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Fly Selection on Small Streams

There's an old fly-fishing joke about two men who meet at the end of the day, parked next to each other at a motel near a famous Montana stream. Since they're both unpacking wet fishing gear, it's obvious they've spent the day fishing.

So as not to be rude, the first man asks the second, a rather tweedy, distinguished-looking fellow, "How was your day?"

"Pretty good!" the second man replies. "It took me a while to figure out the right fly. First I thought they were taking *Ephemerella subvaria*...but I realized they were too big. So then I tried *Seratilla deficiens*. But that didn't work. Then finally, I tried an emerger pattern for *Drunella flavilinea*, and that did the trick. I took 10 trout!"

"Congratulations! That's very interesting, I'm sure." replied the first man.

"How'd you do?"

"Oh, I had an OK day."

"How many did you catch?"

The first man looked embarrassed. "I don't know, lost count. Probably 40 or so."

The second man was astonished. "What fly did you use?"

The first man pulls off his hat and points to a small, mangled fly stuck in its brim. "That little gray bastard."

* * *

I must confess that I have always aspired to be the fisherman who instinctively selects the "little gray bastard." I've wanted to know as little as possible about entomology,

balanced only by fear that knowing nothing might waste precious stream-time using the wrong flies. So over the years I've picked up a few concepts that seem to work pretty well for me.

A key issue around fly selection is whether you're fishing a "freestone" or a "limestone" stream. Most, but certainly not all, small wild trout streams in the Northeast US are freestone, i.e. they have rocky bottoms, and stream flow depends primarily on in-flows from tributaries and runoff from precipitation (rain, snow-melt). Limestones flow through bedrock which is primarily calcium carbonate, with smooth, typically heavily weeded bottoms. Water comes primarily from springs, and is much less affected by precipitation. The classic English "chalk stream" is a limestone.

Some rivers may have characteristics of both.

The good news with small, freestone streams is that fly selection generally isn't all that difficult. Freestone, headwater streams are technically "infertile", meaning they don't supply a super-abundance of foods. Unlike larger streams, there are few distinct "hatches". They often have a steep gradient, which means the water moves quickly, and is riffled and turbulent, limiting vision. The resident trout can't be picky, and they have to make a quick decision before the food is gone...they pretty much have to eat anything that looks like food. So almost any plausible fly selection will work, except in the rare instances when the trout truly are keyed into a specific hatch.

With limestones, it's much tougher. The water is slower, clearer, and fish generally have time to look over the fly before taking. They also have more food to choose from (these are nutrient rich streams), with abundant hatches, and will often key into a specific fly. You need to match the hatch much more closely. The art of fly selection on these streams has been the subject of numerous books and is well beyond the scope of a this note.

So we're going to focus here primarily on freestone streams, and make just a few comments on limestones at the end, to suggest some ways to approach fly selection there if you're lucky enough to find yourself on one.

* * *

One of the most important lessons about fly selection was taught to me a few years ago on a back-packing trip into the Sierra Nevada Mountains of California. My son and I were heading into the Mono Recesses, camping for 5 days at 10,000 feet near a series of tiny streams that all held wild trout.

Inquiries with local fly shops assured me that the "best" pattern for these streams in mid-August was a mosquito. In fact, even when pressed, the people I talked to didn't come up with any alternatives. The mosquito was it.

Since space and weight matter on a backpacking trip, I could afford to carry only one small fly box. It contained 40 mosquitoes: #20, gray dry flies, and I filled it out with a few other patterns which seemed to me, from first principles, might be useful.

We camped about 200 feet from the headwaters of Mono Creek. The stream was only about 5 feet wide, but it had a healthy flow and a steep gradient, creating wonderful, deep plunge pools which are perfect trout habitat.

The first morning dawned clear, and by the time the sun rose enough to warm the water (it had been in the low '20s overnight), it was achingly bright. The plunge pools were in deep shadows, making it impossible to see a #20 gray dry fly.

This didn't concern me too much. The plunge pools were pretty small, typically 5'x 5'. It seemed easy enough to watch the entire pool, and simply react to the strikes. Easy in theory, but after 30 minutes of casting to gorgeous pool after pool, all of which had to be holding fish, I'd caught nothing. It was excruciating. I kept at it, thinking only that the water might still be too cold. After all, I was fishing the "perfect" fly.

Finally, I came to a larger than average pool that was in open shade, rather than deep shadow. I cast into it, concentrating on tracking my fly through its drift. As I watched, a 10" brook trout glided up toward my mosquito, and sipped it delicately. *There was no splash.*

Needless to say, I caught this fish, and realized I'd probably missed a dozen others in the earlier pockets. But knowing this helped only a little, because *I still couldn't see the fly in the deep shadows.* I needed a pattern that I could see.



