

August 2009



### Driftless Days . . .

In the northern hemisphere, the winter solstice occurs about the 21<sup>st</sup> of December and is our shortest day of the year, the longest being the summer solstice of June 21<sup>st</sup>. The spring equinox, sometimes called the vernal equinox, occurs around the 21<sup>st</sup> of March, while the autumnal equinox happens near September 21<sup>st</sup>. A few ancient civilizations only recognized two seasons, summer and winter, and in those instances the equinoxes were more important dates than they are now. The equinoxes are interesting in that they mark the two days of the year in which daylight hours roughly equal night time hours, and they also mark the advent of the spring and autumn seasons. In the southern hemisphere, these same four astronomical days occur as well, but the seasons they demarcate are exactly opposite of those in the north.

Some cultures (and Shakespeare) refer to the summer solstice as “midsummer”, being about midway through the summer season. Webster says the summer solstice is the time during the summer when the sun is farthest from the equator, and astronomers explain this phenomenon in considerably more complicated terms, as they do the other three unique days.

But I am not even an amateur astronomer. Aside from recognizing these four particular days, I know how to find the Big Dipper and thus the North Star, which was taught to me as a boy in case I ever got lost in the dark. I’ve been lost a number of times in my life, but not *that* lost. To me, the summer solstice is mainly a *very* long fishing day.

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For some years now, I’ve always tried to go fly fishing on June 21<sup>st</sup>, or a day very close to it. Sometimes the date falls during the work week and I can’t manage to take the day off, which is ridiculous but true now and again. I have better luck when the day falls near or during a weekend. Occasionally in some years it happens that the weather is bad and I might not make it out to fish that day at all. One year I recall massive rains and flooding at the time of the summer solstice, but in other years it seems to work out perfectly.

This year, I decided June 20<sup>th</sup> was going to be the longest day of the year, as it happened to fall on a Saturday and that worked out better for me.

A couple of seasons ago I had intended to fish all day at the summer solstice, but I was tired and had been working too hard so I left getting up early in the morning to fate and didn’t set the alarm clock. I woke up at 7:30 AM and was dismayed to find two and a half hours of daylight

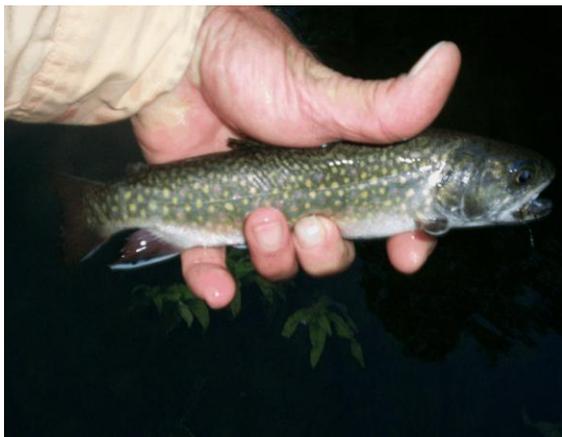
had already gone by. After all, I only have one shot at it each year. My wife suggested I hurry up, get out on a stream and pretend I'd done it, but I knew that wouldn't work as it wouldn't be *official* enough.

So this year I set the alarm clock for 3:00 AM and by God it went off. Elizabeth thought that was absolutely nuts, but this time she laughed as I went out the door. That's a good thing. The stream I'd chosen to fish was a forty-five minute drive from town, and I arrived there at 4:45 AM. It was still dark, and that made the day completely official.

I brought along a few extra supplies so I could take a good break now and then throughout the day. I'm not a big eater while I'm fishing, but for this outing I had a few sandwiches, a big bag of homemade trail mix, some ice water, a couple of cans of pop and a big thermos of coffee. I thought it would be a good idea to keep up my stamina in case the fishing was good. That turned out to be a good thing, too.

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I rigged up in the dark and decided to try one of two consecutive long, slow pools about a quarter mile downstream from where I'd parked. I couldn't see well enough to effectively fish any riffle stretches, and the stream I'd chosen to fish is smallish, so I thought the two large open pools would be a good place to begin. I caught an eight-inch brown trout on my first cast of the day and landed it about 5:10 AM. I was surprised by how many trout were rising in both pools, and I had an early morning heyday in both of them. I think most of the trout were rising to spinners, and there may have been a few midges or the odd terrestrial on the water, too. I fished a #16 searching mayfly pattern and it worked marvelously. After I'd



fished the two slower pools, I took my first break and then fished further upstream, way up into the creek's headwaters. Much of that water is quicker and the slower pools are smaller, but I did very well there too and was pleased and surprised by how many trout I'd managed to bring to hand so early in the day. It was going to be a long outing, but it appeared that it would be far from boring.

