



February 2008

### **Driftless Days . . .**

One of the joys of fly fishing is the great variety of methods available to actually hook and land fish. Most of my comments are confined to the subject of fly fishing for trout in Northeast Iowa

and the Driftless Region in general, but there is very good bass fishing in the area and many of my friends are expert bass fishermen. I've even heard of good walleye fishing on the Upper Iowa River. Panfishing can be great sport on local smaller lakes and farm ponds, and all of these fish can be handily hooked and landed with either a fly rod or spinning gear. I know fisherman who start their young children out in fishing immediately with the fly rod, usually somewhere around the age of seven; others begin teaching children with a spinning rod, perhaps even initially using bait. Adults new to fishing for trout or other species of fish often fall into a similar learning curve. Sometimes fishermen adapt to the fly rod after they have hooked and landed a few fish with spinning gear, whether younger or older. Fly fishing takes a considerable amount of patience and concentration; often adults gravitate to fly fishing at perhaps middle age, when they have a bit more time to spend with it. I also know a number of adult fisherman who have always preferred spinning gear and do a wonderful job of catching and releasing trout and other species of fish with artificial lures. All of these methods have their place. Individual fishermen tend to specialize in one type of fishing or another simply because they derive the most satisfaction and enjoyment in doing so, and that's always a wonderful thing in itself.

Contrary to popular belief, I actually have friends who don't fish at all. All three of them come from good families, so far as I know. They read a great deal. Maybe someday I'll be able to straighten them out, but I suspect that will be a thankless task at best.

I don't want to belabor an already much discussed point, but I must say that in my opinion there is very little room for bait fishing and trout. As Lee Wulff once wrote, we simply do not have enough trout in our waters, particularly in waters where natural reproduction in trout species occurs, to kill them wantonly. Trout tend to swallow a baited hook and it is very difficult to dislodge the hook and release the trout unharmed once this has happened. Granted, a few trout will die after being hooked and landed even with a dry fly and barbless hook due to excessive stress on the fish in playing and landing it, but studies have shown that this is a great deal less likely to occur than with a swallowed natural bait. I believe that bait fishing in the Driftless Region should at least be confined to marginal waterways where natural reproduction in trout does not and probably never will occur; streams of this type are normally termed "put and take" streams, the idea being that the number of fish taken from the stream should be equal to the number of fish stocked, as generally the fish will not propagate or perhaps even survive a coming winter, and could thus be taken for the table with good conscience.

In the specific area of fly fishing for trout, interesting methods can include nymph fishing, fishing with emergers, fishing with wet flies such as soft-hackle patterns, streamer fishing and of course the great art of dry fly fishing. Great to me that is, as that has become my preferred method. Many of us use all of these methods at appropriate times during the season. Some of us specialize in one form of fishing or another all season long and fall back to our preferred method almost exclusively. None of these methods are particularly right or wrong and all have their place in the fly fishing canon.

I once met a fisherman on South Bear Creek who fished with nothing but an Adams dry fly. His fly box consisted of the most beautifully tied Adams flies I've ever seen, in sizes #8 through #22. Even the tiny #20 and #22 flies had exquisite wing sets and were a marvel to see; he was very good at it, I suppose in part because it was the only pattern he tied. And I'll bet he caught an incredible number of trout with his patterns. Another fisherman I used to see from time to time fished entirely with wet flies, using English Partridge solid greenheart rods, many of which were over ten feet in length. He actually had a fifteen foot rod for big rivers. He used a dropper fly at the end of his leader and then tied "sets" of two more flies at intervals further up the leader, most often fishing with three flies but occasionally fishing seven or even nine flies on very open, larger rivers on I remember asking him if his flies ever got snarled up. He said "Yes". At any rate he said he often got when fishing, or two trout hooked at the same time; ultimate experience was the "triple", or three trout simultaneously, which had only happened to him a times. I asked him what it was like to have three trout once, and he said it was "pretty wild" because he simply could not land them all! Truly an interesting gentleman who fished in a very time-honored and rather ancient fashion. There's plenty of room for us all on our wonderful Northeast Iowa rivers and streams.



with five, windless days. and tangled "doubles" but his hooked handful of hooked at

In terms of a short introduction to dry fly fishing in Northeast Iowa, I'd like to suggest a few (but not all by any means) things to watch for during the upcoming season. The streams that propagate the hatches I'll refer to are generally termed "spring creeks", as they emanate from spring-fed headwater sources; these streams include North Bear Creek, South Bear Creek, Waterloo Creek, French Creek, Trout Run and Trout River, to name just a few. All of these streams are easily found on the DNR's annually published [Iowa Trout Fishing Guide](#), available at no charge. Some of the streams have heavier hatches of particular flies than others, and of course seasonal weather changes and more mysterious factors can alter what one has grown accustomed to over the years. Part of the challenge of dry fly fishing is in figuring out what is actually happening on the day you're out on the water, and that's not always easy. But it is always rewarding.

