

Sold but not published

800 words,
plus sidebar

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LOOKING FOR ELSEWHERE

(Alternative title: The Greatest Hatch on Earth)

Following the salmonfly hatch
in Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming

The salmonfly hatch is a major production. Sixteen-foot drift-boats look like toys bobbing on the Yellowstone River. The water is high, fed by melting snow that you can see, unless you get dizzy when you look up at the mountains. Your fly is tied on a size 2 hook. The trout grab it in greedy whirlpools or reject it with a splash, and if either of these things happen while you are drinking a can of pop, you make spasmodic glottal sounds till another fish scares the hiccups out of you. All this is serious fishing, sort of, but you have to cultivate the right attitude. Consider yourself part of a traveling circus.

The insect responsible for the show does not reach the size of a salmon, quite, but we call it a salmonfly because that is easier to pronounce than its official name, which is Pteronarcys californica. It is a kind of stonefly: a large, stupid kind. I have fished here and there around the world without seeing another hatch of insects that are equally big, abundant, and accessible to trout. In that sense, I am prepared to argue that this is not only the biggest spectacle in the west but the greatest show on earth. Furthermore, it occurs in rivers containing big fish. These rivers attract the occasional fisherman -- or several fishermen -- well, quite a few fishermen. No other insect has done so much for the economy of the Rocky Mountain states.

Despite this attention, the best trout often survive until somebody catches them on sucker meat. Salmonfly fishing is unpredictable. Trout have a way of fasting where you are fishing and gorging on the big insects elsewhere. Fishing the hatch turns out, some days, to be a search for elsewhere.

The first salmon-fly nymphs crawl out of the Thompson River during the third week in May. (My source for that is John Adza; I've never fished the Thompson.) The hatch then moves up through colder streams -- sometimes in an orderly progression, but more often with puzzling delays and sudden advances. Very broadly, the hatch begins in the Henry's Fork and Clark Fork a little later in

May; Rock Creek in early June; the Bitterroot in mid-June; lower Madison and Big Hole in mid- to late June; upper Madison in late June or early July; and, finally, in the Gallatin and Yellowstone in early or mid-July. These are Montana streams except for the Henry's Fork in Idaho and the upper reaches of the Yellowstone in the Wyoming part of Yellowstone Park.

The Park does not permit boats on its rivers, which makes it a good choice in late July for anglers with wiry legs (and billfolds to match.) Hiking into the canyons is easy. It's the hiking back out that made me permanently skinny, but there are a lot of trout down there.

For a chance at the biggest fish, however, try the rivers at lower altitude. Use a boat on them if you can. In some, the water is so high during the salmonfly season that wading is difficult. A boat will also let you reach trout that cannot be caught in any other way. Then, if you hit intense activity, you can get out and fish more thoroughly on foot.

Last year I fished the hatch several days with an outfitter named Dennis Kavanagh. I reckoned that we would concentrate on the lower Madison: it is close to our Bozeman homes and has a very high population of trout. Besides, Dennis is the man that even Montanans telephone when they want to talk to the best authority on this water. We fished there for two days. Then other anglers moved in and we moved on, looking for elsewhere. By the

time that news of good fishing gets around, the best of it is over. "If you've heard about it," says Dennis, "you're too late."

Nobody can hit the best of it all the time. Anglers still pursue the mythic "head of the hatch," where the salmonflies are just emerging; but today's fishing pressure can make the trout wary in the early stages of the hatch. The best rise now, Dennis believes, is triggered by an abundance of insects in the air. Salmon flies do not spend much time on the water but they bumble around above it, fluttering conspicuously. Trout watch them, waiting for one to make a belly-whopper. It is hard to believe. Everything about this hatch is hard to believe. Don't laugh till you've tried it. You can watch for flying insects like a trout -- or you can watch for concentrations of birds (often seagulls and robins) along the stream. Like the trout, they know where the food is. That's where you fish today.

Then you tell everybody about it and sneak off tomorrow, elsewhere.

Looking for Elsewhere

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(Sidebar)

If you want more information or a guide, call:

Dennis Kavanagh
Montana Flycast Guide Service
Box 5031, Bozeman, MT 59717
(406) 587-5923

John Adza
Catch Montana
Box 428, Hamilton, MT 59840
(800) 882-7844

Paul Updike
Box 36, Townsend, MT 59644
(406) 266-3123

Or call these fly-shops:

The River's Edge
2012 N. 7th Ave., Bozeman, MT 59715
(406) 586-5373

Montana Troutfitters Orvis Shop
1716 W. Main, Bozeman, MT, 59715
(406) 587-4707

Blue Ribbon Flies
309 Canyon St., West Yellowstone, MT 59758
(406) 646-7642

Jacklin's Fly Shop
105 Yellowstone Ave., West Yellowstone, MT 59758
(406) 646-7336

Parks' Fly Shop
Box 196, Gardiner, MT 59030
(406) 848-7314

Dan Bailey's Fly Shop
209 W. Park, Livingston, MT 59047
(406) 222-1673

Anderson's Yellowstone Angler
US Highway 89, Livingston, MT 59047
(406) 222-7130

Looking for Elsewhere

Proper

September 26, 1989

Mr. Duncan Barnes, Editor
Field & Stream
2 Park Avenue
New York, NY 10016

Dear Duncan:

Here's the salmon-fly piece you requested. I pruned it to 800 words.

You also said that you were considering a section somewhere in the magazine with further information. I don't know your exact format but have enclosed some numbers of guides and fly-shops that may be helpful. Anglers usually do best getting to know individual guides, but the volume of business is such that shops will have to act as a clearing house for most readers. (Maybe some of the shops would be willing to advertise?)

Wish I could have sent you some pictures but did not have any good enough. You know the problem: it takes two boats. Could work that out but would have to entice another couple of guides, starting in May.

I did not try to get into fishing techniques. Most folks are not used to this kind of fishing at all, and getting them retooled would take space. Maybe drift-boating for big trout is worth another story some day.

Yours,

Enclosed: "Looking for Elsewhere"

(The same fly hatches as far south as Colorado* and as far west as the Pacific coast.)

The Mattress Hatch

In YP, fishing on foot, I used conventional, medium-sized dry flies (usually a Royal or Trude * Coachman).

When I was growing up there, and caught lots of trout. Some of them were pretty heavy when I figured out how to jiggle my spring-scale just right.

The guide coaches you in a fishing method that nobody used till a few years ago.

Drift-boats move down the stream so fast that you have only one chance at each trout. This means that you must cast quickly and accurately, using a fly that gives the trout a large stimulus. Usually nymphs work best, so you fish two of them, each tied on hooks an inch and one-half long (size 2 or 4, * depending on the shank length). When the trout want dry flies, fish a bushy one and a low-profile design on the same leader. Try giving them a twitch. Their behavior matters more than their pattern. Dennis Kavanagh tells a story: an angler who did not understand the method got so desperate that he grabbed the shoulder of a successful fishermen, demanding to know the secret fly. Reply: "you could float a mattress down this stream with a hook in it

and catch a fish."

Get a guide too, if you can. He will have the boat -- and knowledge. Use both. Don't insist that he take you to some famous stream that you have read about. Maybe he has a better idea.