February 2010

Driftless Days . . .

Even after years of observation and study, it's virtually impossible to predict what hatches might be best in an upcoming season. General hatch progression trends and charts give fly fishermen a good idea of what to expect and when to expect it, but in some years, certain generally reliable hatches simply don't happen. Or if they do happen, they may be considerably lighter than what one has experienced in the past.

And then again they occasionally can be so heavy they're quite difficult to fish.

In the Driftless Region dry fly season, I normally fish each hatch as though it's going to be incredible. That seems a good place to begin, at any rate. I have plenty of flies tied to match the hatch (at least in the way I'm normally in the habit of approaching it), and I try to get on area streams as early in a particular hatch cycle as I possibly can. The earliest I've seen heavy Blue Wing Olive hatches in northeast Iowa, for example, has been about the tenth of March, and although that is a very early date in a normal year, that's when I now first expect to see them. If they don't come off that early, I just keep looking for them until they do. Last year the heavier Blue Wing Olive hatches came off late and almost coincided with the late March and early April Hendrickson hatch, so it was a very different early season than the norm.

And then last year the Hendricksons were as light as I've seen them in nearly twenty years. The Hendrickson hatch often lasts for three to four weeks, and last season I fished only two reasonably good Hendrickson days in an entire month of fishing. I thought I might simply be going to the wrong streams at the wrong times, but I soon realized in talking with other dry fly fishermen that everyone was experiencing those same light and sporadic hatches. Hendrickson nymphs are "crawlers" as opposed to "clingers", so I suspect they have more difficulty maintaining a stream presence when flooding is heavy, and we have had a great deal of that in northeast Iowa for a number of years now. In the past, spring floods and winter runoffs were generally the norm, but now it seems we frequently have summer and early autumn flooding in addition to spring flooding. Perhaps somewhere along the line, possibly repeatedly, Hendrickson nymphs may have been washed away and killed, thus the comparative lack of April Hendrickson duns.

But maybe that will not be the case this season.

On the other hand, trico fishing late in the summer and early fall was truly phenomenal last season, and I caught more trout fishing trico hatches than I ever have before. Trico nymphs are also "crawlers," but perhaps the sheerly incredible hatching numbers of these, our smallest

Driftless area mayfly, more than compensate for any losses incurred during floods. I have seen extensive trico hatches on northeast Iowa streams that did not have them to speak of at all ten years ago.

It's also possible that I simply may happen to be paying more attention to them now than I used to. I'm a fisherman, not an entomologist, and I work rather hard to stay that way, though occasional forays into the world of entomology are always quite fascinating and beneficial in dry fly fishing. I know just about enough entomology to be dangerous. To trout, that is.

Sometimes factors beyond our normal comprehension affect mayfly hatches. A southwestern Wisconsin scientist has suggested that the many ethanol plants in southwest Wisconsin watersheds have led to a decrease in the Blue Wing Olive population. Ethanol plants present themselves as eco-friendly, one example being that they put the same amount of water back into the watershed as they take out during the product's manufacturing process. The water that goes back in, however, is of a much higher temperature than it was when removed, and there is some speculation that this affects the life cycle of the Blue Wing Olive genus, a mayfly that hatches early and late in the season when the water is coldest. In cases such as this, the fisherman can stare at hatch charts and weather patterns until the cows come home and never figure out where the mayflies have gone.

