



May 2011

Driftless Days . . .

It's been an unusual month, though March in northeast Iowa *always* seems unusual for one reason or another. We've had everything from snowstorms to thundershowers thus far and most of our area streams have been high and off-color for the better part of the month. That has made it difficult to find good fishing, or even fishable water. I hate to concede to weather, but I consider "zero" visibility in streams as unfishable, a condition occasionally referred to as "chocolate milk". I can't imagine what it's like to live out West and wait until *July* for mountain freestoners to clear. By the end of June, northeast Iowa's entire early-season hatch progression of mayflies is over for the year and we're fishing terrestrials.

Being frustrated with the weather is an exercise in futility, but I'm good at it.

Yesterday I drove an hour in the hope that the stream I was heading for might be clear enough to fish. I've lived in the area for over twenty years now and have grown to know the terrain fairly well, and generally I have a reasonably good idea where I might go to beat the odds. At times it almost seems like intuition, but I think it's really more a result of years of experience, and maybe a subconscious accumulation of data that by now comes to mind automatically. It doesn't always work, but it usually does. There are a few streams, or parts of them, that tend to stay clearer than others during high-water situations, and they can definitely be worth playing out a hunch. The worst that can happen might be a little drive in the country looking at muddy water, a drive back home and a longer night's sleep.

Usually when the weather is bad, I go fishing alone. At times, it's almost too embarrassing to ask anyone else if they'd like to go along. Most folks don't want to drive around for a half a day with the very real possibility of there being no place to fish, and I guess I don't blame them, though over the years I've found too many diamond days in the rough to stop me from at least looking around a bit and checking out the possibilities. Miserable fishing conditions have never really bothered me that much. That's often when the fishing is good, and it's as simple as that.

The stream I went to indeed proved to be clear as a bell, though I'm not sure there was another fishable stream in the area. I saw one lone fisherman on the water throughout the whole day, and he was heading upstream at a brisk pace, obviously on his way back up to a parking area. There were no other vehicles parked upstream when I'd arrived, so maybe someone was picking him

up from another location. I saw him disappear into the distance and he didn't stop to fish along the way, so as it turned out, I had the whole stream to myself. It actually surprises me sometimes how often that happens.

And luckily enough, I ran into my first really good Blue Wing Olive hatch of the season. There were a lot of flies on the water late in the morning, and that continued on and off all afternoon. Blue Wing Olive hatches in particular seem to come in "waves", and there were three of them during the day. I started fishing a #16 Blue Wing Quill mid-morning and trout hit the pattern immediately, though I didn't see any flies on the water or in the air as I started fishing. That's normally a sign that the Blue Wing Olive hatches had been occurring for a few days and the fish were used to seeing them. Such has always been my conjecture at any rate.

Later in the afternoon, I saw huge clouds of spinners in the air above riffle stretches, and some of those were falling as more duns were hatching. It turned out to be a good northeast Iowa early-season day, even though there was still a foot and a half of snow along the northern slopes and along some of the streambanks. Blue Wings generally hatch in northeast Iowa even when there's still a good deal of snow on the ground. I've often fished April Dark Hendrickson hatches during driving snow and sleet storms, though we normally think of Hendricksons as a warmer-weather spring hatch. Or at least we hope for it.



Later in the afternoon the wind picked up considerably and it became more difficult to cast in unprotected stretches of the stream. The wind probably brought in the big rain front that came after midnight, which muddied even this particular stream by Sunday morning. I lost three #16 Blue Wing Quills to the trees, which is what you get for fishing an eighteen foot leader in a high wind on a tight stream.

I remember tying the Blue Wing Quills earlier this past winter. It took me a lot longer to tie them than it did to stick them in the trees.

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At one point, a considerable distance downstream from where I'd parked, I stopped to take a break a few steps around the corner of a good bend pool. I'd just landed three or four nice brown trout in the pool, all rising to the Blue Wing Olive hatch. There were a few fish rising in the still-water stretch just upstream, and I thought I'd watch them for awhile before casting to them.

I used to call the bend pool "The Logjam", as there was a huge tree trunk embedded in the bank that I thought would never float away. But as always, if water rises far enough, almost any piece

of wood can be lifted from its moorings and floated away regardless of its size, which is exactly what happened two or three years ago to the bend pool log. Altoona Joe always calls the pool “The Rattlesnake Pool”, as he once saw a rattler draped over the log. The stream is notorious for rattlesnakes, and I always keep my eye out for them, especially in certain areas. There’s at least one rocky draw in the headwaters area where I know the rattlesnakes nest annually. I saw the largest rattler I’ve ever run across near that draw, and consequently I always give the area a very wide berth when I’m up that way.

I noticed a large collection of feathers a few yards from the bank, and they immediately struck me as odd-looking. Scattered randomly and in poor condition, they were all a dark black and appeared to be primary wing feathers. I ruled out a turkey, a heron, an osprey, a turkey vulture and a red-tailed hawk by a simple process of elimination before it struck me what bird they had actually come from.



I scanned the area for more feathers without getting up and soon spotted a large bird carcass caught right beside me in a little hillock. I carefully pulled the carcass from the water and for the first time in my life examined the remains of an eagle found in the wild.

I don’t think the bird had died where I found it, although that’s possible. It looked more like it had been washed there from further upstream, maybe even as long ago as last fall, and had spent the winter stuck in the hillock. I know of no eagle’s nests within the general area, although of course I’ve seen bald eagles on virtually all northeast Iowa trout streams. Many eagles range westward daily from the Mississippi River in search of food along and within our northeast Iowa trout streams, particularly during the winter months when the streams remain open and free of ice. This one apparently didn’t make it back to the Mississippi, if indeed that is where it came from.

The thing that particularly amazed me was the size of the bird’s feet and claws. The talons would have reached comfortably around a quarter, or perhaps even something slightly larger. It occurred to me that it wouldn’t have taken much effort for a bird with talons of that size to take a man’s arm off.

I’m embarrassed to admit how tempting it was to clip a talon from the bird and take it home for a souvenir. The bird was very definitely dead and had been so for quite some time, and it seemed very likely that it had died of natural causes. In the end I decided to leave everything as I found it and simply walked away upstream, which I suppose was the right thing to do. All sentiment aside, the bald eagle *is* our national bird and it seemed honorable to leave it in its final resting place without bother.

When I got home later in the evening, I looked up the federal laws concerning the feathers and other remains of bald eagles, and it appears I did the correct thing legally as well. It is absolutely

illegal to possess *any* part of a bald eagle unless one has a permit to do so, and the fines for possessing feathers or other bald eagle remnants are extraordinarily high. The descriptions of the law are quite extensive, but it is not legal to possess so much as a *stick* from an eagle's nest. Even native American Indians cannot take them without an appropriate personal or tribal permit.

That night, as I mentioned earlier, another hard rain fell and the stream I had fished rose a good foot or two during the ensuing high water surge. The next time I got back to where I'd found the eagle, everything I saw had been completely washed away downstream.

And that, I believe, is exactly what was supposed to have happened.

As of this writing in mid-April, the Blue Wing Olive and Dark Hendrickson hatches have been magnificent in northeast Iowa. We look forward to those hatches for another two weeks. The month of May will bring on occasional secondary mayfly hatches, early terrestrials, caddisflies and balmy skies. At the end of May and on through the month of June, watch out for the March Brown and Gray Fox hatches, which were wonderful last year. Try a #12 Adams or Brown Adams for the March Brown and Gray Fox hatches. July is a great time to begin fishing hoppers and crickets!



Be Vigilant!

*“Red” Canoe
Trout Unlimited
Iowa Driftless Chapter*

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