About ???? words

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Doesn't work as one article... needs to be integrated somehow. Perhaps a very brief point by point discussion of Hewitt's philosophies contained with more recent findings & updated techniques. I'm not sure F+S readers are all that interested about Hewitt's nymph fishing methods. They just want to know how to catch fish. (For March issue)

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, NYMPH

Also: a lot of this last is unnecessary, but I'm assuming this isn't your final draft. The information is interesting, but shares too much of it for a mag. like F+S.

Once upon a time Americans read a fishing story and believed every bit of it. Mind you, the author was Edward R. Hewitt -- the heroic trout-fisherman of his time, a man of wealth and talent who had made angling his life's work. Hewitt's article was published exactly fifty-seven years ago, in the Field & Stream of March, 1933. It told us what we wanted to know about fishing nymphs.

The timing was perfect. By 1933, American anglers in significant numbers had figured out what to do with the dry fly and the brown trout, both of which had been imported from England late in the nineteenth century. They had caused a revolution in American fly fishing (and fishing revolutions do not happen very often). Then, beginning in about 1910, our grandfathers had read

about the scandalous success in England of another new kind of fly. It was a wet fly, this time -- a new way of imitating the mayfly nymph. A gentleman by the name of G.E.M. Skues had developed it. Naturally Americans wanted to get in on the fun. Some went to England, fished with Skues, and came back to teach us. Of those making the pilgrimage, Hewitt was the one with influence.

Mr. Hewitt may not have been quite ready to write about nymphs, however. His 1933 article started out to be on a different kind of fly: midges. He had useful things to say about those little two-winged insects. (When trout hit your leader knots, he advised, they are looking for midges.) Then he got around to nymphs, and on this second topic, his facts were shaky. There is some evidence that he did not understand what a nymph is. More on that later.

Ready or not, Hewitt quickly learned what his readers wanted. In the June Field & Stream, just three months later, he did a follow-up story -- entirely about nymphs. He explained that he had "received several hundred letters" asking for more information. Even today, with far more fly fishermen in America, it is difficult to imagine hundreds of letters in response to one how-to-do-it article. (A reader wrote to me once. He wanted clear directions to my favorite brook-trout stream.)

The demand must have continued, because Hewitt turned the

two Field & Stream articles into a booklet in 1934, and then into at least one book, in 1950. I bought the book a few years later, became one of Hewitt's admirers, and remain one today. He built a fly-fishing myth more successfully than anyone will ever do it again. Nothing else as important as the nymph is out there waiting to be discovered.

(Illustration idea: is there a file-photo of Hewitt?)

Most Americans still believe in Hewitt. Since 1933 we have been getting his ideas either first- or second-hand, from other writers and anglers dazzled by his mixture of novelty, fact, and fantasy. I will wager that, unless you are very new to fly fishing, you have been exposed to these notions:

A. A stream survey found that "Over 80% of the trout food consisted of nymphs."

B. It follows that nymph imitations are "far more ~~more~~ effective than any dry fly most of the time ...." A nymph expert "could actually catch most of the trout out of a stream in going over it a few times."

C. But nymph-fishing is "vastly more skilful [sic] ... than any dry-fly fishing."

Pronouncements B and C are excesses of enthusiasm, but a man who gets excited about his fishing is easy to like. Besides, nymph-fishing must indeed have seemed difficult in the years

before Americans learned how to do it -- and wildly effective for trout that were seing a nymph for the first time.

The first statement (about trout eating 80% nymphs) is a major blunder. It appeared only in the 1934 booklet and the subsequent book. The original Field & Stream article had a different version: "over 80% of the trout's diet consists of underwater forms." This is reasonable, assuming that the the diet is measured over the entire year, including the cold months (when only the immature stages of most insects are available). But there is a big difference between 80% "underwater forms" and 80% "nymphs." A nymph is the immature form of specific insects, only two orders of which are important for stream-fishermen: mayflies and stoneflies. Add one more order -- dragonflies and damselflies -- for still waters. Other "underwater forms" are not nymphs. Caddisflies do not go through a nymphal stage. Neither do midges, other two-winged flies, beetles, alder flies, crayfish, scuds, cress bugs, true bugs, worms, snails, and salamanders.

