

June 2009



Driftless Days . . .

Sometimes, as much as I hate to admit it, they just ain't bitin'.

Normally when I go fishing, regardless of the season or time of year, I fully expect to land my fair share of trout, and I guess I always do. But sometimes my fair share appears to be only one or two trout, and occasionally I guess I don't get a share at all. We usually refer to that as *getting skunked*.

Often when the fishing starts off slowly, my friend Altoona Joe will say "Did you get the *skunk* off yet?" Usually he asks that *after* he's caught one, but not always.

Generally (*very* generally), a dozen or so trout seems like a good effort on the stream. I get the feeling I've at least figured out *something* if I can manage that dozen fish, give or take a few depending on the situation. Of course during heavy hatches, a phenomenal number of trout can be landed, but that's normally the exception and not the rule. Dave Whitlock says a fly fisherman should never land more than thirty trout on a single outing and should reel up and quit fishing when that number is reached, an interesting if not downright admirable rule of thumb. I don't always follow it myself, but there are not that many thirty-trout fishing outings in my life in a given season anyway, so I don't have to worry about it too much.

The most trout I've ever landed on a single day was seventy-five, and I was actually a little embarrassed about it. On that particular day, I caught a good number of rather large fish (it was during a Hendrickson hatch), and I'm not sure I was physically capable of landing the seventy-sixth fish. I couldn't hold my arms over my head at the end. I've had friends who've told me they've landed a hundred trout or more on a single day, but I've never gotten that far myself. I don't think I'm interested. Seventy-five is plenty.

When you live in the heart of a good trout fishing area and get out on the stream a lot because, well, you *can*, you'll have your share of off-days. Simple odds or statistics indicate that you'll have a few phenomenal days, a few bad days (if one can ever have a *bad* fishing day) and a great many average days. That's probably the way it's supposed to be.

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It's late in the month of March, and I can't catch a trout to save my life, or at least not many. Normally I'd have a number of better days under my belt by now, and normally that would be because of a few very heavy Blue Wing Olive hatches. But this season, I can't seem to locate

the Blue Wing Olives, and that may very well be because there haven't *been* many yet.

I'm referring to the #16 Blue Wing Olive and not the smaller *Baetis* hatch, of which there have been a few. I don't count the *Baetis* hatches, as I find them on the water all winter long. I'm looking for the *big* ones.

Last weekend I was out on a good stream and all I could find were a very small number of *Baetis*. Trout were rising to them at the very tail of one good pool, a very difficult place to fish in that case because of conflicting currents and very shallow water. I managed to land a nice trout, but I broke off in another fish and lost a second good one when it threw the little #24 Adams with its first leap. I caught another small trout much further upstream, and that was it for a long day's fishing. And actually I don't think there *was* a *Baetis* hatch, as I didn't see any aggressively rising trout in quicker water. I finally figured out that I was fishing to a sporadic spinner fall. It was a sunny day, and that didn't help matters much either, though there was a bit of wind, which can sometimes counteract a bright sun. Not this time, however.



Earlier in the dry fly season, I like to adjust the reel tension back a bit when fishing a dry fly on small diameter tippet. This allows the trout to take a little line when setting the hook without so easily breaking the tippet. I normally need to make that adjustment after fishing streamers with 4X tippet all winter long, but in the spring I usually have to break a fish or two off before I remember to do it.

Occasionally on an off-day, I wonder whether I'm on the right part of the stream and should move. Sometimes moving to a more likely section of water can help, though on the other hand, sometimes a lot of frantic running around looking for better water doesn't do anything except make me more tired and frustrated, and maybe I'm getting too old for that. I'm not old, but I guess I could say I'm at the age where I might be considered wiser now and then, naturally by a very small and select group of people. In March, the days are not so long, and a lot of stream relocating can simply be an exercise in futility and a waste of daylight.

And then I wonder if I'm on the wrong stream. If things seem abnormally slow on the stream I'm fishing, I sometimes begin thinking about other streams and whether hatches might be occurring on them while I'm whipping the water to a froth where I *am*. But again, running around from stream to stream on any given outing can be another waste of time, particularly early and late in the season when the days are short. My old friend Don once asked me "Why do you want to move somewhere else? If you can't catch them here, how are you going to catch them there?" Well, that's a good point.



Another problem that can occur in early-season Blue Wing Olive fishing is an absolute determination to fish the dry fly when a streamer or nymph would be much more effective. A long winter's worth of streamer fishing usually puts me in that frame of mind

by early March. At times I feel like I should be throwing a streamer pattern and hooking a few more trout, but I just don't *want to* anymore, at least until sometime next November when it will become fun again. I guess a fisherman shouldn't complain too much if he puts *himself* in the penalty box.

And then I dropped my fly box, the one with all the little #20-#24 flies in it. Luckily, at least I dropped it on land. For my small flies, I like those inexpensive twelve-compartment boxes with deep holes. I can get quite a few flies in each compartment, and I don't have to deal with hooking tiny little flies to anything in the box. On the other hand, they're not very good in a high wind, or when they're dropped. I managed to find most of them, I suppose well over a hundred, but I didn't separate them out properly until I got home that night. My friend Joe says the various sizes of those small flies don't matter much, anyway. I wonder if trout get as cross-eyed looking at #24 flies as I did trying to reorganize that fly box.

Today I saw a beautiful wood duck, a red squirrel (not nearly so common in northeast Iowa as the gray squirrel), two large herds of deer moving up through the woods and countless robins. All the animals and birds seemed to be waiting for the same thing I've been waiting for, but honestly, they didn't seem to care as much about the weather as I did.

There's still a foot and a half of snow on the north slopes.

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On March 28th I fished a nearby stream I like more than I generally let on. It's fairly heavily fished, but I've learned the ins and outs of its traffic pattern and can often find sections of it to fish when no one's around. It's a pretty little stream and the hatches are quite good. My main problem with it is it happens to be a stocked stream, but early in the season it's quite enjoyable to land a few rainbow holdovers with a dry fly before the stocking season begins, and there's always the occasional resident brown trout to liven things up. The other reason I keep my eye on it is it's sometimes one of the few streams that might be running clear when others streams are fouled with high water. In recent years it seems to have taken heavy rains rather well.

About 1:00 PM a good hatch of #16 Blue Wing Olives came off, and the hatch lasted until very late in the afternoon. As often happens with Blue Wings, the hatch came off in "waves". Every now and then it seemed like it was over, and then it started up again. It was wonderful to see good sized Olives on the water and trout rising aggressively to them. Even though the trout were rising freely, the water was crystal-clear and the fish were quite selective. The Blue Wing Quill pattern was very effective for me. There was even a good spinner fall towards evening, and I picked up a number of trout that way after the main hatch was over.

Even though the hatch was good today, the last five trout I landed during the spinner fall were hooked in a driving snowstorm. I don't know where *that* came from, but I suspect it came courtesy of our northern neighbors. I was born up there, so I don't complain.

But I finally landed more than a dozen trout.

Honest. A *lot* more!



Be Vigilant!

*“Red” Canoe
Trout Unlimited
Iowa Driftless Chapter*

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