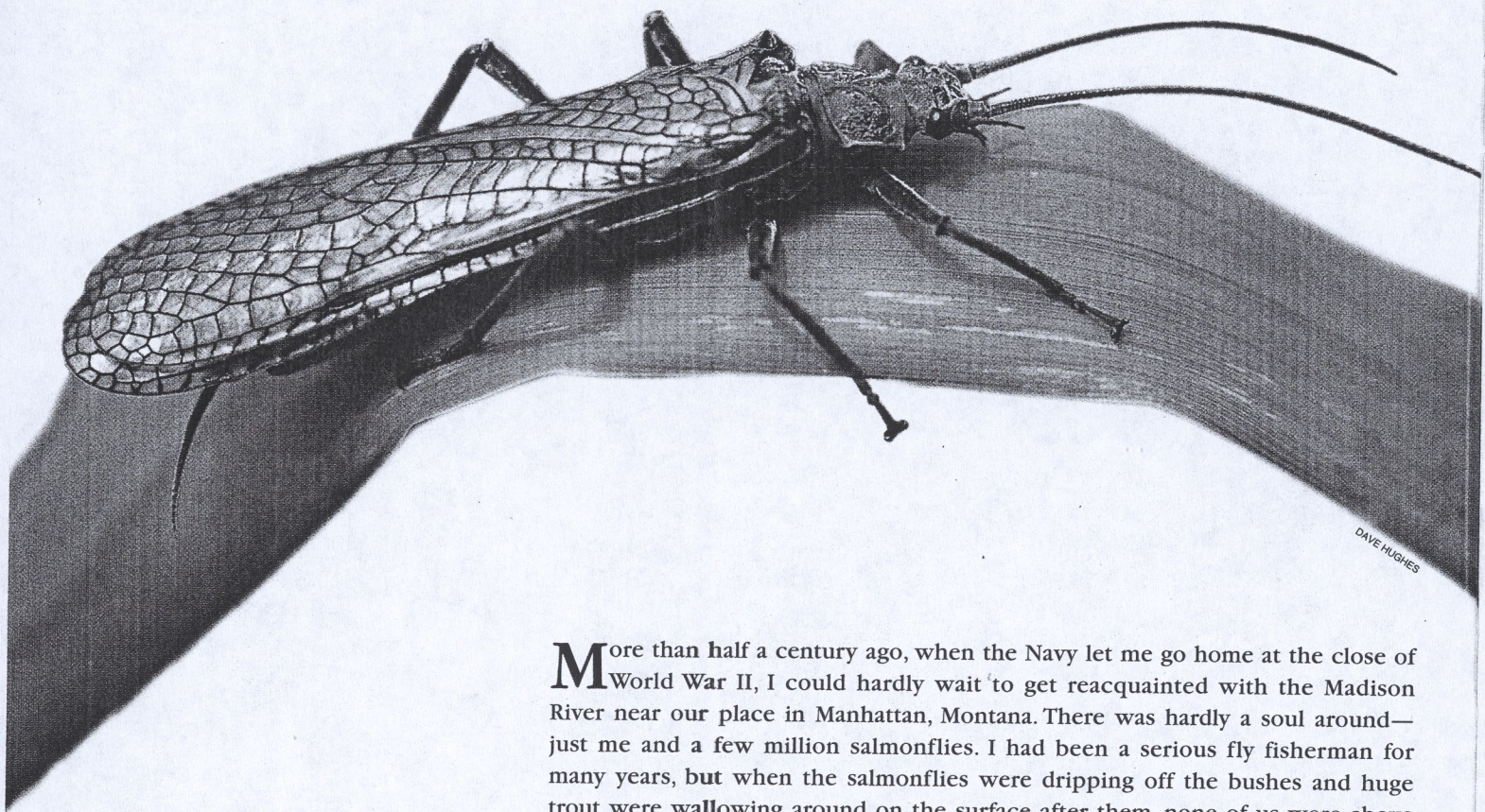


Salmonflies

by Bud Lilly with Paul Schullery



DAVE HUGHES

*These elusive,
unpredictable
bugs can humble
even the best fly-
fishermen*

More than half a century ago, when the Navy let me go home at the close of World War II, I could hardly wait to get reacquainted with the Madison River near our place in Manhattan, Montana. There was hardly a soul around—just me and a few million salmonflies. I had been a serious fly fisherman for many years, but when the salmonflies were dripping off the bushes and huge trout were wallowing around on the surface after them, none of us were above picking a few live flies off the bushes. Sometimes we would fish them on a bare hook, sometimes we would add them to whatever large wet fly we already had on the line, perhaps one of F.G. Pott's wonderful old "Mite" patterns.

