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### INSIDE THE HIDDEN HATCH

Tricos provide the most abundant,  
widespread, and dependable hatch we have.

July 4, ~~1989~~, is the anniversary of two events: one celebrated by fireworks in the evening and the other by headlights before dawn. The Trico hatch is beginning. It has done so at this season for millennia, presumably, but few of us knew of it till Vince Marinaro described "The Hidden Hatch" just twenty years ago, in time to give purpose to the summer of '69. The little mayflies seemed hard to fish, at first: too small, too short-lived, too localized, and much too early-rising. None of that mattered. Now there was real trout fishing from Independence Day till mid-October.

Later, Montana dispelled my notion that the Tricorythodes fishing was for easterners. The tricos in Montana are too much of a good thing: you hope for a light hatch so that the trout might notice your imitation among a few naturals. What you get, usually,



is a day when your wife goes down to the stream for watercress and catches a hundred tiny spinners in her hair.

This is the most abundant, prolonged, and dependable mayfly hatch in North America. We've learned much of what we need to know to make the fishing easier. We are, however, still discovering the trico, and sometimes we sound like the blind men groping an elephant: the one who found the trunk described a different beast from the fellow at the tail. Each was right and probably all of us anglers are too, under different conditions that we don't understand yet.

Confusion begins with the source books, which list about ten species of tricos in the United States. The entomologists cite different sizes, colors, and regions -- but different sizes turn up in the same hatch; color variations are minor; and this is the only mayfly that seems the same (to me) coast to coast. Over to you, Messrs. Lumpers and Splitters. We anglers could use help.

Tricos turn up in many streams but, in my limited experience, have been abundant only in sunny, weedy waters of high fertility (and not in all of those). The best have had some silt in the streambed. The flies have been much more abundant in some reaches -- often the lower ones -- than in others. In most of the trout zone, fortunately, you can drive to the right places instead of taking an airplane; but if the hatch is heavy, roll out of bed in time for the emerging duns. Most anglers arrive too



late for anything but the the spinner fall.

It does not make sense, but the nymphs seem to know about air temperatures. They change into duns before dawn on extra-muggy Pennsylvania nights but not till the middle of cool mornings. How could that information get to insects three feet down in a spring creek with slow-changing temperatures? The spinners are easier to understand. Leigh Perkins reports that they start to fall at an air temperature of 68 degrees. (I have known them to settle for lower temperatures, but they like heat when they can get it.)

The mechanics of the hatch are puzzling too. Some duns emerge while floating down the stream -- you can watch them -- but there are never enough on the water to account for the hordes in the air an hour or so later. Perhaps most nymphs change underwater, sneaking out ready-to-fly. In any case, the scarcity of duns provides a way to beat the odds. Trout sipping a few emerging flies as hors d'oeuvres will often take an imitation on the first good cast. It helps to have the right fly, though. You won't find extensive guidance in print because other anglers don't like to get up early any more than I do.

The Barb-Wing Dun comes closer to being a secret weapon than any other trico in my fly box. Trout may like the design because the pheasant-tail body looks like an emerging fly stuck in the surface film. I like the wing because I can see it. It is made of



barbs (fibers) from a white hackle that is wound and then pulled above the hook shank, fanning out into a broad V. The Barb-Wing is close in structure to both the no-hackle duns and Comparaduns. The hackle is easy to tie in small sizes, more durable than quill wings, and softer in the trout's mouth than deer hair. In Pennsylvania, the Barb-Wing has been catching between three and six fish daily before the spinner fall. The Montana fish are tougher but, relatively, the dun is even more important on cool western mornings.

The Barb-Wing makes the point that the best small designs are not just shrunken versions of big ones. In the 'sixties, I knew that trout taking medium-sized sulphur duns wanted size 18 imitations on 5X tippets. It seemed logical that fish rising for tricos should want size 24 flies of the same design on 8X monofilament. For a time my tippets tested one-half pound, which was ridiculous.

Good trico imitations need not, in fact, be difficult to tie or fish, but the spinners will make more sense after a review of some design problems.

### Sizes

The biggest trico nymphs I have found in both Pennsylvania and Montana measure 7 millimeters, not counting the tails, and some duns are nearly as big. My imitations of all stages



(including the spinners) are tied on hooks measuring 7 or 8 mm overall, including the eye. It's a compromise. The fish may refuse bigger flies and anything under 7 mm hooks poorly.

