



April 2010

### Driftless Days . . .

Other than Saturday, I can't remember the last time I got skunked on a trout stream. I could probably look back in my journal and find out, but I'm not too excited about checking. I think it's been a couple of years.

I've sometimes thought that getting skunked builds character. After all, you can't catch a lot of trout every time you're out fly fishing. And every now and then, you can't catch *any*. Life has its ups and downs, as they say, and so does fly fishing. It's sometimes said that an off-day now and then can make the good days even that much better. Good and bad days create balance, and maybe it's not such a bad idea to have balance.

This is what I'm telling myself, at any rate.

My son John once told me my life was out of balance, mainly because he thought I fished too much. I agreed that my life was out of balance, but it wasn't because of too much fly fishing. It was because of too much *work*. I explained that if I didn't have to work so much, I could fish more often, and *then* my life would become balanced. Perfect. And I had all the numbers to help prove my point.

He said he hadn't thought of it that way before. The subject has never come up since, so either I made a good argument, or he gave up on trying to reform me.

Even after considering the nuances of "character building", it still seems weird to get skunked on a March afternoon. Normally I wouldn't think much of it if it happened during some god-awful winter afternoon, but at this time of year, I just don't expect it to occur.

One self-inflicted problem I've always had in early-season fly fishing is the overwhelming desire to fish the dry fly. During the winter, I usually fish streamer patterns, switching to a dry midge or *baetis* pattern when the winter opportunity arises. This past winter I caught more trout on dry flies than I have for quite a few seasons past, mainly fishing to midges during mid-to-late morning outings. I'm not really sure why the winter dry fly fishing was as good as it was this winter, particularly in light of the tremendous amount of snow we had in northeast Iowa. It just *was*, I guess. Or maybe, for some unknown reason, I simply paid more attention to midges this winter.

So around that first week of March, after throwing streamers since November, it seems high time for a change, especially when there are a few early-season Blue Wing Olives on the water. Early season Blue Wing Olive fishing can be perplexing and sporadic, to say the least. At times the fisherman might see hundreds of duns on the water and no trout rising to them whatsoever. A friend recently suggested that even though it might be warm enough for Blue Wings to hatch, it might not be quite warm enough for trout to rise freely and comfortably to them. That is an interesting observation and perhaps very true. Dry fly fishing is generally (though not always) poor shortly after streams or rivers have risen, and it often doesn't improve until the water falls to more normal levels, even if it's relatively clear when high. The addition of melting snow and ice makes risen waters even more difficult to effectively fish with a dry fly.



Just before I gave up for the evening, I cast a #20 pattern to a lone bank riser. The trout did not move in half a dozen casts, but then struck hard on the pick-up of my last attempt, apparently encouraged by what looked like a midge trying to get off the water. The fish simply missed the fly, and I couldn't get him to come back.

That was a sixteen inch brown trout if I ever saw one, and a fitting conclusion to my fishless day.

Earlier in the afternoon I'd reached into a vest pocket to grab one of my fly boxes, and it was gone. I had attached my last fly hundreds of yards downstream, and the thought of one-hundred and twenty lost midge patterns about made me sick, particularly as I was having such a great day anyway. Amazingly enough, I have yet to lose a fly box, though I've tried a number of times. My wife is Catholic, and she always suggests I say a prayer to St. Anthony when I've lost something I want to find. I'm not sure who St. Anthony was (or is), as he wasn't covered in my Missouri Synod Lutheran upbringing. Lutherans don't really "do" saints. Anyway, I said an apologetic prayer to St. Anthony for even mentioning something so insignificant as my midge box (especially since I'm not even a Catholic), walked twenty feet downstream and found it floating upside-down in the current.

My wife is out of town until the end of the week, but when she returns I intend to ask her which saint one prays to in order to get a strike on a dry fly during an early Blue Wing Olive hatch. If the Catholic church doesn't have one, I'm going to have to become a nymph fisherman.

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Speaking of nymph fishing, I fished Sunday with two fellows who definitely know how to do it. I managed a half-dozen trout during the afternoon with my little Blue Wing pattern, but Steve and Steve absolutely hammered 'em fishing nymphs in the slightly stained water.

