

September 2012

### Driftless Days . . .

I suppose one doesn't necessarily need to get up at 3:15AM to fish a trico hatch in northeast Iowa, but I do it a few times a season if I can just to observe the entire pageant from beginning to end. Initially that was how I learned to fish the hatch, though even at this point the learning curve has not become complete, and no doubt never will. I hope not, at any rate. In late July through the middle of August, I've got an hour to bolt down some coffee at the house, stash my gear in a vehicle and drive forty-five minutes to one of any number of streams before arriving somewhere around 5:00AM, probably while it's still dark. I can save a little time if I've already loaded up the car the night before, and I can pick up a few more minutes by finishing my morning coffee while rigging up in the parking lot, a pleasant enough thing to do regardless.

However it's done, I try not to be in any hurry about it. It is said that fly fishing is a contemplative sport, and I've always found it difficult to contemplate if I don't have my act together. Dawn, or shortly before, is always a beautiful time to be near water.

Trico fishing has normally been a solitary affair for me. I've only had (and still have) two fishing companions who truly enjoy early morning trico fishing, but if I don't happen to go with either of them, I'm on my own. I seldom see other fly fishermen out on the stream at that time of day (once it actually gets light enough to see of course) though it happens occasionally. Oddly enough, I've never seen anyone I actually *know* fishing a dawn trico hatch other than the two friends I've referred to. Perhaps other acquaintances go to different streams for their trico outings, though I rather doubt it. I know anglers who, for various reasons, do not go to bed until I get up, and they hardly ever fish the trico hatch. By and large, I think most fishermen simply don't like to get up that early in the morning to fish, and that's certainly fair enough. The only time I ever do it myself is for the trico hatches of late summer and early autumn.

Altoona Joe and I have fished trico hatches on the Rush River in Wisconsin for a number of seasons now. The Rush River is a three-hour drive from Decorah.

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Tricos hatch at dawn, or even before, during the hotter days of late July and August. If nighttime temperatures are in the sixties or seventies, the hatch tends to come off very early in the morning.

As summer wanes into fall and the nights become cooler, the hatch comes off a bit later in the morning, sometimes as late as 9:00AM, which can make for a more reasonable fishing morning for most. On earlier warmer outings the spinner fall ends about eleven in the morning, and on later cooler days the spinners are over around two in the afternoon.

Some anglers say that one never actually fishes a trico hatch but always fishes the spinner fall. I'm not entirely sure that's the case and don't believe it myself, but the subject is certainly open to debate. I use the same dun pattern from dawn through the spinner fall and catch trout throughout that entire time period, so either I am catching hatching flies as well as spinners or my pattern is a very good spinner representation. Either way, there are a lot of trout out there to be caught in the wee hours of the morning.

After years of experimentation over many seasons, I've settled on a very simple trico pattern that works extremely well for me. I have great confidence in it, and that goes a long way toward helping any angler catch fish. I use a #24 hook and rarely try a larger pattern, which I used to do now and then. The trico is our smallest hatching mayfly in the Driftless area and after the aforementioned seasons of experimentation I now simply go for the jugular and do it right. I always fish my #24 pattern on 7X tippet, though my 7X strand is only six or seven inches in length. The two-foot strand of 7X or 8X tippet I've sometimes heard and read about does not work for me at all and doesn't seem necessary. I say that only after landing many hundreds of trout on short strands of 7X tippet during both trico and *baetis* hatches, where #24 patterns are in order. To be fair, most of this fishing has occurred on midwestern spring creeks rather than larger, more brawling waters where different leader techniques might be more appropriate.

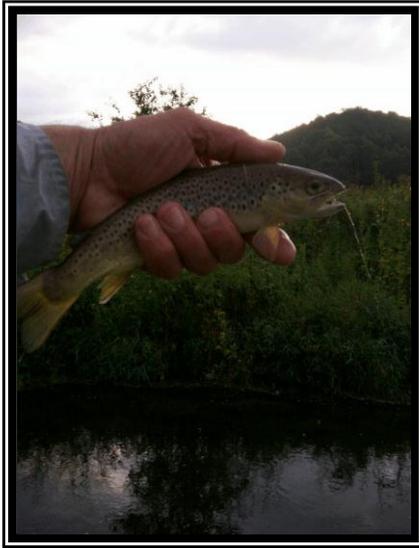


For my #24 Threadwrap pattern, I simply tie on a small wisp of grizzly hackle for the tail, wrap the black body in 8/0 thread, tie about four wraps of #20 grizzly hackle at the head and tie the fly off. The #20 grizzly hackle is somewhat oversized for a #24 hook but I find that helps to keep the fly well above the water's meniscus and very visible to my eye. Vincent Marinaro would have approved of the pattern, at least based upon what I've been able to comprehend concerning his theories of fly tying. His approach for tying dry flies might now be considered somewhat antiquated but in most instances that still seems to work out quite well for me. Basically, Marinaro liked high-riding dry flies and so do I.