The Mustad company uses at least three different scales for our trout hooks, and the confusion has increased with the availability of British, Japanese, and French hooks. A size 20 Mustad 94840 hook has about the same length as a size 16 Mustad 3906 (which is a better model for Tricos). The equivalent in Partridge Code A hooks is size 17. The unromantic ruler just keeps on reading 7 mm. Recommendation: buy a ruler and forget what you read on boxes.

Whether we photograph mayflies or bathing suits, we prefer models with perfect bodies; but when trico female spinners have laid their eggs and fallen spent in the stream, there is not much body left. I used too much film trying to photograph mayflies without make-up as they floated naturally down the stream, and they were nothing that would sell calendars. Trico wings, on the other hand, hold their shape and become the most visible feature of the spent flies. It seems wise to think of spinner imitations as wing flies, not body flies.

Tippet materials have become vastly stronger, but off-sizes still sneak through if you don't use a micrometer. In the strongest brands, .005" is now reliable and .004" has become practical in Pennsylvania, or even in Montana before the weeds



grow.

Measuring things is not as romantic as fishing a size 24 fly on a 7X leader. That's a pity, because you and I are the last of the romantics. We love X-rated tippets and Zinfandel and bamboo rods and ladies who patch our fishing pants with blue-denim hearts. Too bad the stupid fish don't appreciate us.

### The Weakest Link

With modern leaders, hooks are often the weakest links in our tackle. Mustad 948-series hooks are springy and have poor hooking geometry in the small sizes. In size 20, the 94840 will open far enough to lose a trout with a pull of about one and a half pounds. This assumes that the hook is caught in the trout's mouth by the point only. A hook that has fully penetrated will take a stronger pull.

The Japanese hooks (available in a confusing variety of brands) often have shapes that hook better in small sizes. Those I have tested, however, are not much stronger than Mustad models. For heavy trout on small flies, the best remedy I have found is the Partridge Code A. Romantics will be encouraged to find that it is an old design, apparently identical to the Hardy hook that Americans used in prewar days. (Check Preston Jennings' book.) By comparison with the size 20 Mustad, the Size 17 Partridge has the same length and is almost twice as strong, testing at 2 3/4



pounds. It also has 40% more gape, which helps to get the fly stuck in the trout in the first place. For best hooking geometry, it is important to get the down-eyed version.

This hook seems heavy to most anglers today. You may be surprised, however, to find that weight is not much of a problem in small flies. Try this experiment: place a small, bare hook on your fingertip and immerse your finger in a pan of water. The hook will float readily in the surface tension. A medium size will also float, but with more difficulty. A big streamer hook will not float at all.

The smaller the fly, then, the easier it is to get away with a relatively stout hook. It's counterintuitive but it works. The small, stout, wide-gape hooks have another advantage: they seem to "anchor" the fly in the surface film, resisting drag. That lets you get away with a thicker tippet when fishing for strong trout in the weeds.

### The Spinner Glut

During a good spinner fall, the trout eats till his stomach is stuffed like a black sausage. Then he eats till the flies he started with an hour earlier are forced out his vent. This translates into hundreds of rises, during any one of which he might take ~~an~~ an artificial fly -- but probably won't. The odds are against us fisherman. We get frantic too, given so many missed opportunities. For a couple of seasons I tried making my



spinners more and more realistic, with black thoraxes, green-tinged white abdomens, and palest dun wings. We humans like to define realism in terms of color. The trout, on the other hand, seem more interested in correct behavior and size. The right behavior is drag-free and floating, but low -- right in the surface film.

But that's only the fish's point of view. You, the angler, need three other things:

- \* Good flotation. You must make a great many accurate casts (short ones if possible) over gobbling fish, without wasting time false-casting or greasing your fly.
- \* Durability. The fly should stay in shape for the whole orgy, so that you don't waste time preening and changing it.
- \* Visibility. You need to know when the trout takes your fly as opposed to one of the gross of naturals floating nearby.

No fly is pretty enough to break the trout's feeding pattern. Absolutely none. He is no longer very selective during the spinner glut; he hasn't time to be. He is not impressed by the the most realistic fly you can tie but will accept any reasonable imitation that is in exactly the right place at the right time. (You should know, however, that this is another matter on which writers differ markedly, perhaps because some streams do not have such heavy spinner falls.)

