

October 2009



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

Not long ago I was visiting with one of our very good northeast Iowa fly fishermen, Steve Jacobsen. I generally listen to Steve quite closely, although perhaps he doesn't know that. He is 6'5" tall, so he has a way of getting one's attention. He's also a Lutheran minister, so I've assumed he has excellent connections. Whenever we've fished together, I've always done particularly well.

Steve mentioned in passing that one evening in late June or early July, he'd been perplexed by trout rising to a fly he couldn't see on the water. Presuming the fish were taking something very small, he finally went down to a tiny mayfly imitation and began getting into a lot of fish. I guess there's nothing particularly unusual about that except for the fact that throughout the month of June and sometimes the first part of July, two of our biggest Driftless mayflies are hatching regularly, the Gray Fox and the March Brown. Occasionally at the very end of June we might even see a few Brown Drakes, which are even larger mayflies than the Gray Fox or March Brown. At about the same time period Steve was referring to, I myself had fished a rainy evening and encountered a great many trout rising to a fly I could not see or identify. My assumption was that the light rain was knocking March Brown or Gray Fox duns down from trees and bushes or perhaps from mating flights, and the fish were taking those. I put on a #12 Gray Fox imitation, let it get wet and bedraggled and cast it upstream to the rising fish, which resulted in a spectacular evening of fishing. In my instance, the trout definitely wanted that big fly.

So Steve's comments on his success with a small imitation intrigued me, and I guess I sort of filed it away for future consideration, or an idea if I needed one. My experience made more sense to me considering the season, and I couldn't quite put my finger on Steve's.

\* \* \* \* \*

An evening or two later I fished a good nearby stream and did well with a grasshopper imitation. As dusk approached after the late afternoon and early evening of excellent hopper fishing, trout quit taking my hopper pattern and were clearly taking something smaller. But it was one of those evenings that had reached the point where I really didn't care about catching many more fish, and I simply was enjoying my time on the water. I'd already landed enough trout to lose

track of how many I'd caught, and that seemed more than fine to me.

As the sun dipped below the trees to the west, something landed on my glasses, and I took them off to see what it was. That's always been one of my better insect-identification techniques. Thus far I've never dropped my glasses in the water, which in my case would definitely be a problem. I found a beautiful little #22 *baetis*, or what I would generally call a small Blue Wing Olive, perched near the outside frame of my glasses.

Blue Wing Olives hatch all year long, but often I don't notice them much when more dramatic and larger mayflies are hatching. Trout seldom care about Blue Wing Olives when there are larger mayflies on the water. The best Blue Wing Olive fishing for me has always been very early in the season during March and April, and late in the season during October and November. In those months the Blue Wing Olive is generally the only mayfly hatching on our Driftless area streams, and the trout key on them much more heavily than they do during summer months. Of course another season to watch for the occasional distinctive Blue Wing Olive hatch is winter.



A couple of days later I fished the same stream, this time in a different location. I started with the grasshopper pattern and landed a trout on my first cast, and then I landed a second fish just a few casts later. A great beginning, I thought.

And then I didn't land another trout for three hours. Most of us have been *there* many, many times. You'd have thought there wasn't a fish in the stream.

Just about the time I was thinking of giving up for the evening, which I'm usually loathe to do, I came around a little bend of staircase rapids and entered the tail of one of two consecutive long, slow pools. A lot of fishermen call pools of this type "frog-water" and impatiently hurry past them, looking for rapids and quicker water on ahead. I'm often the guy who slows down and hangs out with the frogs. Hell, I like frogs.

There were a number of fish rising ahead of me in the barely-moving water, many of them right next to thickly blooming watercress and water-celery beds, others in wide-open clear water. I stood there in the tail of the pool for quite some time observing the feeding trout, and then I clipped off my hopper pattern and retied my leader all the way down from 4X to 7X tippet. I put on a very simple #22 *baetis* pattern I came up with last winter at the tying bench, and gave it a go.

From 5:30 PM until dark, I guess I'd have to say I landed a *lot* of trout, and I hooked a lot more than I'd landed. I caught quite a few fish in the two still-water pools, but had equally good success in fast water. In fact, I was amazed at the trout I was hooking in very fast water. As long as I could keep my eye on the tiny fly, I could elicit strike after strike. It was great fun. The vast majority of these fish were stream-born brown trout.