I have tried to understand how Hewitt took a plausible statement from the magazine article (80% underwater forms) and converted it to a whopper (80% nymphs). He mentioned a source: research done at Cornell University. I went through a book by Cornell's Paul R. Needham and found nothing resembling Hewitt's statement.

Perhaps Hewitt found that his readers salivated every time

he said "nymph," so he gave them what they wanted. I doubt it. He was not the kind of man who invents tales to make himself look important. He knew that he was important. But he was not a student of insects, and he was not always careful with facts. He may just not have known -- or cared -- that there are a lot of insects under the surface of the water.

Regardless of facts, the error caught on with the fishing public. Today, if you want an imitation of any underwater life except a fish, you will probably find it sold as a nymph. Mr. Hewitt started more than he knew. Before him, artificial nymphs were considered wet flies. A few decades later, the few traditional wet flies that are still sold are likely to be on the page of the catalog labeled "nymphs."

Since 1933, each of Hewitt's nymphal fantasies has been repeated endlessly (though usually without attribution). The "80%" error, being precise, is the one that led me to Hewitt as the creator of our myth. When an accurate observation is repeated, you might guess that different people have discovered the same truths. When you read, year after year, that 80% of the trout's food is nymphs, you have to suspect a single convincing mistake.

Why bother with the history? Well, nymphs do have a people-problem. Fly shops still sell far fewer of them than of dry flies. If there is such a thing as a typical fly-fishing

beginner, he -- or frequently she -- loves to fish with a dry fly but is not sure about the nymph. The problem could be its overheated sales job. Anglers do not know just what a nymph is or what it is supposed to do. At the same time, it is said to be incredibly effective for experts. "Incredibly" is, I guess, an accurate adverb.

Several hundred readers will either refrain from sending letters or tell me that I have spoiled a good party. In desperation, therefore, I will leave you with three methods that show where nymph-fishing is in 1990. These may or may not be nymph-fishing in any sense that Hewitt (let alone Skues) would want to recognize. At least they are underwater methods. They use fly rods, lines, and leaders. The first of the three methods ought to catch the first trout of the year if any artificial fly will do it. The third of the methods might catch the toughest trout of summer. And the middle method might catch a few in between. Article #1

Article #2 * * * * *

Since Hewitt's time, changes in tackle have made nymph-fishing (whatever it is) easier. Long, light graphite rods help you to hold much of your line off the water, giving the nymph a more natural drift. High-floating lines are easier to control. Strong leader materials let you use a light tippet without breaking off fish on the strike. None of this improved tackle,

however, solves the biggest problem in nymphing: knowing when a fish has taken your fly.

When a small fly drifts naturally in the current, trout usually take it quietly. You may have heard that you need a "sixth sense" to time your strike. Unfortunately, anglers have not improved as fast as their tackle, and none of us come equipped with a sixth sense. The news is that any fly shop today carries visual aids. We call them "strike indicators." You fasten one of them to your leader and watch till some slight movement of the indicator suggests that a fish has taken the fly. Then you strike -- very quickly but very gently. This ~~is~~, I think, is the biggest change in nymph-fishing since Hewitt's time.

You would not know it from the labels, but indicators come in two radically different types: floating and non-floating. The non-floating type is, typically, just red synthetic yarn. You cut off a short piece of it and knot it around your leader two or three feet above the fly. It remains fairly visible even when it has been pulled a few inches under the surface of the water.

(Illustration: floating and non-floating indicators, with the effect they have on leaders.)

As to the other type -- well, only a fly fisherman could reinvent the float and give it a five-syllable name like "strike indicator." I suppose we dreamed this up to avoid being confused

with the other anthropoids. Mainly we confuse ourselves. Float-fishing has little in common with traditional fly-fishing. If we are going to break from tradition, we might as well understand the possibilities.

