

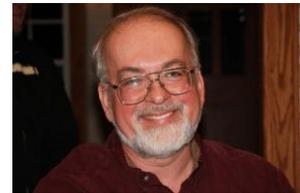
August 2010



Driftless Days . . .

The “dog days of summer” have ancient mythologic and astronomic associations, though they are now so removed from common thought they’ve generally been forgotten. Most of us associate “dog days” with hot and humid midwestern summer afternoons, dogs lying in whatever shade they can find, panting for water and generally looking miserable and tired, much like their owners come to think of it, at least those that might not have air-conditioned quarters. In a fashion, that is not too far off the ancient mark.

My friend Bill McClain, an amateur astronomer (the kind with a very expensive telescope), says that Sirius has been the Dog Star since ancient Egyptian times. Sirius is the brightest star in the sky and is part of the constellation Canis Major, which, to the highly imaginative, represents a dog. Canis Major is the larger of the two “dog” constellations, the smaller dog being Canis Minor. Both dogs accompany the constellation Orion, the mythological hunter of the sky. Sometimes it is said Orion and his two dogs are chasing the constellation Lepus, the little night rabbit.



In the northern hemisphere, the star Sirius can only be seen in the winter sky. In our summer, it is in conjunction with the sun and is of course still located in the sky, but only during the daytime, when it can’t be seen. Sirius, because of the astronomical conjunction, was thought to have added to the sun’s heat, creating hotter summer days. Some myths suggest that the Dog Star, among other things, drove canines mad during the peak of summer.

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Somewhere near the first of July, I saw a grasshopper somewhere. I can’t remember where, but I know I saw one. It is now the third week of July and I haven’t seen another, but I’ve been fishing a #12 Hopper pattern since the beginning of the month, and on some days that’s not been a bad idea. On other days, it’s been almost idiotic.

Occasionally a fisherman decides what he or she is going to catch them on, and that’s all there is

to it. Sometimes, particularly after a few weeks of landing a lot of trout, it's done in a spirit of experimentation. A.K. Best once said if he can't catch them on a dry fly, he's not going to catch them at all.

We've had a lot of rain over the past month, and I think it's actually been entirely too wet for grasshoppers. Hot, dry and windy weather normally bring out the best in hopper and cricket fishing, and we haven't had much of that yet in northeast Iowa. Some say that once it stops raining and the big faucet in the sky is turned off, we're going to have a very hot and dry late



summer and early fall, in which case the hopper and cricket fishing will improve. Maybe. Even though the fishing has seemed slow at times, I've been fortunate enough to land somewhere near a hundred trout in July already with the hopper pattern, which I suppose is not exactly like getting poked in the eye with a sharp stick.

After more comfortable conditions and spectacular dry fly fishing during the months of April on through the better half of June, we've now entered those infernal "dog days", though recently they have been accentuated by heavy rains. Midwestern heat and humidity are considered oppressive by most folks, and usually there are not many fishermen out on the streams. That's probably due in part to the uncomfortable weather, and perhaps in part because the trout often aren't hitting at all. It might also have something to do with the mosquitoes, which seem to be

approaching the size of Hendricksons.

A few years back I began fishing hopper patterns much earlier in the season, normally near the beginning of July. Last year I even caught a few trout on hopper patterns during the last week of June. Earlier this week, I went to a difficult stream and caught one trout of about eight inches in two hours of fishing. I was fishing a #12 Hopper, though on that particular stream I don't think it would have mattered *what* I was fishing. If the trout there want to hide in the watercress beds and sulk now and then, that's exactly what they'll do, and that's that. After a flash-flood and a six-foot high-water mark, I'm glad the stream still *has* watercress beds, and that thought tempered the slow fishing. But I decided to go upstream and try a good deep bend pool beneath a tree, which I knew would be shaded, and a number of very good brown trout absolutely blasted my hopper pattern. The difference between that and my earlier efforts downstream remains a complete mystery to me, but I was glad to have stuck it out long enough to feel like I had figured something out, however fragmentary, illogical and fleeting it appeared to be. It's called catching a few fish, for God's sake.

Tuesday evening (let's say "late" afternoon after work), I visited another neighboring stream and got a bit of birthday fishing in. I'd mentioned the fact that it was my birthday to a few co-workers and said I probably would be hard to reach later in the day. Nobody asked any questions. I suppose they all have birthdays now and then too. I had intended to fish a certain section of the stream, but there were a few beef cattle in that particular stretch and within a few minutes I found myself twenty feet from the bull, who'd decided to come over and visit me. He

didn't seem to be in a big hurry, but I don't trust bulls regardless of how quickly or slowly they happen to be moving. I picked the best angle I could to the fence, which was not a good one and wouldn't have stopped him anyway, and got the hell out of there. I gave up on bulls about four years ago when one tried to kill me. It's not that I can't outrun them anymore. It's just that I don't *feel* like it.