After I fished the upstream section, I hiked back down to the parking lot and took a *long* break, which seemed quite luxurious as I don't normally do that. It was only 11:30 AM and I'd already had a field day. A luxurious break at the very least involves a nice leisurely lunch or snack, a

cup or two of coffee and a serious drying out of waders. It was a hot day and my waders are on

their third season (though they still repel *some* of the water), so I took them off, turned them inside-out and hung them out to dry on a bush while I rested. Then I drove downstream, where I could fish two more substantial sections of water before dark.

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At some point late in the morning, I'd switched to a large #12 mayfly pattern and without a doubt that turned out to be the fly of the day. It may have worked early in the morning too, but the stream had been so quiet and peaceful then I thought I should cast a smaller, less obtrusive pattern.

In June, I normally look for two of our area's largest hatching mayflies of the season, the March Brown (*Stenonema vicarium*) and the Gray Fox (*Stenonema fuscum*). These flies are a true #12 and loom very large when on the water. They normally hatch late in the afternoon or early evening, but as with any mayfly, that can vary and it is quite common for them to come off earlier in the day. Also, as with most mayfly hatches, once trout have seen the fly regularly for a few days they'll often rise to an effective pattern regardless of whether there happens to be a hatch occurring or not. Since the Gray Fox and March Brown hatches occur all month long in June, I often fish a #12 fly as a searching pattern whenever I'm out on a stream, particularly after the noon hour. Generally these two flies migrate to slower water from rapids when they hatch,



and long, still pools well below rapids are extremely effective places to fish the hatch or spinner fall. Both flies have two tails, and the only noticeable difference between them is that the March Brown dun has a dark brown body and the Gray Fox dun has a gray or tan body. Occasionally I find either a darker or lighter pattern more effective at a given time, but some fishermen say that makes no difference at all, and I wouldn't argue the point too far.

Normally, if I'm lucky, I might manage to land a "certain number" of larger trout in a given year. The number doesn't matter. It's just a benchmark for me. From my perspective, a larger trout in the Driftless Region starts at sixteen inches, and I make note of each of these sizable fish in a special section of my journal. This year, I caught considerably more trout of that size in the month of June than I normally catch all season long, and the March Brown and Gray Fox hatches are what brought out the big trout. The hatches have been magnificent, perhaps in part because we were lucky enough not to have any excessive stream flooding in June. I managed to land one brown trout over sixteen inches on my summer solstice outing, and that was indeed a wonderful fish. Most of the trout I managed to bring to hand were of average size, but this year "average" on this particular stream seems to be over twelve inches. I caught a number of fish near fifteen inches, as well as four beautiful brook trout of about ten inches.

I've fished this particular stream for over fifteen years now and I can't recall a better outing than the one I had on my summer solstice day, and every trout I landed was born in the stream. I appreciate that more than I can communicate.

Roderick Haig-Brown once said that a man should *think* while he is fishing. We all do that when fishing a long day on a good stream. Sometimes, it's more like daydreaming than thinking I suppose. A long summer outing on a beautiful stream gives one a sense of timelessness, as though the day might never end. At the summer solstice, the sun actually for a time does not move in midday, hanging rather suspended and immobile in the sky, and that in part is what lends the day its timeless quality.



I wondered what it would be like to quit my job, sell the house, the car and everything we've accumulated over the years, buy a small camper and take a *long* drive. It took me all day to think *that* through. I concluded the idea was highly impractical and probably unfeasible, but it was great fun to plan it out nonetheless. I've never been big on practical. You never know.

At the end of the day as the sun went down below the treetops and wooded ridges to the west, I quit fishing and just watched trout rise above me upstream. Sometimes simply watching trout rise is as interesting as trying to catch them. It was a very peaceful moment. A car drove up near the bridge upstream, and I recognized the vehicle and driver. My buddy Joe from Altoona had driven up for the weekend, and he had been fishing in Wisconsin all day long. He'd driven over to see if he could find me at day's end, so we stood in the waning light and compared notes about our respective fishing days. We could have fished out the rest of the daylight, but we both decided not to. We'd each done well, and we decided to leave well enough alone and just visit.

How can two fishermen fish the whole day through in two different states and somehow still meet up with enough time to compare notes, not to speak of knowing where one or the other might be at dusk on the longest day of the year? We're both pretty well wired, as they say.

It's trout radar.

**Be Vigilant!**

*"Red" Canoe  
Trout Unlimited  
Iowa Driftless Chapter*