We caught a lot of big fish, up to a few pounds each, but the thing that stands out in my mind now, almost fifty years later, is one fish I never even got a look at. I was working a couple of weighted flies through a deep run when something grabbed them and without any hesitation just swam to the other side of the river and parked itself over near the far bank. I couldn't move it, even though I was using heavy line, probably ten- or twelve-pound test. Whatever it was, it just stayed there until finally I pulled so hard I broke the line. There's no knowing how big a trout it was, of course, though obviously it was a whole lot bigger than the three- or four-pounders we were able to land pretty quickly. The chance of getting a working knowledge of a fish like that is probably the greatest attraction of fishing the salmonfly hatch.

Here in the Yellowstone region where I live, people have been talking about "salmonflies" since at least the 1870s. They also called them "trout bugs," or "hellgrammites," or something else inaccurate, but everyone knew what they meant: the giant stonefly, *Pteronarcys californica*. They have been a special part of Rocky Mountain trout fishing since the first fly rods arrived out here in the 1800s, and fishing for trout on a stream when they're emerging is still a thrill for me after nearly seventy years of living right among them.

By the 1950s I was guiding, but the few other guides were pretty secretive about the salmonfly hatch, so my clients didn't know they were paying me to get

the nymphs by turning over a few rocks and seeing where the biggest concentrations of nymphs are.

The salmonfly is at its best from about the last week of May until the first ten days of August. Some of the rivers in my region may still be in high water during the hatch. The Yellowstone north of the park is out of condition for dry-fly fishing during the salmonfly hatch four years out of five.

There is a well-known western recreation called "following the hatch," which involves careening up and down the river in your car with your head hanging out the window as you look for the bugs in the air. A lot of the time, however, there is no clearly defined "front" of the hatch. At times, depending on the various environmental conditions mentioned earlier, the flies may actually be emerging or laying their eggs along twenty-five miles of river at once. There may be no one "magic" section of river, and the fish may be on the lookout for the flies for weeks after the heaviest part of the hatch has passed by. Paul tells me he has used to use salmonfly imitations most of the summer on smaller freestone streams in Yellowstone Park, and the fish didn't seem to lose interest in them.

The Fish Are Better At This Than We Are

One little-known element of the salmonfly hatch is that the fish will sometimes migrate to follow the hatch. Most resident trout in a stream may live their lives in a fairly short stretch of river, at least through a summer season. They'll move as water temperature, depth, and other factors dictate, but usually they won't move too far. But I'm sure that some fish will travel long distances to follow the heaviest part of the salmonfly hatch. A friend of mine

The Salmonfly hatch often brings the biggest fish of the season to the surface.



hooked and lost a trout once on the Madison, using a Sofa Pillow he'd tied himself. The next day he caught that same fish, with his fly still in its mouth, about a mile upstream. There was no mistaking the fly, so we knew that at least this one trout was willing to move a long way to keep up with the food. I've seen similar movements on the Henry's Fork, when the salmonfly nymphs are moving and get washed out of the mouth of the Box Canyon area in great numbers. Trout will move up to the mouth of the canyon from the meadow stretches downstream to take advantage of the food.

The fish have been paying attention long before we start to see flies in the air. Trout notice all the pre-emergence activity, and will gorge themselves on the nymphs long before they start taking the adults on the surface. Interestingly, this often happens by fish species, with the browns switching to the adults first, then maybe the next day browns and rainbows, and then there may be a day when all you catch is whitefish. It may be that the browns are the quickest to switch to the surface flies because of some trait we don't fully understand, but I've seen this sequence often enough to know it isn't occurring by chance.

The trout can get enough, even if there are still flies available. Eventually, if the hatch is heavy enough, all the fish may stop feeding, having become lethargic from being so stuffed. The only good news in this is that the largest fish are often the last ones to stop feeding, so if you're fishing a stretch of water after the hatch has gone through you may have an unusually good chance at the big fish who had enough appetite to keep feeding longer.

Presentation and Pattern

Most of the time you fish the adult of the salmonfly as you would any other dry fly, but there are times when it's useful to work the fly. If you find a small back-eddy you can give the fly a twitch now and then; the adults struggle and flutter a lot on the surface.

There are several sizes of the naturals, and when the hatch is really heavy I use a large fly, probably a size 4. I have used 2's, but they won't all take a 2. When they're feeding less heavily I'll use a smaller fly, a size 6 or maybe even an 8. There is a good bit more to this than just pitching it out there.

