



November 2008

### Driftless Days . . .

One of the most difficult situations in dry fly fishing is the “multiple hatch”. This occurs when a number of different stream flies are hatching on the water simultaneously. During multiple hatches the fly fisherman is often seen staring into his fly box for incredibly long periods of time rather than actually fishing. He looks bewildered. The more he stares into the fly box, the more mindless he becomes. Fish are rising everywhere, and he cannot catch them, regardless of *what* fly he might attempt to fish. It’s beginning to get darker out and soon it will all be over, whatever it was. The fishless evening will plague him all of the next day, and he may go out again the next evening for an attempt at redemption. That might not work either.

The “overlapping hatch”, on the other hand, is not quite so complicated. This occurs when two or more species of fly hatch on the stream on the same day, but not at the same time. One hatch may blend into another, but each hatch is distinctive during its peak dun period and is most probably the only fly on the water at that time. A classic example of the overlapping hatch in Iowa’s Driftless Region often occurs in April and involves the Blue Wing Olive and Dark Hendrickson hatches. On a late March or early April day, Blue Wing Olives generally hatch on the surface at any time after 11:00 AM, give or take an hour or so, depending on stream conditions and weather. Sometime between 2:00 PM and 4:00 PM, again allowing for an hour or so differential, you might notice the very large Dark Hendrickson dun suddenly appearing. The trout’s rise form is significantly different; you’ll notice a much noisier, more aggressive attack on the Hendricksons as opposed to the rather delicate sipping action on the Blue Wing Olives. There very well may be a few Blue Wing Olives yet on the water when the Hendricksons begin to show, but you notice the trout will switch over to the much larger Hendrickson fly almost immediately. All you have to do is be able to distinguish between the two flies and then fish the appropriate pattern, which in this particular case is a relatively easy task. I’ve had many memorable days on the stream fishing Blue Wing Olives and Hendricksons.



Another interesting example of an overlapping hatch can often be found on Minnesota’s Root River in mid to late June during a good year of relatively clear early-season water. The March Brown or Gray Fox mayfly may hatch in the afternoon or very early evening (it’s tough to distinguish between these two mayflies at first glance; they’re both a size #12 and I’m not entirely certain the trout know the difference between them either, though I do use a different pattern for each insect, sometimes with startling differences in effectiveness). At any rate, as either of these flies begins to wane towards dusk, the Little Sulphur mayfly may hatch and provide a second wind to your dry fly day. The Little Sulphur is a size #18 and is a rather bright,

whitish-yellow fly. I've had wonderful outings on the Root River fishing these two overlapping hatches back-to-back.

A slightly different variation of another good overlapping hatch can be found in late July, August, and September, although it couldn't be called an "official" overlapping hatch. This variation begins with fishing the tiny early morning Trico mayfly hatch, which often occurs at dawn and lasts through the spinner fall until perhaps 11:00 AM at the latest, and then fishing terrestrials such as hoppers, beetles, crickets or ants for the balance of the day. The terrestrials aren't "official" stream flies, as of course they do not hatch from the water; they fall into it from land. But late summer outings of this type offer at least two very distinctive forms of dry fly fishing, one right after the other, so at least we're in the ballpark of overlapping hatches and sometimes we're catching a *lot* of trout.



And so on. Other variations can occur, depending on the stream, lake or river fished. The main thing is to be as aware as possible of the seasonal hatching options and to keep a close eye on different types of rise forms and actual insects on the water. And of course it's not a bad idea to have a good selection of flies available to cover all the bases. That's easier to do when you tie your own flies.