In trico fishing, I always cast upstream to rising trout. It's much easier to hook them with a #24 pattern that way. I try to get as close as I can to rising trout and keep my casts as short as possible, both of which are helpful too. It is particularly important to keep one's eye on the fly while fishing such diminutive patterns in order to see the strike and immediately set the hook. A very light

lifting of the rod tip is generally all it takes to secure the hook. My favorite trico rod is a nine-foot split-cane Hiram Leonard replica, which I think could be classified either as a light 5wt or slightly heavier 4wt. A good cane rod has an incredibly fine touch while working with small dry flies and fine tippet, and that is of great benefit when fishing the trico hatch.



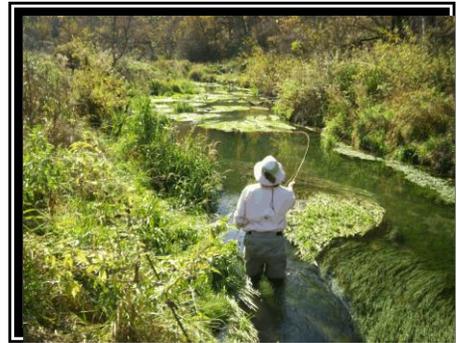
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I've kept fly fishing journals for twenty seasons now. Other than actual time spent on the water, I think my journal efforts have helped my fly fishing skills, such as they are, more than anything else I can think of.

This morning Chris and I met on the Waterloo Creek near Dorchester, Iowa, and this is what found its way into my journal:

*Sunday, July 29<sup>th</sup>*

*This morning Chris and I met on the Waterloo for some trico fishing. I arrived at dawn and had caught six nice trout in the frog water below the crossing at the top of the Horse Pasture before I heard Chris drive up in the parking lot. Tom Murray was to have come too but he couldn't make it after all and Chris said he and Tom were going to try again Monday morning. Chris and I walked downstream and split up to fish different areas, and just after I'd caught another good fish it began to rain, which neither of us had expected. To make a long story short it rained all morning long and that ruined the hatch. Chris found me downstream about ten o'clock and said he was going to pack it in as it didn't look like the rain was going to let up. I caught one last trout during a short lull in the rain but then it began to rain again harder so I left not long after Chris. At least we each caught a few good fish before getting rained out.*



It's tough to get up at three or four in the morning and get rained out of a promising hatch, but that's the way it goes sometimes. We both agreed we needed the rain much worse than a few more trout.

Here is my journal entry for yesterday:

*Saturday, July 28<sup>th</sup>*

*This morning I got up early and drove out to the Waterloo, arriving just before dawn at about 5:00AM . . . obviously in search of tricos, which indeed I found. It was a pleasant sunny*

*morning once daylight arrived and the trico hatch was very good. I caught a trout or two early on but the hatch really kicked in about 7:00AM or so, just as the sun rose above the treeline to the east. My best fishing was in the riffle stretches in the heart of the Horse Pasture, particularly in the section a couple of hundred yards below the riprap bank. I had strikes on almost every cast for periods of time, though of course I did not hook and land every trout that struck. True to form the action ended entirely at 11:00AM, at which time the rises stopped and trout would not even glance at my fly. I decided to go home after the hatch rather than fish hoppers throughout the afternoon as I had done so well in the morning, but not before a little fellow (with his Dad and Grandma in tow) insisted on showing me his "Spider Man" spinning rod as I was getting ready to leave the parking area. I told him it was a very cool rod and I wished I had one like that myself.*

It's been an interesting weekend, largely because of a tiny little mayfly that begins hatching before most dairymen have a light on in the barn. With the drought conditions we've experienced in the midwest and most of the rest of the United States this year, it was actually quite pleasant to get rained out of a good hatch. The Waterloo Creek is a challenging stream and I don't think I've ever run into a four-year-old there, especially one with a "Spider Man" rod.

I sure hope he caught one.

### **Be Vigilant!**

*"Red" Canoe  
Trout Unlimited  
Iowa Driftless Chapter*

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