There are countless patterns, but I'd keep in mind profile most of all. There are times when the trout seem to prefer a fly that is partly drowned, and I've taken many fish on a dry fly that has sunk completely. The advantage of the Sofa Pillow, or the Bird's Stonefly, under some circumstances is that they have such a low profile that they simulate the naturals in the last stage of their lives when they're just barely floating along. On the other hand, the bushier silhouette of a Stimulator sometimes draws more attention, or just makes a meatier splash when it hits the water. And a number of rubber-legged patterns have that added quivering motion that seems to make such a difference. Go into any good-sized tackle shop in the region and sort through



Bud Lilly (left) and Paul Schullery.

the various bullet-headed, foam-bodied, mono-antennaed concoctions for what looks good to you, but keep in mind how they'll look on or in the water, and try to have some high-floaters and some low-riders.


You may not think of trout feeding on these big flies as being selective, but there are lots of kinds of selectivity. I've noticed that the fish can be selective to the size of the salmonflies. There is a period when they seem to prefer the larger flies, and there may be a period when they want something as small as a size 8. Keep in mind that everything else on the river doesn't go away just because the salmonflies are hatching. One reason the fish may prefer smaller flies is that the golden stonefly hatches about the same time, and they may switch over to this smaller fly. On the other hand, it's hard to know sometimes what the fish are thinking. Paul describes watching a rainbow trout come up under a live salmonfly that was struggling and thrashing around on the surface of a quiet pool; after a few seconds examining the bug, the fish left, rejecting the real thing!

It's Not Always Hog Heaven

I remember a day on the Madison during the salmonfly hatch, years ago. I was fishing with a good friend, Sam

Radan, and we'd already caught some big trout, when just downstream from Varney Bridge I saw a fish rising to the naturals in midstream. I worked my way out to him, right up to the top of my chest waders, and confidently put a fly over him. No take. I moved closer and tried again. I tried different flies, different tippets. I moved closer. I could see that he weighed four or five pounds. He was throwing spray like another fish weighing more than five pounds that I'd caught earlier that day. I got so close he was actually throwing spray on my glasses when he rose. Sam was watching from the bank. I'd cast, the fish would rise and take a natural, Sam would cuss, and I'd cast again. Nothing worked.

I didn't catch him. He never stopped rising, and I never spooked him, but he just wouldn't take. It may be something you didn't think you needed to learn to do, but it's a humbling part of your education as a fly fisherman to have to walk away from an eagerly rising trophy trout just because you can't catch him. Salmonflies can teach you about that, too.

This excerpt from *Bud Lilly's Guide to Fly Fishing the New West* by Bud Lilly and Paul Schullery. 

some on-the-job training. I had a couple from Texas who wanted to fish the salmonfly hatch, so I just took them down to an area I happened to enjoy.

We had an incredible day. I led them around just like I knew what I was doing, and we caught large browns until we were tired, including several that weighed over four pounds. When we quit for the day, we kept two and headed back to the car. As we crossed the road, some passing fishermen saw us dragging these big trout along. They swerved to a stop and ogled the fish while they asked us where we'd caught them.

"Oh, we just got them over there, in some good water."

"What on?"

"Salmonflies."

"My God, we just spent the entire day twenty-five miles down the river where the salmonflies are supposed to be, and we haven't gotten a thing."

What made that day stick in my mind wasn't the dumb luck of being in the right place at the right time. What was so memorable was that we caught only large fish. Besides the really big fish, we caught lots of browns in the sixteen-to eighteen-inch range. We were probably ten miles upstream of the hatch, so apparently the fish had been feeding on the nymphs as they moved to shore and were really ready for the adults. Our big dry flies were just what they were waiting for, and there wasn't another fisherman for miles.

Catching the Hatch

Everybody dreams of finding the large western stonefly hatches under ideal conditions. The most experienced fishermen in the world can't tell you what day, or where, or anything else precise, about the salmonfly hatch. The salmonfly is one of the hardest hatches to plan a trip around.

The salmonfly is one of the real bruisers of the insect world. You would think that if any fly could hatch regardless of environmental conditions it would surely be the one. But it doesn't work that way. Salmonflies are as sensitive to changing conditions as any other flies. If there is a sudden spring rain or snow, or if there are high winds or some other change in conditions, the hatches in a stretch of river can be scrambled instantly and never make sense again that year. If there is a sudden air temperature change while the adults are exposed, they may die (like flies!). An abrupt change in water temperature just when the nymphs are about to emerge may also kill a lot of them.

From my observations it appears to me that the big stonefly nymphs begin to show pre-emergence activity as much as several weeks before they actually leave the water. In that period they begin crawling toward shore. After a while so many of them are moving that there is a general migration toward shore. It goes on for weeks, and offers a real service to guides, who can more or less track

Fishing grassy edges with the "big guys" can be extremely productive.



PAUL SCHULLERY