Figure 1. The author on the headwaters of Mono Creek, holding a small brook trout caught on a parachute hopper pattern, on the day he learned an important lesson.

So I tied on a #10 parachute hopper. I cast it into the next plunge pool. Bam! Another nice brookie absolutely smashed the fly. Here was a pattern I could see, and I didn't need to! Taking a hopper, the fish were making as much of a splash as I could want.

What this experience taught me is that THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A PERFECT FLY. There are only flies that work for you (or not). The fisherman and his limitations are nearly as important in this equation as the fish's proclivities. On a given day, you may be much better off with a fly you can see easily, which is only moderately attractive to the fish, than the "perfect fly" which you can't see. Of course, it's even better when the two coincide, as it happened with the hopper.

Another issue you can help through fly selection is drag. All of us seek to present a fly with perfect drift, but most of us fall short. That's why, all other things being equal, my favorite fly is a caddis. Natural caddis scoot over the surface of the water when they oviposit. A little drag on a caddis dry may be perceived by the trout as a natural scooting motion, not as a problem. I prefer the Goddard pattern because of its nearly unsinkable cork body (though elk hair ties are also good).

As we'll see, however, I believe that initial fly selection is less important than intelligent adjustment as we go along. But we have to start somewhere.

Initial Fly Selection on a Freestone Stream

OK, we've just arrived on a small, freestone stream we've never fished, somewhere in NE United States. What fly should we tie on?

Let's start by watching the water. If we need to hike in, we'll try to get as close as we can to the stream, and watch for fish and bug signs long before we start fishing. Similarly, we can use our time gearing up. We'll do it in sight of the stream, and watch for signs. No matter what, we'll make sure we spend at least several minutes studying the stream quietly before deciding on the initial fly to tie on.

OK, so let's assume we've done that. The first decision is dry, nymph, or streamer? Mostly, this choice is a matter of personal preference. If you've seen rising fish, the dry is a no-brainer. Otherwise, it's pretty simple: unless it's fairly cold, I'll always start with a dry. In my opinion, dries are easier to fish, and more fun. Also, wild trout on small, infertile streams will rise to a dry more easily than their larger-stream cousins. But you might decide to start with a nymph. There is no perfect fly.

Selecting a Dry Fly

The choice of which dry then depends on what's going on, and the time of year. If you see something specific on the water, this trumps any rule of thumb:

- Stoneflies crawling around? Go with a stonefly pattern.
- Did you see caddis flies ovipositing? A caddis pattern is a good bet, even if you didn't see a fish rise.
- See mayflies come off? Go with a mayfly pattern.

But suppose you see something going on, but you don't have a perfect match in your box? If you think about the three dimensions of fly selection: size, color, and shape (i.e. the type of insect being imitated), on a freestone stream you'll want to get two out of three more or less right.

Size is almost always an important dimension. Fish key into the size of food almost more than anything else: if it looks like food, and is the right size, you have a shot at getting a strike even if everything else is whacky. You want either to match the naturals, or be a size *small*.

Color is occasionally very important, but usually only in the extremes. An Adams will probably do for *any dull colored* mayfly. I prefer parachute ties to traditional Adams ties, because they're easier to see. The caddis patterns in your fly box are tan, and the natural looked olive? Don't worry about it, just get the size right.

At certain times of the year, when there is a dominant hatch, fish do seem to key directly on color, especially the early season stone flies (black), and sulphurs (yellow). That's why in the fly selection that follows, we've got specific imitations for them. But you need to imitate yellow sallies (small yellow stoneflies)? Try the sulphur pattern of the right size, even though it's shaped like a mayfly (remember 2 out of 3).

If you don't have a perfect imitation, you may need to cheat a little bit through movement (natural or induced). On slower water, try twitching or skating the fly a bit. This is always a good strategy to try with caddis; but even with a parachute Adams, I've stimulated strikes this way – I suppose it mimics the twitching of the naturals as they try to take off. Even if you're not having luck in the slower water, try fishing the riffles and runs (on a dead drift to start). There, the fish aren't going to have time to realize your imitation fly isn't perfect.

Absent specific data from the stream, seasonal considerations can drive the initial fly selection:

- Mid spring, if I don't see anything else, start with a tan caddis. Not only does it often stimulate strikes, it's also easy to see.
- Late spring through fall, caddis remains important, but don't forget terrestrials: e.g. hoppers and ants.
- Late fall until spring, nymphs are my default choice.

Attractors are also useful, especially on fast moving water when the fish can't afford to study the fly. The Royal Wulff is a classic attractor pattern that's easy to see and often effective, especially for brookies on fast moving flows. I do find a higher rate of "refusals" with attractors: i.e. the fish rise, but decide in mid-strike not to take the fly. I find Wulffs particularly useful in "prospecting", seeing if the fish are in the faster water. It's a great pattern to stimulate a strike. I may then switch to another pattern once I start fishing in earnest, especially if I experience a refusal.