Our first notable hatching fly is the **Blue Wing Olive**. Generally I begin to look for larger hatches about the tenth of March, but that is an early date. **Blue Wings** often hatch late in the mornings around 11:00 AM, but sometimes they come off later than that, and at times they even hatch earlier in the morning. It all depends. **Blue Wing Olives** hatch throughout the year but are most fishable early and late in the season when they are the only fly on the water. Often in the afternoon during the early season **Blue Wing** hatches, the **Little Black Caddis** will come off as

well. Sometimes it's important to notice them if you want to hook up with rising trout regularly on your outing. Look for **Blue Wing Olive** hatches throughout the months of March and April, and again during the late season months of October and November. They hatch more heavily when the water is colder.

Our second notable hatching fly is the **Dark Hendrickson**, considered by many to be Northeast Iowa's premier dry fly hatch. That's hard to argue with. I begin looking for **Dark Hendricksons** late in March and will generally see them until roughly the third week of April. The hatch occurs daily and lasts three to four weeks. Watch for them between 2:00PM and 4:00PM, though again they can hatch earlier or later in the day depending on conditions. Often one can fish **Blue Wing Olives** during the earlier part of the day and then move on into the overlapping **Dark Hendrickson** hatch later in the afternoon, and days like this can provide all the dry fly action you'd ever want or need. Until the next day, that is! The **Dark Hendrickson** hatch is the only hatch of the season I usually take time off from work to fish.

After the **Dark Hendricksons** cease hatching at the end of April, there can be a bit of a lull in dry fly hatches throughout the month of May. You can still catch trout, sometimes a lot of them, but May isn't the worst month to take a trip and try some Minnesota or Wisconsin waters. Towards the end of May and on through the month of June, however, watch for our third and fourth major dry fly hatches, the **March Brown** and the **Gray Fox**. These are spectacularly large flies in the #10-#12 range, sometimes hatching simultaneously on the same streams. Look for them late in the afternoon and on into the evening. Occasionally another large fly will hatch late in the afternoons at the very end of June, the **Brown Drake**, though I do not find them every year. I always watch for them nonetheless, and occasionally am rewarded with a fine outing courtesy of our largest spring-creek dry fly.

Our fifth and last notable dry fly hatch, other than the recurring autumn **Blue Wing Olives**, is the very early morning **Trico** hatches of late summer. **Tricos** are our smallest hatching mayfly, often in the #24 range, and they normally come off just before dawn. Look for them about mid-July if you can get up early enough to be on your favorite stream at dawn; they generally hatch every morning until the first heavy frost sometime in September. I've had many a great dry fly fishing day beginning with **Tricos** at dawn and ending up with **Terrestrials** such as **Hoppers** or **Crickets** after 11:00AM when the last of the **Trico** spinners have fallen.

**Terrestrials**, or insects that have not hatched in the stream as mayflies do, can be fished as a dry fly whenever you see them on land. They often end up in the water, particularly on windy days, and trout love them. **Terrestrials** include **grasshoppers, crickets, beetles, ants** and **bumblebees**, to name just a few of our most prominent Northeast Iowa land bugs. Pick your favorite and fish the daylights out of it!

There are a number of spring-creek "secondary hatches", generally less prominent and more sporadic than those we have covered above, which have not been discussed. These can be of importance, however, on certain days, or within certain seasons. **Caddisflies** and **Midges** are also important non-mayfly hatches and can provide great fishing when they occur on the water, particularly the **Caddisflies**. The Upper Iowa River is a subject unto itself and provides a number of mayfly hatches generally not seen on our spring-creeks. Perhaps the Upper Iowa

River experience can be covered in a future commentary. The Upper Iowa River is replete with trout, as well as bass and walleye, if you know where to look for them. One of our Trout Unlimited Iowa Driftless Chapter members is an avid and excellent fly fisher for carp, also abundant on the Upper Iowa River, and occasionally even hooks one in the mouth! His name is “Steve”.

There are numerous fly tying instruction and insect identification books available on the market. My favorite fly tying book is The Orvis Fly Pattern Index by John R. Harder. My favorite insect identification book is Trout Stream Insects: An Orvis Streamside Guide by Dick Pobst. Roger Jaeger, long time member of the Luther College staff and fly fishing instructor at the college, recommends the website [www.flyanglersonline.com](http://www.flyanglersonline.com) for both fly tying and insect identification information. The website is extensive and Roger uses this site in working with his students.

A couple of seasons on our Northeast Iowa streams will give you your own picture of the plethora of fly fishing possibilities available in our own very special corner of the world. Fishing through the major hatches will provide memorable experiences helpful in seasons to come. Visits with fellow fly fishermen on-stream can also be of great benefit in learning to fish our local waters. Last but not least, Trout Unlimited members are always happy to share information and experience with catch-and-release fishermen. See you on the water!

### *After Moonless Midnight*

*I waded, deepening, and the fish  
Listened for me. They watched my each move  
through their magical skins. In the stillness  
Their eyes waited, furious with gold brightness.  
Their gills moved. And in their thick sides  
The power waited. And in their torpedo  
Concentration, their mouth-aimed intent,  
Their savagery waited, and their explosion.  
They waited for me. The whole river  
Listened to me, and, blind,  
Invisibly watched me. And held me deeper  
With its blind, invisible hands.  
“We’ve got him,” it whispered. “We’ve got him.”*

*Ted Hughes, from River*



### **Be Vigilant!**

*“Red” Canoe*

*Trout Unlimited  
Iowa Driftless Chapter*

*Photos courtesy of  
Altoona Joe!*