn can be tied in with the Double Surgeon's Knot tip/tippet junction or tied directly to the tippet with a second piece of fine nylon monofilament with an Overhand or Clinch Knot.

From Hooking to Landing

THE FIRST MISTAKE most midging fly fishers make is to use heavy fly tackle; the second is using too much speed and power. Fine, sensitive tackle allows effective use of smaller flies and frail tippets. You must remember to strike and fight fish delicately or you will lose flies and fish.

When the strike comes, respond to it deliberately but make your rod's reaction slow and smooth with a delicate power response. The larger the fish the slower and softer I strike for two reasons: The mouths of large trout are large and tough and the small hook must slide into the edges of the lips, jaws, or mouth hinge skin. A small, sharp barbless hook with a wide, clear gap does the best job hooking in this area. A fast strike will cut through these parts. And if the hook does catch, the leader, knot or hook may break or straighten.

A hard, violent hooking motion can terrify a good fish and cause it to overreact as it tries to escape. That can instantly break

you off or lead to trouble within a few seconds. The soft strike and passive rod pressure worries a fish but will not cause it to go into a leader-shattering flight. I always keep slack line ready to insure against a fast charge.

Once a fish is hooked on a small midge try to stay below it or between it and obstructions. Apply light but constant rod pressure and let the hooked fish move against that pressure. I let any fish I hook that can break the tippet or tear the hook out swim where it wants. If I am in position or there is time, I try to coax the fish away from weeds or rocks with a sideways rod pull. A long run downstream can be turned around by releasing all rod pressure. With either steady, gentle pressure from below or behind the fish many trout will back out and swim free of their hiding spots. If they will not back out or have passed under and out the other side, I follow by gingerly passing the rod and even myself through the obstruction then resume the fight. The knotless leader and small-diameter fly-line head and shooting mono of my midgehead line will usually remain unfoiled if you give the trout all the line it wants.

The only consistently effective method is the follow-the-leader, gentle persuasion approach. That is what midging is all about: using your skill and finesse to out-

wit and "tame" a fish that has the odds in its favor until it is landed. I would rather catch one 18- or 20-inch fish on midge tackle than a dozen standing in my tracks winning them in on heavy tackle.

Some critics say very light tackle fatigues a fish and it will die after being released. Once the hooked fish calms and slows down, you can land a large trout quickly and safely. I prefer a large net to handling or beaching, but use whatever methods conditions dictate. Keep the fish in the water at all times. Removing fish from the water puts them into deadly shock. Most trout, char and salmon regain their equilibrium and strength immediately after landing if you keep them in the water as you unhook, photograph or show them off. Let them regain their wind first if you must remove them from the water to unhook or photograph them. The fish that is denied oxygen when it needs it the most goes belly up when set free. It takes about the same time for a fish to get its breath back as a winded person. On several spring creeks and my home river, the White. I have hooked and landed big trout twice with this light-tackle method.

Midge Fly Imitations

Correct fly size and proper presentation are the two keys to successful imitation of

Continued on Page 86

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Midging . . .

most aquatic midge insect forms. Texture,
shape and color are of secondary impor-
tance. For imitating smaller flies (#18 to
#28), the hook's design can be a factor.
For large fish, most midge imitations
should be tied on extra short-shank hooks
to give the same size fly with a better gape
(bite) and more wire strength. I compen-
sate for the short shank by using 1/3 or 1/
2 of the bend to build the fly's body.

The simple four- or five-phase midge fly
series—larva, pupa, floating pupa, still-
born or emerger, and surface adult will
suffice for most situations.



DAVE WHITLOCK ILLUSTRATIONS

Midge Fly Imitations

HOOK: Mustad 94838 or 94843, shank
length equal to body length of natural.
TYING THREAD: Midge thread or 7/0 to
match color of body.

Larva

BODY-ABDOMEN AND THORAX: Extra fine
fur or synthetic dubbing, color of natu-
ral. Add lead or copper wire for weight.
HEAD: Thread same color as body.

Pupa

BODY-ABDOMEN: Same as larva.
THORAX: Enlarged and darker in color
than larva.
NOTE: Tie emerging pupa with weight.
Surface film pupa needs no weighting.