Let's start by rejecting all flies that are difficult to see



on the water. Out goes any design that looks like a proper spent spinner to humans -- including all those pretty ones with horizontal wings of hackle fibers, polypropylene, or feathers. Ant imitations are equally hard to see and even worse for flotation. Parachute flies are good because their horizontal wing is usually wrapped around a vertical post, which provides visibility. Brilliant synthetic-fiber posts are very visible indeed. The trout have no objections to them, but I do. They're ugly. I thought I should confess my bias.

Perhaps we can improve a little on the flotation and durability of parachute flies without losing visibility. A white, shiny hackle is easy to see, so let's start with that. Let's wind it over the front two-thirds of the hook, for a broad wing silhouette, adding a widespread V-tail for additional flotation. Let's put a wisp of dubbing on the thread and wind the body forward over the hackle, to secure it. Let's clip the hackle flat on the bottom for low flotation. Finally, let's seal head, tail, and hackle with tiny drops of penetrating rod varnish, not cement. Bet you this fly won't get out of shape in a hurry. Mind you, I'm not saying that the trout like it better than any other -- just that they like it as well, and I can fish it better. It helps in playing the odds.

Schwiebert and Caucci and Nastasi describe trico nymphs as important but I find few in trout stomachs. (Another difference



in streams, perhaps.) Artificial nymphs don't catch much for me at the beginning of the hatch but do pick up the occasional fish looking for stragglers at the end. A plain pheasant tail works in Pennsylvania but is not as good in Montana, where the trout are bigger and more wary. If the fly drifts deep they may take it, then get rid of it before the leader twitches. The Invisible-Hackle Nymph has some helpful behavior designed in: a couple of turns of stiff, translucent hackle help the fly land gently and sink slowly. You strike when you see the trout move for the fly.

The other day a Montana trout gobbling trico spinners turned out to be a nose over twenty inches long. I'd have changed the tippet if I'd known, but the new .004" stuff held. A fly the size of a mosquito looked ridiculous in the jaws of a fish that should have been feeding on the muskrat hatch. Marinaro would have liked that brown. He wrote that the biggest wild fish he'd landed on a trico was eighteen inches long. Vince wanted to come to Montana when we talked about fish like this feeding on tricos, but he wouldn't get in an airplane and the passenger trains had been discontinued.

He didn't miss much, really: The hidden hatch is not for big fish, even if a big one forgets himself on occasion. Tricos are small flies, big hatches, and serious fishing. You appreciate all of those things most near home, in the months when you thought the fun was over.



SIDEBAR

DRESSINGS FOR TRICO DUN, SPINNER, AND NYMPH IMITATIONS

Hook: Partridge Code A, 7 or 8 mm overall length (size 17 or 16), 2X-Fine. Substitute Partridge "Captain Hamilton" or (if the fish are small) a lighter-wire Japanese hook.

Cement: Penetrating rod varnish instead of regular cement. Allow to dry overnight.

**BARB-WING DUN**

Thread: Pale green or yellow.

Tail: Pale hackle barbs (fibers), about 7 mm long, in broad V.

Wing: White hackle, about 9 mm in length of barb. Wind in normal fashion, then pull into an upright V-shaped wing fanning out over about 120 degrees. Secure with figure-8 wraps of tying silk under shank of hook. Tie wing before body.

Body: Two pheasant-tail herls spun around waxed tying thread, then wound sparsely. Take a figure-8 wrap under the wings to form broad thorax.



### WING-FLY SPINNER

Thread: Black.

Tails: Dun hackle barbs, about 10 mm in length, spread into broad V.

Wing: Shiny, stiff white hackle wound over front 2/3 of hook shank. Barb length about 5 mm. Trim bottom of hackle after body is wound.

Body: Wind tying thread (lightly dubbed with black fur) through the hackle to reinforce it. The body is on top of the hackle.

### INVISIBLE-HACKLE NYMPH

Thread: Same as dun.

Body: Same materials as dun, but form a small thorax bulge behind the hackle.

Tail: Allow tips of body herls to protrude about 5 mm.

Hackle: Two wraps of watery blue dun cock's hackle, barb length about 4 mm.