Occasionally I've had fish fussy enough to insist on taking emergers rather than the fully floating dries...it's useful to keep a few in your box.

Keep in mind that small streams generally breed small flies. You may be used to fishing #12 to #14 flies on some larger streams. Small streams typically go #14 - #18; given the "one size small is OK" rule, you can probably get away with nothing larger than a #16, and save room in the box.

Selecting a Nymph

Basically, select a nymph whenever you think fish won't rise to a dry. This can mean:

- All day long during early and late season.
- Early or late in the day during mid-season. For example, early morning after a cold night, start with a nymph, and move to a dry later in the day as it warms up.
- Certain structures, any time. For example, fast, deep runs may hold fish hugging the bottom even during peak season. Fish holding there won't rise to a dry

because it's wastes too much energy fighting the current to the surface, then swimming back down, even if the dry is attracting fish elsewhere on the stream. For a change of pace, try a nymph and see what happens.

I'm a big fan of bead head patterns. The bead head sinks the fly, so you generally don't need to add extra weight, and acts as an attractant.

Frankly, 95% of the fish I've caught on nymphs in small streams have been on 2 patterns:

- Pheasant tail. Skinnier ties seem to work better than fat ones. On dull days, the flashback pattern covered with green Mylar seems to work better than the traditional brown. I carry both. PTs will generally be taken for mayflies (so they're the nymph of preference when you think mayflies are about).
- Gold-ribbed hare's ear. This is a broader spectrum pattern than even a PT. Fish will take them for just about anything, including caddis pupae. Color can be important here. Black can be deadly whenever you think dark naturals are in the water. Otherwise natural brown.

The good thing about both of these patterns is that you can fish them in any kind of structure: fast water, slow water, pools, runs, riffles. You name it, they work.

Most streams that have caddis ovipositing, also have caddis pupae floating around. So they're a useful fly to have around. I also carry a few prince nymphs. This is a broad-spectrum western pattern that targets primarily caddis pupae, but works OK for a stonefly or mayfly, so it complements the PT and HE which are primarily mayfly imitations. Fish a prince deep, near the bottom, in any water that moves, especially riffles and runs.

Beyond these three or four patterns, which are useful on almost any stream in the world, choice of other nymphs becomes stream dependent. If you see the exoskeletons of stone flies on the rocks, a stonefly nymph the same size or slightly smaller can be deadly. On streams that don't support stoneflies, they're a waste of time.

Similarly, scud patterns (basically tiny shrimp) are deadly on streams that have them.

Every once in while you're gong to run into fish that are taking midges. Much more common on bigger streams and limestones, but it happens even on freestone streams. So I always have some brassies, midge emergers (e.g. WD40s), and Griffith's Gnats on hand. They take up almost no space in the box.

Selecting a Streamer

Streamers can be just as deadly on small streams as on bigger ones. I know some fishermen who use them on small streams to the virtual exclusion of other kinds of flies, and do as well as anyone I know. I'm just not a fan – personally I find streamer fishing tiring rather than relaxing. But don't let my prejudice get in the way if you enjoy them. Just scale the streamer to the stream and the fish. You're not going after 20" brown trout;

you'll want patterns that are two or three sizes smaller than what you'd use on a big stream.

Streamers for me are the “oh shit” pattern, when I've tried everything else and nothing works. The fact that I'll usually then take something on a streamer, you'd think, would get me to use them more in general fishing situations, but somehow it's never worked that way.

Adjusting Fly Selections along the Way (Freestone)

The single most important lesson I've learned about selecting flies on small streams is to change them if they're not working. If conditions are reasonable, and you're casting over nice structures, you're probably covering fish. So if nothing's responded after 15-20 minutes, change the fly, or at least try different things.

Same prescription if things go dead in the middle of the day, though I'm a little slower to change flies if something's been working all day. Generally I'll keep it on the line, and add another fly, until I find something else that works better.

If the temperature is on the cold side (or has dropped), and you're fishing dries, switch to nymphs (or if you like, put a nymph on a dropper). Some people fish a “dry and a dropper” routinely. I don't as a rule because I find it hard to react quickly to two very different strike scenarios. But I will do it if I haven't yet found a fly that's working, since it doubles the chances of finding one.

Similarly, if you're nymphing, try two different flies at once. Again, I'll usually cut back to one nymph once I know it's working (less likelihood of tangles). Also make sure you try varying the depth. Try changing the length of leader between the nymph and the indicator. If you're fishing relatively deep water, try adding a small amount of weight.

