



December 2007

Driftless Days . . .

At this time of year I always think of Robert Travers' Anatomy Of A Flyfisherman and the wonderful photograph of Travers and his fishing friends all huddled together under trees dripping with rain, looking out at nothing in particular, their eyes glazed over with that hundred-mile stare common to the last day of the trout fishing season. Of course that would have been in Michigan somewhere within Travers' famed brook trout fishery; like Hemingway, Travers was always careful about identifying his streams, or not identifying them perhaps one should say . . . Even though our season is year-round in Iowa, I think we all still have that end-of-season feeling (at least until the winter fishing begins!) when we think about our year's efforts on the water and how they have enriched our lives.

A few weeks ago I had all but given up on our fall Blue Wing Olive hatches. If I drove around enough and looked for fishable water, I could manage some good outings, mainly with terrestrials, but many of our northeast Iowa streams were periodically high and off-color during August and September and some of the flooding was so detrimental I thought the Blue Wings would without a doubt be blown out for the season. The year had been so good otherwise it wouldn't have been fair to complain; as John Gierach once said, you catch as many trout as you're supposed to and that's that. Very true. But I always like to fish the Blue Wings out in style in October and November and was somewhat concerned, if not manically depressed, that it might not happen this year.

But on the weekend of Saturday October 20th my good friend Altoona Joe drove up (of course from Altoona) and we made a few haphazard plans to at least meet somewhere on the water. Joe is a free spirit and likes to go where that spirit moves him when he comes up; sometimes I can figure out where his spirit will take him, and sometimes I can't. Yet we often meet on the same streams and in fact began fishing together some years back for that very reason. On Saturday morning I had driven over three streams, all high and muddy, before finally deciding to head to the only stream I knew was clear (French Creek), assuming Joe would do the same. Great minds think alike, right? I ended up spending my day landing four trout in a thirty-mile-per-hour wind, occasionally managing to hit the water with my fly, but not too often . . . French Creek has a way of seriously humbling a fisherman now and then, and that's one of the reasons I like to go there. If I'm going to get skunked that's normally where it'll happen; some of my most memorable days have been on French Creek, spending untold hours not catching them. My wife particularly appreciates and respects this aspect of my fly fishing. At any rate I never did see Joe and of course wondered what he was up to.

I caught up to him on another stream Sunday morning and we fished that water until about three

in the afternoon, doing moderately well on a fishable Blue Wing hatch. Not great, but reasonably good . . . But Joe had fished one of the streams I'd passed up the day before on Saturday and hit an incredibly heavy Blue Wing hatch, right up through the high water. That time he'd guessed right and I'd guessed wrong; it's always good to talk with your fishing friends and compare notes, especially if their name happens to be Joe. Needless to say Joe's success got my attention, and for the next four weekends I found some of the best Blue Wing fishing in northeast Iowa I've had since the incomprehensible season of 2003.

I've read that there are some thirty-six species of Blue Wing Olive in North America, and that perhaps trout can't really tell the difference between the species. I tend to agree with that. Two of the best Blue Wing months are March and October, although they generally hatch during the entire year. During the early and late season hatches they tend to be the only fly on the water and are more distinguishable for that reason, both to the fisherman and the trout. During other months the hatch can be masked by other hatches or terrestrial action, though occasionally the hatch can be quite obvious, at least for part of the day. It all depends. In northeast Iowa it seems to me that the March Blue Wing hatches tend to move rather quickly to a larger-sized fly, generally in the range of a #16. In October the distinguishable hatches are also characterized by that larger size, but as the month moves along and slides into November, the flies become smaller, and around Thanksgiving you might find yourself fishing a #22, or even a #24. In our area Blue Wings tend to come off a bit earlier than some fishermen might think; it's not a bad idea to be on the water by 10:00 AM. You might be a bit early but I think it's easier to blend into the heavier hatch times if you work into them rather than jump right in on top of them. There are days when the late afternoon spinner falls are nearly as good (if not better) than the main hatch, for reasons I don't entirely understand. Sometimes trout want the spinners and sometimes they don't. I generally like to hang around and find out if I have the time . . .

Everyone has their favorite Blue Wing patterns. Often I get by with a simple Adams pattern in the appropriate size, particularly very early or late in the season; the trout are either hungry after a sparse winter, or feeding heavily in the fall, anticipating the coming winter. When the trout become more selective, for mysterious reasons of their own, I might switch to a Blue Wing Quill, a more delicate and less obtrusive pattern. Altoona Joe likes a parachute Adams, in part I think because he caught a zillion trout on them this year. I think a parachute pattern can be effective, when you think about it; it can resemble a dun, an emerger, a cripple, an aborted fly or even a spinner, all in one. I try and capture the same concept with the more traditional Quill pattern, and they're easier to tie in the smaller sizes. I also rather like doing what Theodore Gordon did, at least as long as I'm catching a few. By the way, Joe caught every trout of his 2007 season on a dry fly, a spectacular achievement I had never heard of prior to. So you might want to give the parachute a good look!

On Saturday November 17th I had the honor of landing my first autumn Brown trout during a driving snow, something I look forward to at the end of each season but sometimes can't manage. It can be done most predictably when we get early flurries before it gets too cold and the hatch shuts down for the season, and on Saturday that's exactly what occurred. There's something interesting in trying to pick up your fly in the air and watching snowflakes at the same time.

One more thing: if anyone mentions a “gigantic Blue Wing Olive” early in March, try as discreetly as possible to find out **exactly** when and where that occurred and then **go there as soon as possible**. You might find a hatch of Iron Blue Duns, a large fly in the #12-#14 range that is **not** a Blue Wing Olive, but looks like one. I have experienced only three Iron Blue Dun hatches here in Northeast Iowa over the past fifteen years, though I’m sure I missed a few of them. Always on the lookout however . . .

Remember the best time to go fishing is not necessarily when you want to, but when you can. I hope you can go as often as you like!

Casting and Gathering

Years and years ago, these sounds took sides:

*On the left bank, a green silk tapered cast
Went whispering through the air, saying hush
And lush, entirely free, no matter whether
It swished above the hayfield or the river.*

*On the right bank, like a speeded-up corncrake,
A sharp ratcheting went on and on
Cutting across the stillness as another
Fisherman gathered line-lengths off his reel.*

*I am standing there still, awake and dreamy,
I have grown older and can see them both
Moving their arms and rods, working away,
Each one absorbed, proofed by the sounds he’s making.*

*One sound is saying, “You are not worth tuppence,
But neither is anybody. Watch it! Be severe.”
The other says, “Go with it! Give and swerve.
You are everything you feel beside the river.”*

*I love hushed air. I trust contrariness.
Years and years go past and I do not move
For I see that when one man casts, the other gathers
And then vice versa, without changing sides.*

Seamus Heaney, from Seeing Things



Be Vigilant!

“Red” Canoe

TU’s Iowa Driftless Chapter