

Spin-Fishing With Flies

by Jeff Samsel



The whipping was undeniable. It seemed my fly-rod-wielding buddy was engaged with another trout every time I gave him a glance. Meanwhile, I was being served a big dose of rejection as the fish would follow my normally productive spinners and plugs but would not quite commit. I hadn't carried a fly rod that day. However, I did have one fly box in my vest, and that made me start thinking.

The notion didn't fester long before I found myself pulling a black Woolly Bugger from the fly box, tying it to my light mono and adding a split shot to the line so I could cast a very light offering. About two casts into the experimental plan, I was in the game, with a trout on the line, and from that moment forward my buddy and I caught fish at roughly the same pace.

That was many years ago, and I've since spent dozens of days fishing flies with spinning gear. I also fly-fish some days, and on most spin-fishing trout outings, I still favor traditional lures. However, I'm never hesitant to pull out a box of flies to present with spinning gear, and at times these are the best tools for the task.

WHY FLIES?

Various factors can cause trout to favor flies any given day, but usually it has something to do with pickiness. The simple fact is that trout eat a lot of bugs, and no artificial

offering looks as much like a typical bug than a well tied fly. Even most “non-bug” fly patterns have a natural and unintimidating look in the water. When the trout turn fussy, whether due to extra low or clear water, heavy fishing pressure or an overabundance of natural forage, offering something that looks natural and uninhibited often is the key to getting fish to strike.

Several “fussy fish” condition prevailed that first day I ever tried a fly on a spinning rod. The river was low and bottled-water clear. I could see trout darting from behind rocks to examine my lures and darting away, and based on my own positioning, I was convinced that I wasn’t spooking them. The lures were just a little too bulky and fast moving under those conditions. It’s also a highly popular stream, where catch-and-release is the norm, so for most trout it was not their first rodeo. Although a Woolly Bugger is not a perfect match for any specific single food item, it does look like something natural that would live in a stream.

Often the thing that makes trout the fussiest is an excess of a certain food item. When gazillions of caddis flies, all of the same size, shape and color, are drifting across the surface, a trout’s instincts tell it to think of anything that looks different as a potential threat and unnecessary risk. In those cases, it typically doesn’t matter how good your lure looks. If it doesn’t “match the hatch” it gets rejected.

Food-generated fussiness isn’t limited to the extreme of a heavy hatch, though. Any time a stream supports an extra strong population of any trout food — whether an aquatic insect, crawfish, baitfish or some other critter — the fish will be more apt to take offerings that suggest that menu item. In many cases, a fly will offer a more natural imitation of that foodstuff than anything in your other boxes.

Finally, there are times when fish simply can’t resist what the fly-fishing crowd collectively call “junk flies” — stuff like bright-colored egg pattern and San Juan Worms. Unfortunately, those times are tough to define, and it’s more a matter of keeping a few of those patterns in your box and giving one a whirl when your favorite baits aren’t producing as well as you think they should.

PRESENTATION AIDS

The basic purpose of a fly-fishing outfit is that it allows you to cast a loop of relatively heavy line in order to present an offering that on its own would be too light to be cast with other gear. If you’re fishing with spinning gear, that’s an obvious challenge, but there are solutions.

For dry flies or nymphs, which are the generally smaller insect imitations that drift across or beneath the surface, respectively, the best way to add casting weight and manage drifts is to clip a casting bubble or other small float to the line. Casting bubbles are clear and are therefore a little better for dry flies, which they’ll be drifting near, and for shallow nymph presentations. If a nymph will be at least a few feet beneath the surface, a colored float is easier to watch.

It's worth acknowledging that a spinning rod is not as efficient as a fly rod for many nymph and dry fly presentations. It's very hard to "mend" mono to keep current from dragging your rig, and you can't get your fly more than about 5 feet from your float or casting bubble without making casting extremely difficult. That said, your spinning rod will work wonderfully for many situations so carrying a small selection of nymphs and dries and a few floats opens up a lot of possibilities without requiring you to abandon spinning gear or the other lures that you normally like to fish.

For larger flies that fly fishermen normally cast and strip beneath the surface, the only thing you need to add to your line is a little weight in the form of split shot. Woolly Buggers and various streamers normally have at least a little bit of weight already, so one or two small split shot provide plenty of weight for most trout stream gear. Fly fishermen often add weight to the same flies to get them down in the water column, and with weight added it's often actually easier to cast a streamer with an ultralight spinning rod than with a fly rod.