I know I've mentioned it before, but there's nothing like fishing a small fly on 7X tippet using a fine-tipped split-cane rod. In my book, I don't really think there's a better rod for the job. I'm not certain I've ever before fished such a heavy Blue Wing Olive hatch in July. And I don't think I'd have gotten into it had Pastor Jacobsen not mentioned his experience to me when we visited. I *might* have caught on myself, but a little help from above never hurts.

\* \* \* \* \*

About ten years ago, I inherited an Abel Model "O" fly rod reel. It wasn't a particularly normal inheritance, as it wasn't in the will of the deceased. My old fishing friend Don had suddenly and unexpectedly passed away, and later on I ended up being a co-executor of his small remaining estate, duly appointed by the primary executor, who happened to live out of state. The main reason I agreed to do it was that since the primary executor lived out of state, somebody closer needed to be appointed to sign documents at the courthouse, auto and boat dealerships, law offices and I can't remember where all else, which eliminated a lot of driving for the primary executor. But being even a co-executor is an extremely legal arrangement.

Although I was happy enough to oblige and rather thought it my duty to an old friend, I'm not sure I'd ever do it again. A lot of weird things can happen when one is involved in executing an estate, and most of them happened. In the end it all turned out OK, but it took awhile.

At some point I was asked if there was anything in Don's old fishing stuff that I could use, which certainly was a nice gesture by the powers that were, and I selected the old Abel reel. I don't think I ever saw Don use another reel in the six or seven years we fished together, so I thought it would be a nice memento. And it has been. I've used it for ten years now, though I have a number of other reels. I guess it's had a good second life with my usage.



In the last year or so, though, I hadn't fished it much, as I was having difficulty keeping it operating. I took it apart now and then and oiled it up after cleaning out the grit, but there were a couple of parts in there that didn't look too good anymore. On that particular Abel reel, there are two tiny springs connected with the drag system, and they were clearly shot. I rigged up an interesting alternative, but it didn't work for very long.

Then I spotted an ad in a magazine from some fellows in Chicago who repair fishing tackle, and the gentleman I spoke with was kind enough to listen to me and ultimately suggest I send the reel to the Abel company in California. He even gave me the telephone number, so I gave the company a call and ended up mailing it out to them for a look.

When a service technician called after looking the reel over, he said it was in bad shape but definitely repairable. For a hundred bucks, they would completely rebuild and repaint the reel, which involved a special process of some sort. Since I had quite a sentimental attachment to the

reel and always liked it, I thought I'd go ahead and let them fix it. I could have bought a decent new reel for not much more than a hundred bucks, but it definitely wouldn't have been an Abel. The least expensive reel Abel carries now that most closely resembles my old reel would have run me six hundred bucks (including a spare spool, which I have with the old reel), and I've never really been able to afford that kind of equipment. For the hundred bucks, they also said they'd replace the bearings in the spare spool, which I had never used. I wondered how the bearings in the spare spool could be bad too, as I'd never used it. They told me *I* may never have used it, but my buddy sure had. Don used to have a sink-tip line on the spare spool, and come to think of it, I'll bet he did get a lot of use out of it on bigger waters. Don did a lot a fishing traveling.

The reel diameter on my particular model measures 2 3/4", and the smallest diameter Abel now makes is three inches. I believe the reel is at least twenty-five years old, perhaps a bit older, and an older-styled silk line would fit on it a bit more comfortably than a modern synthetic line, which takes up more space. Newer-styled fly lines probably necessitated the increase in spool diameter, but that's just another reason I like the old reel. It's unique.

The outside of the reel was pretty dinged up too, but when I got the reel back just a couple of weeks ago (in time for my birthday), I could not believe the beautiful job the Abel folks had done on it. It looks brand-new, and works like it, too. I've caught a few trout with it already. It fits perfectly on the split-cane Leonard duplicate my friend Chris Wasta built for me, and I think that's the rod I will always mount the reel on. I had a new DT-5wt line ready to put on the refurbished reel when it arrived, which happens to be a blaze-orange color, and the jet-black reel with orange line on a light split-cane rod looks, well, quite incredible I'd have to say. So much so, in fact, that two fishermen I ran into the first day I took it out again, neither of whom I'd ever met, asked for a closer look.

Don would have been very happy to see that. Or as my wife says, he *was* happy to see it.



## **Be Vigilant!**

“Red” Canoe  
Trout Unlimited  
Iowa Driftless Chapter