On bright sunny days, fishing slower water, try going to longer and/or a finer tippet. I usually fish 6x all the time, anyway, since with modern materials they're plenty strong enough to land any fish you're going to find in a small stream. But if you're fishing 5x, try going to 6x, or on super bright days, 7x.

Selecting Flies on a Limestone Stream

So, after much anticipation and exploration, you hike into a small stream and discover it's a limestone (or more likely, a hybrid stream with a lot of limestone characteristics).

What do you do?

There are two issues you're going to need to deal with at once.

First, in the clear, relatively smooth flowing water, the fish are going to be able to see the fly better. So you're going to need to match the hatch (size, color, shape, and even stage, e.g. emerging) much more closely. (They're also more likely to be able to see you as well – stealth will be doubly important).

Second, they're much more likely than on a freestone to be going after smaller flies including midges and tiny olives. It makes figuring out what to match that much harder.

As someone who usually fishes freestone streams, I confess I find limestones intimidating. I don't carry a huge range of specific dry-fly patterns in my box, and I'm not confident that my entomology is well enough developed to figure out the match anyway. But there are a few strategies I've found useful.

First, try nymphing: there's less variation to match in the nymphs than in the mayfly duns. Trout continue to take nymphs even when there's a hatch on. Are there small mayfly duns coming off? Throw out a PT or flashback PT nymph of the right size. While you're at it, add a brassie on dropper for the hell of it.

Streamers can be extremely useful on more technical streams. Typical upstream presentations of dries and nymphs may not work, because the fish are too line shy. Cast upstream to them, and they're gone.

However, a typical streamer presentation – across the current, or down-and-across – exposes minimal line to the fish, and they work pretty well even on highly selective fish. Look for more riffled water or bend pools, and swing a wooly bugger, a matuka, a hornburg, or a muddler through it. You might be shocked at what slams it on the way through. More than once I've saved myself from coming home with a stripe on my back using streamers in this way. Soft hackle wet flies can also be used in much the same way.

A Small Stream Fly Box

On small freestone streams, you don't need the 3 or 4 different fly boxes that some fishermen routinely carry on larger or more technical streams. I believe that one, carefully packed 4x5 box should provide enough variety for virtually any situation you're likely to run into year round.

As an exercise, I chose a small box and decided to “fill” it. I selected a nice little Scientific Anglers box, just under 4x5. It has 8 small compartments for dry flies on one side (big enough for 8 small flies each, #16 or smaller), and slits for 120 flies on the other side.



I've added just enough “technical” flies to give you an afternoon's entertainment on the occasional limestone stream. If you fish them routinely, you're going to need more flies than you can hold in one box.

The key ground rule for the basic box is that it needs to hold at least 4 flies of each pattern and size which you expect to be a mainstay. You *will* lose flies on small streams, there's too much brush around not to. But there's nothing worse than being on a stream in the middle of some great action and

losing your last “hot” fly. More experienced small stream fishermen will lose fewer, of course, but that gets offset to some extent by the fact that they attempt more challenging casts.

OK, so here’s the list:

Dries (in compartments, 4 each #16 and #18 unless noted otherwise):

1. Caddis, tan (Goddard or elk hair caddis)
2. Caddis, black (all #18 – use for early season stonefly)
3. Adams, parachute
4. Sulphur, parachute
5. Royal Wulff
6. Ant, black
7. Hopper, parachute (#12 – 4 will fit)
8. Emergers: 2 caddis, 2 mayfly

Nymphs (in slits, 4 each #16 and #18, unless noted – all bead heads):

1. Pheasant tail
2. Flashback pheasant tail (+ 4 #20 to imitate small olives)
3. Gold ribbed hares ear, natural
4. Gold ribbed hares ear, black
5. Prince
6. Scuds, gray
7. Caddis pupae, #16 only: 4 tan, 4 olive

Streamers, 2 each (each streamer occupies 4 slits in the box):

1. Wooly bugger, bead head, olive (#12)
2. Wooly bugger, bead head, black (#12)
3. Matuka, green/black/red (#12)
4. Hornburg, brown/yellow (#12)

Miscellaneous:

- Inch worm (green latex, 2)
- Stone fly nymphs (2 large black and 2 golden medium – 20 slits)
- Griffiths Gnat (4)
- Midge emerger, e.g. WD40 (4)
- Brassies (4-#22)

Resources

A great introductory book is *The Orvis Streamside Guide to Trout Foods and Their Imitations* by Tom Rosenbauer (Lyons Press). It fits into your pocket and is beautifully illustrated with lots of color photos.

The best serious treatment on entomology for beginners that I've found is *An Angler's Guide to Aquatic Insects and Their Imitations for All North America* by Rick Hafele and Scott Roederer (Johnson Books). One-color sketches only, but it goes much deeper into the science than most, yet is reasonably accessible.