When you fish with a float, the tip of your line and the butt of your leader lie flat on the surface of the water. Below the float, the leader angles down sharply. If the fly is weighted, the tippet may hang almost vertically, at an angle of 90 degrees from the butt of the leader. In streams of normal depth and speed, this is the most effective arrangement I know for bouncing a fly along the rocks on the bottom. Only the fine tippet is exposed to the full drag of the current, allowing the fly to drift more naturally than one attached to a sinking line. Then, when a trout takes the fly, the float signals you to strike.

How come?

The first of the nymph-fishing methods described below uses a float; the next uses a non-floating strike-indicator; the last uses no visual aids at all.

1. Float & Sinker

Mr. Hewitt would probably have disliked this method if he had known about it. He did not. "I have found no advantage in fishing the nymph deep," he wrote, "as the trout will come to the surface for them if they will come at all."

He was wrong on that. Trout sometimes feed deep at all

seasons of the year. In the colder months, trout may take almost 100% of their food near the bottom, and when they do, they typically refuse to rise. Midge larvae are the most common cold-weather food in the streams I fish, followed by immature mayfly nymphs and caddisfly larvae. Usually the different insects are all mixed up in the trout's stomach, which suggests that there is little selectivity. And this fishing method is generic. It works for most deep-lying "underwater forms" -- nymphs, pupae, or scuds.

Start with a fly of modest dimensions (say size 12 through 16). Use a standard-wire hook, not a lightweight, and keep the point sharp. It should have a little lead wire under the body, but you cannot get much weight on a fly of this size without spoiling its action. This means that you should avoid designs with stiff legs, hackles, tails, or wings -- all of which slow the rate of sinking. On the other hand, you will not be imparting any motion to the fly, so it needs some built-in feature to make it seem alive. My preference is conventional: a body of real hare's ear, if you can find it. It has short, stiff fibers that stick out and work in the current. Herl is good too: pheasant-tail in the smallest flies and peacock in those a little bigger.

Paradoxically, the float provides the most efficient way to fish a small fly deep (in streams of average depth and speed). Furthermore, the method is easy because the float does so much of

the work. I do not spend much time float-fishing for trout in warm weather -- although the method still works. In the winter, an easy method is necessary. Cold fingers make it difficult to change flies and do fancy casts.

You can buy fly-rod floats that look just like little sunfish bobbers. They have the advantage of being easy to move up and down the leader when the stream changes depth. I usually prefer stick-on plastic floats in a shockingly visible orange-red. If necesary, I use two of them, learning something about the fly's behavior by watching their relative positions.

In most streams, the leader needs added weight. The oldest idea is the best: split shot -- pure lead in a pure sphere, the heaviest and most compact package available. Look for it in a container that dispenses three or four sizes. Avoid lead strips, lead wire, or shot with little ears -- all of which slow the rate of sinking and increase the frequency of snagging on the bottom. Squeeze a shot or two on your leader at least eight inches up from your fly. That leaves it enough slack to behave naturally.

The leader should have a short butt. The tippet, however, should be long and fine -- between .007" (4X) * and .005" (6X) * in diameter. This lets a small fly sink quickly and bounce along the bottom with a minimum of drag.

You cannot fly-cast gracefully with a float and sinker, so for the most part you do not try. You let the current pull your

line down below you, and when it is dangling downstream, you flip it up. [Ref any other article?] * The first cast goes almost directly upstream from you. The next goes a little farther out, and so on till you have covered all the good water you can reach. Then you wade upstream a few feet and start again. You try to get thorough coverage, because this is a method for inactive fish, and you will seldom be able to see where they are.

(Illustration of the casting pattern)

2. Strike Indicator

Unlike the float, the non-floating indicator can be small enough to fly-cast easily. You might want to switch to such an indicator when trout become active in mid-water. Under these conditions, experienced anglers may get away with no more than brightly-colored leader butts. They are one kind of indicator, but they are not easily adjustable. With yarn, you can tie an indicator a couple of feet up from the fly and move it as needed.

Because the indicator does not put an angle in your leader, it is less efficient than the float for fishing on the bottom -- but better for fishing delicately in mid-water. I like the indicator for searching good water upstream, as if I were fishing "blind" (without seeing a rise) using a dry fly. But maybe I should say the obvious: there are a great many nymph-fishing methods -- especially if you think of a nymph as any fly fished

underwater. Unlike the float, the indicator can be used with several methods.