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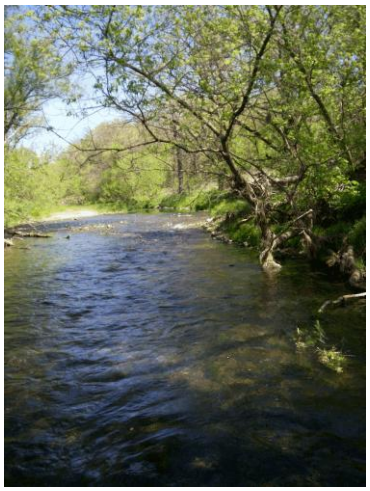
After the early heavier Blue Wing Olive and Hendrickson hatches are over, assuming there are a few, I generally look for the Gray Fox and/or March Brown hatches of late May and June. I say "and/or" as sometimes entomologists no longer distinguish between these two flies and have lumped them together as a single species with color variations dependent upon geographic location. Traditionally, the Gray Fox has been termed the *Stenonema vicarium* and the March Brown a *Stenonema fuscam*. In my Driftless area experience, particularly in northeast Iowa, there seems to be a definite variance in coloring in the two flies, the Gray Fox dun being a tan gray and the March Brown a darker brown. I have sometimes noticed both flies hatching simultaneously on the same stream, and either a lighter or darker pattern might prove more effective. Some fishermen say a difference in coloring for the pattern is insignificant with Gray Fox and March Brown flies, and I tend to agree with that in fast water, where trout must make a quicker decision. But I do think a difference in coloring can matter in fishing slower or nearly still water, and I do a lot of fly fishing of that type, so I continue to tie the two color variations every winter. It's also possible that different ambient lighting conditions cause fly patterns to appear differently to trout than they do to the human eye, in which case tying on the correctly shaded fly pattern might be more a matter of luck for me than one of



knowledge or skill. Either way, it's always nice to land a few fish.

Perhaps one of the tendencies in professional entomology is to simplify terminology. There are of course people of greatly varying appearance and skin coloring that fall within the blanket of *Homo sapiens*, so I suppose there is no reason in particular to differentiate insects by species that so closely approximate one another.

Last season, the Gray Fox and March Brown hatches were as heavy as I've ever seen them in the Driftless Region, and the dry fly fishing was phenomenal during the month of June. The hatches were a daily occurrence on virtually any stream I happened to fish, and without a doubt I caught the vast majority of my larger trout of the year roughly during that month of June. By larger trout, I mean those of over sixteen inches in length. A heavily hatching fly of that size, a #12 or even a #10 in some instances, can really bring out larger fish, particularly when the hatch occurs late in the afternoon or early evening. Once the hatch has progressed for a few days, spinners are also very effective late in the day. Flies are generally either hatching or falling almost every afternoon and evening.

There's an interesting balance between a light hatch and a heavy hatch, either of which can be very difficult to fish. Sometimes the hatch is *just right*, neither too heavy nor too light to fish effectively. Last year the Gray Fox and March Brown hatches seemed to define that balance perfectly, so perhaps there were not so *many* of them as there were a *good, steady number* of them.

March Brown and Gray Fox nymphs are "clingers", and perhaps for that reason they have a better mechanism for surviving floods, being not so easily washed away and destroyed during high-water periods. Though we have had many periods of high water during the past few seasons, not all of the floods have been of a scouring nature, where the streambed is literally rolled over and rearranged, and that may have helped their survival.

Very late in June and very early in July, we occasionally see the Brown Drake (*Ephemera simulans)* in northeast Iowa, though this does not by any means happen every year. The Brown Drake nymph happens to be a "burrower" that digs tunnels in silted and sandy areas. It generally hatches out of slower water. Many of our northeast Iowa streams are of medium to lower gradients, and that can make nice habitat for "burrowing" mayfly nymphs. The Brown Drake

hatch late last June was very good on lower gradient water, at least on the particular stream I found them hatching on a number of occasions. And last season, the Brown Drakes on that stream lasted further into the month of July than I have seen in earlier seasons. The Brown Drake is a true #10 mayfly and is the largest spring-creek hatching mayfly I am aware of in our area.

If you run into a Brown Drake hatch in northeast Iowa and have any #10 Adams dry flies with you, you will have a fishing experience you will not soon forget, not the least reason being you can use a rope for a leader in crystal-clear water and the trout will pay absolutely no attention to it. The only thing they will be concerned about is how quickly they can inhale your pattern.

Be Vigilant!

"Red" Canoe
Trout Unlimited
Iowa Driftless Chapter