



December 2009

Driftless Days . . .

It's the middle of November, a time of year during which I've sometimes had mixed feelings about fly fishing. Perhaps it's not the fishing so much as the fact that what I consider *normal* fishing is over for the season, and maybe that's what bothers me just a

bit. Thinking back on the many great dry fly hatches that have occurred throughout the year, I recall how I was generally there for all of them, or at least a good representative share of each. I also think of all the fishing friends and acquaintances, both new and old, with whom I was able to share time on Driftless area streams and beyond, regardless of how many trout we happened to catch on any given outing. They're good memories.

And then, I fish a quiet November afternoon alone on a neighboring stream and do not see a single fish rise to a mayfly. What I've been used to for seven or eight months is now over.

There's a certain fatigue that sets in after a long year of fishing, and occasionally I look forward to dark and snowy winter afternoons simply for the quietness they can provide. In some quarters, it's called hibernation. During the earlier hatch months of May and June, it's not uncommon to fish until dark when the hatch is on. Long summer evenings are great for hoppers, crickets, caddisflies and the odd secondary mayfly hatch. *Trico* hatches in August and September bring fishermen to the streams at dawn, and who knows how long the fishing day might extend after the last of the *Trico* spinners have fallen around noon?

So sometimes it's a bit of a relief when it all ends with the last of the prominent *Baetis* hatches in October and early November. This past weekend I fished a neighboring stream with my friend Marv and we didn't see another fisherman all afternoon. When we decided to leave, it seemed a little early to me for some reason, yet by the time we arrived back in Decorah after a drive of twenty miles it was almost dark. We might have squeezed in another half-hour of fishing had we stayed longer, but that would have been about it.

And we've yet to even reach our shortest days of the year in December.

A few good fly fishing writers have touched upon the subject of end-of-season fishing, and I'm sure there are countless others I haven't run across yet in my reading. Robert Traver talks about it in *Anatomy Of A Fly Fisherman*, indicating both a sense of relief at the end of a relentless season of fishing (Traver fished *every day* of the Michigan trout season) and a wistful nostalgia about the wonderful season he's just completed and is not



quite ready to abandon. Traver utilized his winter months to write novels and fly fishing books, and I think he looked forward to that almost as much as his fishing seasons, though perhaps not quite. He tied no flies at all and purchased those he used, so his winters were not for tying flies, as they are for many of us.

In one of his books, Roderick Haig-Brown speaks about the joy he has in making the decision whether to fish or *not*, the *not* sometimes being every bit as interesting as his Campbell River fishing. In “Thirteen Ways Of Looking At A Blackbird” the poet Wallace Stevens says

*I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.*

So the poet also delights in the thought of making a decision.

In *The Longest Silence*, Thomas McGuane asks himself whether one can have too much of a good thing. He says not, as it would then no longer be a good thing but a bad thing. When wondering how many times one should go fishing, McGuane concludes one should go as many times as he or she wants to. That seems workable to me.

John Gierach, the Colorado outdoor and fly fishing author, writes eloquently about being torn between autumn hunting, which he dearly loves, and fly fishing the last of the autumn Blue Wing Olive hatches, which he also dearly loves, both of which often occur at the same time. Apparently the choice is often difficult for him, though he seems to have come to the conclusion that he can't hunt properly if he's distracted by fishing. I have a feeling he's read “Thirteen Ways Of Looking At A Blackbird”, though I couldn't swear to it.

On the first Saturday of November, I drove up to fish one of my favorite Driftless stretches of water, not really knowing what to expect. October had been an incredible month of Blue Wing Olive and *Baetis* hatches nearly anywhere I fished, and every now and again I'd throw a streamer when the hatches died off, or before they started, and that worked, too. It was typical October fishing in a way and quite similar to that of March, two months that tend to bookend each other in the Driftless region, which is the way it's supposed to be if things work out well. October held up its end of the bargain this year, and then some. I slowly worked upstream during the late morning and afternoon hours, fishing a #22 *Baetis* pattern on 7x tippet, and I ended up landing enough trout to call it a very good dry fly day. It would have been a respectable outing during any of the season's earlier big mayfly hatches so I felt good about going, and especially about where I chose to fish. What made the outing particularly special for me was the fact that I consider the section of the stream I fished premier dry fly water only, and I never fish a streamer there. It would be a sacrilege. I doubt I'll go there again until spring, but I finished up my season there in style.



The trout fishing season closes in both Wisconsin and Minnesota on September 30th of each year, or so it does at present. Early in October I sometimes see a few vehicles with license plates from those states, and I certainly don't blame fishermen who like to extend their season a bit in northeast Iowa. I catch my share of trout in their states earlier in the year and enjoy every minute of it, so the least we can do is return the favor. I would hate to end my season as early as September 30th and miss the October and November hatches, sporadic as they might be. Brown and brook trout spawn in the fall, and some people think it best to close streams for fishing during that time period. In my experience, trout don't feed heavily during spawning anyway, particularly on dry flies. A main consideration is not to step into or wade through the redds, which are normally quite visible. I try to stay out of the water and fish from the banks during late season outings. "Catch and release" and "artificial-only" should be law on streams with viable populations of spawning trout in northeast Iowa, and that could be the case in Minnesota and Wisconsin too should those states ever decide to extend their seasons.



I'll be doing some streamer fishing for the balance of the year, all the while looking for that occasional hatch of Blue Wing Olives or *Baetis*. If I get lucky, I'll find a *Baetis* hatch during the first snowstorm of the year, always an interesting phenomenon. And I mean *always*. During the winter, I'll get out on the stream at least four or five times a month, depending on how cold it gets. I've got nearly four hundred flies to tie, and I always like to get those done by March 1st if I can. A number of books will be thoughtfully read and studied this winter, particularly when the nights are longest and the snow is flying. My reading group, which has met every two weeks for nearly fifteen years, will get more regular attention from me than it has during the summer months, when I often didn't get home from evening hatches until long after our meetings were over. I may even clean up a bit and present myself as less "scruffy", as one of my reading group friends likes to put it. And there will be a lot of writing. I think it will be a nice, quiet and productive winter.

I can't wait for March. It's just around the corner, like it always is.

Be Vigilant!

"Red" Canoe
Trout Unlimited
Iowa Driftless Chapter