Still another delivery aid is a small jig, which is rigged in tandem with a San Juan Worm, a small streamer or some other fly. The rig is simple. Begin with a small Road Runner Original Marabou or some other jig you would otherwise use for trout. Tie 12 to 18 inches of 4-pound-test mono or fluorocarbon leader to the bend of the hook and add a fly to the end of the leader. You might be surprised by the number of fish you will catch on the fly.

Finally, unless you already fish for trout with extremely light gear, you might want a couple of small spools of extra light line (2- to 4-pound test) to add as leader material when you opt for really small flies. It's hard to get 6-pound test through the eye of a No. 16 dry fly, and line that's too big definitely will hamper a fly's effectiveness. Fly shops sell mini spools of leader material in 1-pound increments.

FLIES TO TRY

If fly-fishing is not your main game, you probably don't want to tote several boxes stuffed with flies for every application each time you go fishing. That's no problem. A very modest selection of flies representing a handful of basic categories will create a lot of new possibilities, and a single fly box will easily cover your needs.



Photo by Jeff Samsel.

A spin-fisherman doesn't need a huge selection of flies to vastly broaden his arsenal.

If you asked 100 fly-fishermen to list their 10 most important flies, all but a very few renegades, liars or dry fly purists would put a Woolly Buzzer or some very close variation somewhere on the list. From the standpoint of the spin-fisherman, there's probably no more important fly because a Woolly Buzzer can imitate everything from an aquatic insect larvae to a minnow. Buzzers are also easy to cast with only a little weight added, and there's almost no wrong way to fish them. They can be dead drifted, swam steadily or worked with twitches and pauses. Black and olive are good colors; size 6 is a good average size, but it's nice to have a couple that are bigger and smaller as well.

In addition to Buzzers, add a few streamers that can be swam through the water column to suggest crawfish or forage fish. Best sizes, patterns, will vary some according to what lives in the waters you fish, and area fly shops could make good recommendations. (You don't have to tell them you intend to use the flies on spinning gear!) Good baitfish patterns include Olive Matukas, Muddler Minnows and Deceivers. Some of the best crawfish imitations are actually designed to imitate shrimp or crabs and will be sold with saltwater flies, and many of these have lead eyes and can be fished just like jigs.

The absolute best nymphs and dry flies, even more so than streamers, will vary from stream to stream. Lacking local knowledge, pick up a handful of "buggy" nymphs and buoyant dries in the size 10 to 14 range. Good nymph picks include Gold Ribbed Hare's Ears, Prince Nymphs and Pheasant Tails. Good dry flies to try include Humpies, Elk Hair Caddis and Royal Wulffs.

You might also include couple of hoppers or ants in your dry fly mix. These are often categorized separately as "terrestrials" because they imitate terrestrial insects, but they get drifted across the surface just like traditional dry flies.

Whatever they imitate, stick with extra buoyant dry pattern for spin-fishing, because you won't be doing the false casting that normally keeps dry flies dry and afloat. Also, if you do plan to fish many dry flies, buy a little bottle of floatant and stick it in your vest.

Finally, be sure to pick up a few bright-colored "junk flies," including San Juan worms and at least a couple of egg patterns. Whether or not wormy critters or "spawn" of any sort is in the fish's diet at any given place and time, trout seem wired to nab this type of offering at times when all else fails.

PRESENTATIONS

Streamer fishing and much Woolly Bugger fishing is similar spinner or jig fishing. Use your reel and rod tip to control the fly's depth and add action to imitate crawfish, leeches, sculpins or whatever you think the trout are apt to be eating. Don't get too carried away with added action, though. A fly's slow fall and natural drift are important to its appeal.

Unless you're specifically trying to imitate some fast-moving forage fish, let the current do much of the work. Cast just upstream of obstructions the trout will hold behind and let the stream deliver your fly just as it would with natural foodstuff. And when a fly gets downstream of you, let it swing a bit before you reel it back. Often the natural accelerated swing triggers strikes.

For most flies, dead-drift presentations are tough to top, and an important key to catching fish is to create a natural, drag-free drift. A typical aquatic insect doesn't propel itself much but instead moves at the mercy of the current. If a fly is moving faster than or slower than the current line it is within (which happens when other currents drag the line), it looks unnatural and is a red flag to a trout. Short casts, and high rod positions and downstream presentations can all be helpful for eliminating drag.

A final important consideration any time you fish with flies is that trout often "sip" such offerings, feel them with their mouths and spit them back out as quickly as they take them, if something doesn't feel or taste right. There may be no hard strike, and if you don't set the hook quickly, you won't hook most fish. If you feel a tiny tick, see your float pause or notice your line taking an unusual jump, set the hook. And when you do, be ready for there to be a trout at the other end of your line!

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