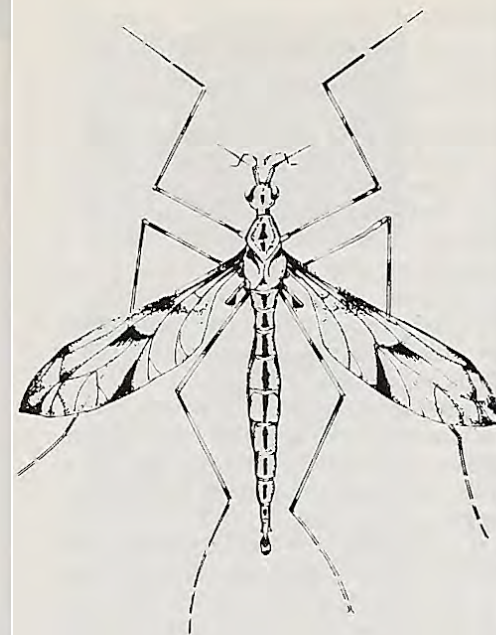
Stillborn Emerger

SHUCK: Tip of ostrich herl equal to or
shorter than body.
BODY-ABDOMEN: Same as larva.
THORAX: Same as pupa.
WINGS: Two white or grey soft hackle tips.

Adult

BODY-ABDOMEN: Same as larva and pupa.
THORAX: Same as pupa.
WINGS: Two soft-hackle tips.
LEGS: One or two turns of long hackle
around a small feather or monofilament
post between abdomen and head.

Tying near, small midge imitations
(#16 to #28) is much easier and more
effective if you use magnifying aids, deli-



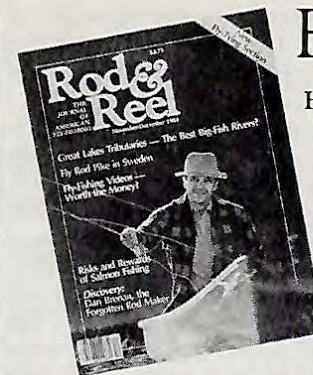
cate tools, midge jaws in your vise and
extra fine materials. I have also found
working from larger sizes, stepping down
to smaller sizes, much easier adjusting to.
Since I began using soft, suggestive body
materials, especially dubbing in place of
the more traditional quill, coarse hair,
wire or thread segmented midge bodies,
my effectiveness has jumped dramatically.
Just remember to use fine-textured natural
or synthetic dubbing to obtain a good out-
line. Work hard to tie sparse, neat, cor-
rect-size midges and they will always serve
you well in selective feeding conditions.

When a larval or pupal imitation is
fished deep I prefer using a lead micro-
shot about six inches above the fly, rather
than overloading the hook shank with lead
wraps. Always have several extras; you can
lose and wear out a lot of these tiny imi-
tations in just one good day.

I used to take midges lightly as an im-
portant trout food, but 25 years of expe-
rience has changed my mind. More and
more—because of environmental changes,
fishing pressure and significant advances
in our fly tackle and flies—midges are im-
portant to imitate. If you prefer to fish to
rising fish and the aquatic hatches of
spring and summer terrestrials are not
enough, midges seldom miss a day provid-
ing year-around emergencies for the trout
and for you. In so many of the popular
catch-and-release areas or heavily fished
special-regulation trout have become al-
most impossible to take on standard pat-
tern flies of larger sizes. Yet they seem
extremely vulnerable to well fished midge
imitations. That fact, and how much pure
challenging fun midging is, should be all
any fly fisher needs to rig up a second rod
and a small box of tiny flies just for this
method.

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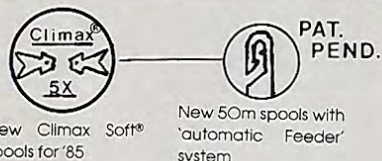
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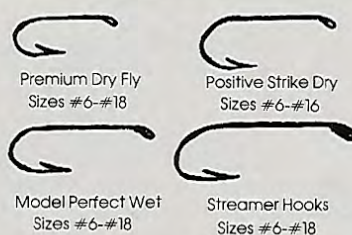
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