The section of water below the bridge was free of cattle for some miles, and I caught a rather surprising number of trout on that #12 Hopper, walking some distance downstream and working the water back up to the bridge. It was a nice, lazy birthday afternoon and the brown trout were very agreeable. The stream also had high-water issues a week or two before and some sections of the stream scoured, but the half-mile or so of water I fished was entirely unscathed and that was pleasant to see. During the recent flooding, the stream took on enough water to very nearly have serious problems, but not quite.



And then one evening I managed five trout on a different stream, again on the hopper, but I don't know how I did it. One of the most inept performances I've had while fishing for as long as I can remember, I might have simply been too hot and tired to function. It happens, particularly in the high heat and humidity of summer, though it can also happen in the frozen depths of winter, for similar but entirely opposing reasons, whatever that means. I lost three straight flies, all to hooked trout and all due to the clinch knot at the fly. If the knot is not *clinched*, it's not *improved*. Everyone has outings like this occasionally though no one ever wants to admit it, myself included. After I lost the third fly, I took a deep breath, looked out over the beautiful evening summer horizon, thanked God for the five trout who'd hooked and landed themselves with no interference or assistance from me whatsoever and decided to go home before I accidentally broke my rod or a leg, whichever came first.

An old adage concerning split-cane rods says *break a leg, but don't break the rod*.

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It seems I've been dodging from one stream to another for four or five weeks now, looking for that little bit of clear water that might have some shade in the afternoon. With all the rain, the options are becoming limited. I recently fished a relatively clear section of a nearby stream the day after another evening two-inch rain, but everyone in northeast Iowa had selected the same location and it turned out to be a rather weird outing. I certainly can't say that I blamed anyone at all, and it didn't bother me to be fishing in the crowd, or walking through it to be more accurate. We were all trying to accomplish the same thing. There was even a bit of comradery on the water, an interesting mixture of pissing and moaning about the weather and trying to catch a couple of fish. I caught two trout, nearly twice as many as most of the fishermen I visited with. One young fellow told me his Dad had caught one "yesterday morning".

I'd fished the same area a week or so ago and didn't see a soul. That evening I did remarkably well on a #16 mayfly pattern, which I believe the trout took for a caddis. Some days trout strike, and some days they don't.

I've always had trouble fishing the dry fly on water that is dropping in height after rain, regardless of whether the water is clear or not. Since I fish dry flies almost exclusively (and sometimes foolishly) from late March through November, I have trouble every time we have heavy rains. After high water, the trout seem displaced and unsure of their positions in the stream, and generally they don't seem to be "looking up". I think the insect population becomes displaced, too, and it takes awhile for everything to calm down and level out again. When high-water surges go on for weeks on end, things can become difficult for quite some time.



Some years ago I participated in a July stream-improvement workday on a local stream, and the afternoon temperature eventually reached one-hundred degrees. I knew it was going to be hot, but I didn't know it was going to be *that* hot. We knocked off from the project around noon, and I became a little embarrassed when I asked a few of the guys whether they intended to go fishing later. I'd brought my gear along and was certain I'd find a fishing companion for the afternoon and evening, but everyone begged off because of the heat and went home. I got the impression they thought I was nuts.

I chose an upstream section of a nearby stream that I knew would be shaded late in the afternoon and evening, but even so, I rested quite a bit as I fished and remember splashing cold water on my face regularly to cool down. Another good trick to remember when trying to cool off is to stick your hands into the stream above your wrists and

hold them there for awhile. The water will cool your blood as it pulsates through the arteries of your wrists, and it feels great. I did that a few times, too, and don't recall ever becoming terribly uncomfortable. When you think about it, a spring-creek with sixty-degree water and some shade might not be the worse place in the world to find yourself on a sweltering July afternoon.

On that particular hot and humid July afternoon, I landed the largest number of eighteen to twenty-two inch brown trout I've ever caught in a single afternoon. I was fishing a hopper pattern, and the best of the fishing occurred from one in the afternoon until about five, right through the worst heat of the day. One of the trout I landed, a nineteen inch brown, was being battery-rammed by a *really* big fish that was trying to dislodge the hopper pattern from its jaw. Later on I hooked a "normal" twelve-inch brown, and I think that very same big trout was the one that came up and tried to eat the twelve-incher. He'd taken it from behind and wouldn't let go until I'd almost landed the smaller fish. I really thought I had a chance with the bigger one, but he finally released our twelve-inch minnow and proceeded to thrash around at my feet, perturbed that I'd taken its lunch and apparently not concerned about my presence in the least.

The smaller fish had a few teeth marks on its back but seemed none the worse for wear. It swam away strongly when I released it, so I assume it made it through the ordeal.

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July fishing can be unpredictable in northeast Iowa, to say the very least. When in doubt, consult your planisphere.

And if that doesn't work, you can always try a #12 Hopper.



Be Vigilant!

*“Red” Canoe
Trout Unlimited
Iowa Driftless Chapter*

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