But on to the more complicated question of "multiple hatches". One little perplexing example sometimes occurs in March after the early Blue Wing Olives hatches have begun to come off. A bit later in the month, the first Little Black Caddis flies will begin to hatch during the afternoons, and these flies will often come off at the same time the Blue Wings are hatching. I often experience this on the North Bear. I might be working upstream through a series of pocket-water riffles and pools, fishing the Blue Wings to rising fish and doing well. Then as I move to the next upstream riffle or pool, I find that all of a sudden the trout don't love my fly anymore. What happened to change things in just ten yards of water? I might try a different Blue Wing pattern, or perhaps a different sized pattern, all to no avail. The trout ignore all my choices. Then I notice the Little Black Caddis in that particular stretch of water. Switching to a small dark caddis imitation does the trick, and I'm back into fish once again. The next stretch of water may have me changing back to the Blue Wing pattern, or I may have to stay with the caddis. This can change many times over a hundred yards of water. All flies of course do not necessarily hatch at the same time throughout the length of the stream. And all hatches tend to come in "waves", with an alternating intensity as to the number of flies on the water. Again, the main thing is to pay attention to what's going on and be lucky enough to have the right patterns along to remain flexible. It's helpful to have a good supply of tippet material along too, in all the appropriate diameters, as you might be changing flies quite often.

Another way to fish "multiple hatches" is to stay with one particular pattern and just keep working it. In this scenario you'll tend to get strikes from trout keying on the pattern you're using, regardless of where you're fishing or what's hatching there. You just keep moving along until you find a pod of trout that are taking what you're fishing. It's not a bad idea at times, and it occasionally helps to keep you more focused on trout and less focused on the complexities of

your fly box.

For me, the *big cahuna* of “multiple hatches” in Iowa’s corner of the Driftless Region occurs in late summer and early autumn on the Upper Iowa River. Normally this hatch progression begins at the earliest in mid to late August and continues until the first or second hard freeze late in September or the first few days of October. This is without a doubt the most complicated hatch scheme I encounter anywhere in my fishing travels. Oddly enough, of course, I normally travel on foot to this dilemma from my house. At least the frustration does not demand a lot of gas money. I greatly look forward to it every year and it’s one of the highlights of the fly fishing season for me. It’s the type of fishing where I accept my defeats as magnanimously as possible, and accept my occasional successes and good fishing evenings with an appropriate degree of modesty. I can only think of a time or two in the last fifteen years where I really “hammered ‘em” on the river, as they say, but it **has** happened.

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It’s a weekday during the first or second week of September and I find myself walking down to the river within the city limits of Decorah after work. The late afternoon sun is warm, but that will change quickly on the water as the sun dips below the trees to the west along Twin Springs Park. If it’s a warm afternoon and Luther College is in session for the fall term, there may be a huge flotilla of young people tubing down the river and enjoying their day. Like most mayfly hatches, they may come in “waves” and I might have to sit out an occasional group of water sports on a “sitting rock” placed at a convenient resting location on the river. I know how long it takes to get from the Tavener Bridge to the College Street Bridge from vast experience, even though I’ve never been tubing in my life. I can closely estimate when my fishing will begin in earnest and the last of the revelers will have floated by. Once a few seasons ago I hooked a large rainbow trout that jumped directly into the lap of a young fellow nonchalantly floating by on the far side of the river. The three of us were all very surprised and I’m glad the kid was not hooked seriously with a #12 Brown Adams. And I got the fish.



On a good evening, somewhere around 4:00 PM or shortly thereafter, the fisherman will begin to notice fish rising very aggressively, generally beginning in the riffle stretches. It happens rather suddenly. Everything is quiet and still, and then in the blink of an eye the river lights up with dozens of rising trout. And often this is precisely where the problem begins. There are generally two large mayflies hatching on such evenings, the Leadwing Coachman (*Isonychia bicolor* or *sadleri*) and the famous White Mayfly (*Ephoron leukon*). Both of these mayflies are a size #12, but on the river in fast water, I’ll often use a size #10 pattern. To complicate things further, there may be some late season Sulphur mayflies hatching, often in two sizes, a #14 and a #18. On a given evening, there may then be at least four different mayflies hatching simultaneously. If you consider the nymphs, the emergers, the duns and the spinners for each mayfly, you are faced with sixteen different options to present to feeding trout, any of which a particular fish may be keying on at a particular moment. And of course trout may key on a

particular food source for awhile and then switch to something else, for reasons only it and God knows. That normally happens about the time you think you've figured out what he's eating. Actually, I'm not entirely sure whether God **does** know about this one. Sometimes I've seen two different caddisflies hatching as well, again a larger and a smaller, and for them you are faced with fishing either an emerger or a dun, which adds four more possibilities to the equation. If you want to throw in another secondary mayfly or two, depending on the evening, you'll soon realize that feeding trout have so many bewildering options available it becomes nearly impossible to figure out what to do or try in terms of **catching them**.