Steve Matter has told me he particularly enjoys nymph fishing during the early season, though he fishes nymphs throughout the year as conditions dictate. Steve's a very good all-round

fisherman and is comfortable with nymphs, streamers, wet flies and dry flies alike. Steve Jacobsen has similar skills and it's no wonder they often fish together, even taking long trips out west nearly every year.



It was Steve Matter's birthday on Sunday, so it was a particular honor to have the opportunity to fish with him on that day. Steve Jacobsen came out later and met us on-stream.

At one point during the festivities we all converged and decided to drive over and fish another stream to finish out the day. Matter drove Jacobsen back to his vehicle a half-mile away and was to come back and pick me up, and I was waiting patiently in the parking lot when he drove on by. After over-shooting the driveway by fifty yards he slammed on the brakes, backed up and finally

came down to get me.

I wondered how he'd forgotten about me so soon, so I couldn't help but ask him what he was doing. He said he was looking for his car but didn't see it in the parking lot. I said "You're *driving* your car, man."

"Yeah, I know" he replied. "I just remembered that".

It's amazing what one birthday can do to a guy's mind. Even so, we had a great day and we all caught some trout, especially the birthday boy. And *that's* the main thing.

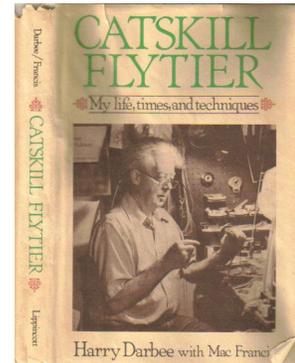
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Two winters ago one of our Driftless Chapter members and northeast Iowa fly fishermen, Marv Slind, demonstrated the "Two-Feather Fly" at a Trout Unlimited chapter meeting, which he also calls the "Hatchmaster". Marv had first heard of the fly in Steve Raymond's book *Blue Upright* and had fished it years ago when he lived in the western part of the country. Steve Raymond suggests the pattern for *Callibaetis* spinners in western slow water streams and lakes, though the fly can be tied with an almost infinite number of color and feather variations using the same two-feather technique. Marv recommends a white version of it for the Upper Iowa River's *leukon ephoron* (Big White Mayfly) hatch of late summer and early fall. It's an oddly simple but very unique dry fly, gone rather out-of-fashion and rarely seen in fly fishing catalogues these days. In his *Blue Upright* commentary, Raymond was not quite certain of the fly's origin and had learned to tie it from a fly fishing friend.

Later that winter I happened to read Ed Van Put's masterfully interesting *Trout Fishing In The Catskills*, a historical omnibus of the Catskills area which I found in a used bookshop in Des Moines. Harry Darbee, the mid-twentieth century Catskills fly fisherman and tier, is credited by

Van Put as the original tier of the “Two Feather Fly”. Harry Darbee and his wife Elsie tied flies commercially and began their business in the 1930's, at one point having as many as ten employees. They were acquainted with Roy Steenrod and Hermann Christian, both very close friends of Theodore Gordon (who died in 1915, infamously reclusive) and were thus connected to early dry fly fishing developments and experiments in the Catskills.

Harry Darbee's book *Catskills Flytier: My Life, Times and Techniques* was published in 1977 by J.B. Lippincott Company and is now long out of print. I made a few internet enquiries and found the book ranged anywhere from \$50.00 to \$750.00 for used copies, so it is indeed quite collectible. Earlier copies included a fly tied by Darbee himself, and those editions are the very expensive ones. I was able to borrow a copy from my weekend fishing friend Steve Jacobsen, and I had just finished it before we went fishing. Steve Matter had recently read it too so it was very interesting exchanging perceptions of the book as the three of us fished throughout the afternoon. Occasional discussions of interesting books are one of the finer things fellow fishermen can do while fishing (and otherwise) and that has always lent a great deal to the sport for me. It was unusual for three of us to be together on the same day having recently read the same book, and it was very generous of Pastor Jacobsen to lend out his valuable edition.



I think we'd all like to visit the Catskills someday. I know I would.

### **Be Vigilant!**

*“Red” Canoe  
Trout Unlimited  
Iowa Driftless Chapter*

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