(Illustration idea: Schaldach's 1933 mid-water picture)

There is one major exception. The indicator gets in the way if you plan to give your fly motion, either on purpose or by letting the current swing it around downstream on a tight line (the old wet-fly method).

3. No Indicator

Trout behavior is much less predictable in warm weather than cold. In one Pennsylvania spring creek, trout stomachs contain nearly 100% floating flies from July through September. Under these circumstances, dry flies are far more effective (and fun) than anything else. But then there is Humility Creek -- a spring-fed stream near my house in Montana. Its trout may take dry flies very well. Then again, the fish may feed all day on insects that are swimming up to the surface in order to hatch. These, now, are immature mayflies, real nymphs. The fishing method is not generic. I won't try to tell you that it is easy, either.

In Humility's shallow waters, indicators frighten the trout. They also distract the angler. The indicator is, after all, a kind of crutch, a device that keeps you from focusing on the what the trout are doing under the surface. You have to watch the

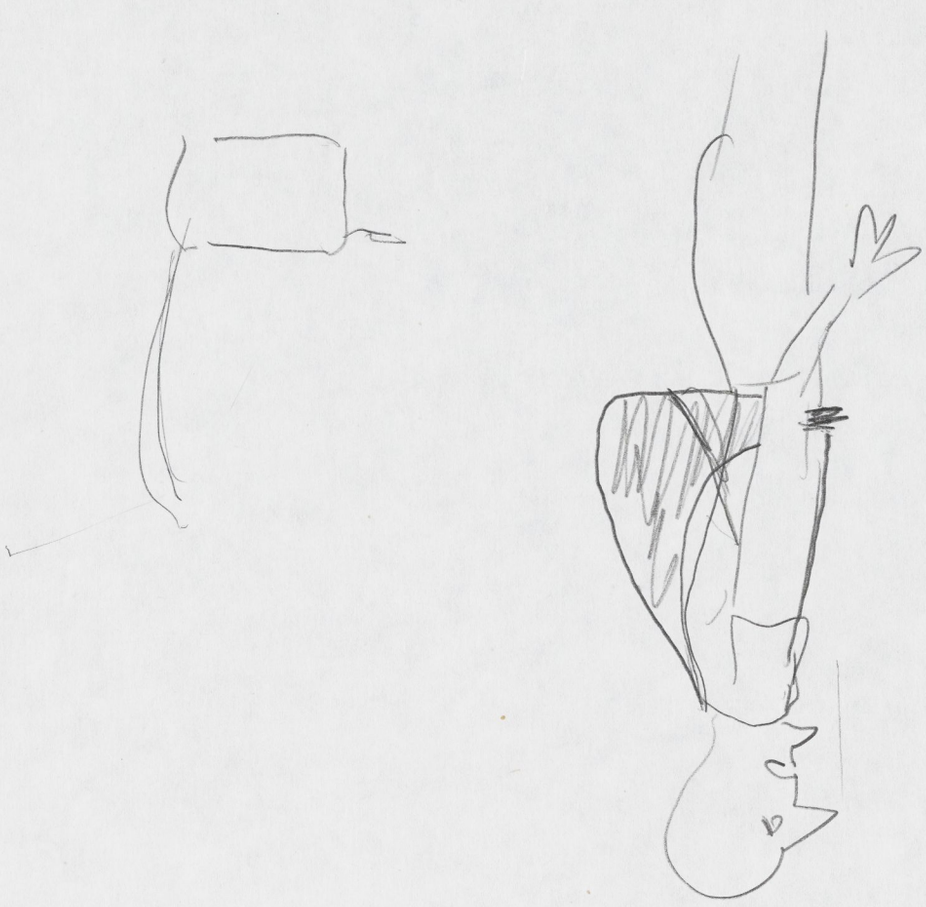
fish when their take is very subtle. Humility Creek's trout can sip a nymph and spit it back out without twitching even the point of the tippet -- let alone an indicator two feet further up the leader.