During one of these amusingly psychotic evenings, I often lean heavily toward the Leadwing Coachman dun stage and stay with that until dark. Why? I suppose it's because I like the fly, I like the way I tie my pattern, I can move it from trout to trout quickly and I can **see** it in the waning light. Some nights it works, and some nights it doesn't. A very close second choice is the White Mayfly dun stage. Sometimes I might alternate between the two, depending on which hatch appears to be the heaviest. **Sometimes** the White Mayfly comes off a bit closer to dusk, and I may switch to it then. Late evening spinners can be either insect, or both. But as I mentioned earlier, occasionally it works best for me to pick a pattern and essentially stick with it all evening. It's frustrating to cover rising trout that won't strike, but often enough I find a trout that will take, and by consistently seeking out trout feeding on that particular pattern, I might end up with a fair number of caught fish, perhaps in part because I've not wasted a lot of time changing flies. But of course some evenings I find myself doing that, too.

Some fishermen have success with emerger patterns for either the Leadwing Coachman or the White Mayfly. This is a very good option. The White Mayfly in particular has a very unusual emerger with a large, rather bizarre trailing shuck, and fishermen who find a way to successfully imitate the stage often do very, very well. If I fish an emerger for either fly, I normally simply drown my pattern and fish it across and down like a wet fly. This is called "cheating", and I do it all year long on many streams when I need an emerger. I like the method because I don't have to tie specific emerger patterns and can use the same fly for two different approaches. But it certainly is not as effective as tying a good specific emerger pattern.



Another trick I've picked up over the years is to put a bit of movement on the large mayfly duns while fishing them. If you observe the naturals on the water, you'll be amazed at how far and how quickly they can move in their attempt to get off the water. I've seen them scoot four or five feet at times, especially if it's windy, so often a traditional dead-drift approach is not always the best option. Sometimes in fast water I'll dead-drift the dun pattern, mend it, skip it over the current waves and then drown it, all in one cast. Sometimes I'll get a quick strike on either of the last two options if the dead-drifting dun is not taken. I think the main thing is to get a pattern on the water, work it in different fashions and **keep it out there** until you hook up. You can't hook a trout if you don't have a fly on the water!

And I haven't caught one yet in my back yard.

A good early autumn evening on the Upper Iowa River may yield three or four good fish. A very good evening for me might be up to ten fish, perhaps with an occasional smallmouth bass, particularly when fishing sub-surface part of the time. I've had evenings of over twenty trout during this autumn hatch scheme, but these outings are "off the map" and not the norm. For some reason I tend to have more spectacular outings in early September when the Leadwing Coachman is the dominant hatch. And then of course I have those evenings when I get skunked, but honestly those are very uncommon too and I usually manage to pound up at least a fish or two even on a slow night. During one of my most memorable seasons on the Upper Iowa River in September, I landed about a hundred trout in a month fishing evenings after work. Sometimes I've fished elsewhere during the day and then come home to hit the river in the evening.

For late summer and early fall evenings on the Upper Iowa River in particular, **BEST OF LUCK!** You're probably gonna need it!

*"The imitation may be Impressionist, Cubist, Futurist, Post-Impressionist, Pre-Raphaelite, or caricature. The commonest is caricature. It therefore catches most fish."*

*G.E.M. Skues, from  
Skues On Trout*

## **Be Vigilant!**

*"Red" Canoe*

*Trout Unlimited  
Iowa Driftless Chapter*



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