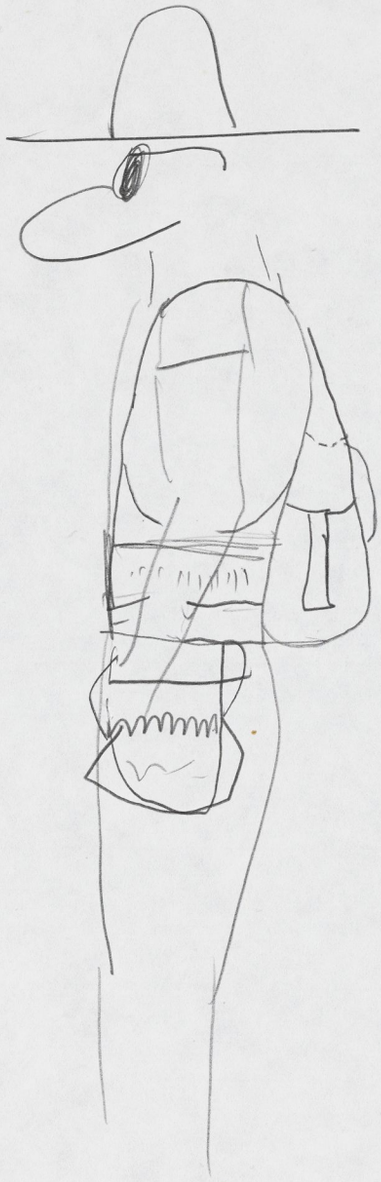
The artificial nymph needs to look and behave about like the natural insects the fish are taking. The leader is a long dry-fly taper, greased with flotant except for the last few inches near the fly. The aim is to have the nymph come drifting down barely under the surface, so that when it is taken, the trout's movement will be visible.

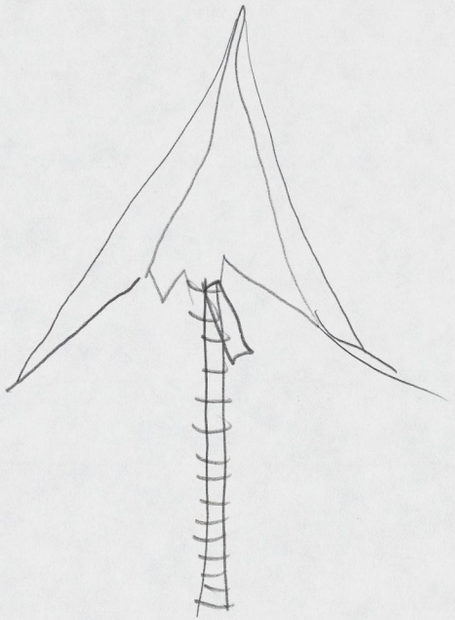
A nymph for this kind of fishing needs a different design. In summer, it will usually be small -- say sizes 16 through 20. Like Mr. Skues, whose method this is, I favor a twist or two of very small hackle on such nymphs. It adds "life," but more important, it keeps the fly from sinking fast.

This old Skues method still comes closer than any other to my nymphal fantasies. It is fun visually, because there are trout to watch. It is fun manually, because the tackle is light and the casting graceful. The sun is warm, the wild irises are jiggling in a June breeze, and the snipe are practicing little drum-rolls on fluffy clouds. Furthermore, the trout also get a Humility lesson now and then. They are about the biggest of the year, on average: as big as the ones I try to catch on gigantic stoneflies, but don't.

Fish grow fast in the fertile creeks, and you still do not meet many anglers who know what the trout want. I guess they think that nymph-fishing is something else.







About 735 words

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Smell

HOW I TRAINED PATCH

-- and vice versa

Unlike some parents, I will lose no sleep when my teenager goes on his first date. Why get excited? He probably won't take me along anyhow.

It was a thrill, however, when my budding bird dog got a hunting invitation and I was allowed to play chaperon. I had to be included because Patchwork obeys me, sometimes -- and no one else at any time. Modesty aside, I have discovered the secret of successful dog-handling. You wait till your dog hits scent, then say "hunt 'em up!" This is like ordering a human adolescent to take an interest in the opposite sex.