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## THE MAYFLY MURDERS

A detective story for anglers

A brown trout was waylaying insects the other morning and a fisherman was trying to identify the victims. The scene was a fertile spring creek -- the kind that often has two or more hatches going on at the same time. The only clue was that my peacock-herl midge drifted over the trout repeatedly with no show of interest. Meanwhile, natural flies continued to vanish in stealthy little rise-bubbles.

Fly-fisherman have been investigating such cold-blooded violence since the 15th century, and probably longer. There are variations in the details -- as you would expect from a mystery series running 500 years -- but at core the plot changes little. There is a furtive wrinkle on the surface of the stream, or perhaps a violent slash. The angler tries to deduce the identity of the insect that just went swimming with the fishes. He then offers the trout an artificial fly that resembles the natural, but has a hook in it.



There is, of course, nothing that obliges you to delve into cases of missing insects. The plots can be complicated. The same mayfly, for example, may disappear at any stage of its life -- as an immature nymph, juvenile dun, or mature spinner. The trout may also feed on midges, caddisflies, stoneflies, ants, and various other innocents. You could do less thinking for more money elsewhere. Or you could try a good general fly. Coming up later is a design that may fool rising trout, even when you do not know which insect they are taking during a complex hatch. It just happens that -- for reasons best left to philosophers -- many of us anglers enjoy playing detective. Sometimes we even solve our mysteries and catch trout.

The sleuth in this story knelt by the stream, trying to identify the victims of foul play. Down the current came a tiny mayfly -- wings above the water, body still emerging from its nymphal shuck. It drifted into an insect net and posed under a magnifying lens. (Don't laugh at my detective kit. This is a tale in the style of Sherlock Holmes, not Mike Hammer.)

The insect was a trico, appearing before the hatch was expected. Trico is short for Tricorythodes, a genus of mayflies that reach a maximum length of about 7 millimeters. Anglers failed to notice the tiny insects -- or at least failed to mention them in any major publication -- till 1969. It was the most important oversight in the history of American angling. In some streams during the summer months, tricos are to the trout what hamburgers are to human teen-agers in the fast-food outlet



just up the road.

The obvious fly to try was one imitating a trico dun -- the teen-aged stage, old enough to leave the nymphal shuck but not ready to start a family. The trout fell for this ruse, ran out most of my line upstream, caught the hook in pondweed, and twisted free. At least the fly did not break off. Leader materials are stronger than they were a few years ago, simplifying what used to be an expert's game.

That was a sizable fish. The next one was not big, for the stream, but on its third jump it lit on the bank, a 13" rainbow fat and trembling.

It would be wrong to deduce, here, that those two trout were feeding selectively on emerging tricos. To be sure that the evidence would stand up in court, a better detective would have checked the stomach contents of the fish. They could have been eating not only trico duns but anything else that floated by, except peacock-herl midges. Trout and anglers often tell different stories about the same event.

What happened next was so unmistakable, however, that I put off taking the stomach sample. The trico duns molted in midair, turning into the adults called spinners. They then mated while flying. (No wonder they looked dizzy.) Finally, the females lit on the water to lay their eggs, and hundreds of the spinners disappeared into excited little rises. (This means that the detective was excited and the fish seemed to get carried away too.) I landed a brown and a rainbow, both small, and then cast



to another tiny bubble. The rising trout turned out not to be tiny. It tangled the leader in weeds, jumped, and broke off the fly.

By the time Sherlock got back in business, the tricos were gone and the fish were rising cautiously to a few hatching olives -- mayflies of the genus Baetis. These were small too. Fly-fishing has changed since anglers learned to identify the trout's real prey. The most important spring-creek insects bear little resemblance to our traditional, bushy, size 14 dry flies.

I went back to the same small pheasant-tail/parachute fly that had worked for the trico duns. It might have worked for the olives too, if the trout's accomplice had not put in an appearance.

Ms. Teal is an actress of modest size and major talent. First she led me to think that she was decoying me away from her brood, and I went along with the routine. Then she got carried away by her performance and forgot the ducklings entirely. When her audience -- me -- fled to a new spot, she flew along and splashed down thirty feet away. There she uttered piteous quacks and flailed her wings till the only trout in sight stopped rising. I took a hike.

Far upstream in the duck-blind pool, where I refrain from shooting Ms. Teal every October, three trout were acting out a different drama. They streaked around just beneath the surface, displacing more water than a mother duck at her most melodramatic. This was baffling behavior, for fish that are



ordinarily cautious. There are no minnows in the spring creek and the usual mayflies and midges do not require an active chase.

Mystery.

Solution: a parachute beetle. It clearly did not represent what the fish were feeding on, but a fat beetle can sometimes tempt a trout away from its regular food. After several long casts, the fly lit in front of the closest of the three streaking fish. The rise was violent and so was the fight that followed -- a series of leaps that tired the trout before it sought shelter in the weeds. The only trick was to slacken the line with every jump so that the rainbow's weight would not fall on a taut leader.

The fish was fat, shiny, and 18" long -- enough to make any angler's day. Furthermore, forensic medicine was going to provide a clue that might help me to catch the trout's cronies.

The obvious way to take a stomach sample is to kill the fish, but then I would have been obliged to eat it, and this creek's rainbows taste as strong as they fight. Alternatively, a stomach pump could have been used, but that process makes me feel as guilty as if I had shot Ms. Teal. So I pulled a scoop from my detective kit. The instrument is slender and rounded, and it does the job gently.

The kit had another gadget that came in handy now -- a shallow, transparent plastic box. The trick was to put the top part of the stomach contents in the box, add water, and stir till the trout's prey were separated. The mystery insects turned out



to be crane-fly larvae, big and ugly.

Nothing in my fly-box looked exactly like a crane-fly larva, but an unweighted hare's-nymph came close. It was big enough to work well on a stouter tippet, too. The first few casts failed to intercept the next of the trout that cruised the pool. In time the geometry looked right. I lifted my rod tip, pulled the imitation larva past the fish, and watched it take like a tarpon. This rainbow was 19" long but the strong leader allowed me to release it while it still had some jump left.

Three big spring-creek trout do not often make fools of themselves, one after the other, but the sprinting larva was extraordinarily tempting. The third rainbow was as violent as the other two and a nose over 20" long.

You might say that the day's fishing involved a little bit of everything -- duns, spinners, hatching nymphs, even the crane-fly Olympics. In fact, however, there was a pattern. All of the trout's victims had died within the top inch of the stream.

For the last century (but not before), we humans have drawn a sharp distinction between dry and wet flies. Trout have not caught up on the literature. They feed wherever their victims are easiest to catch, which in some waters may be near the bottom. In shallow, fertile, weedy streams, however, the surface film traps a concentration of insects. Some of them are in the film and some just below, but all are vulnerable.

Because spring creeks, tailwaters, and chalkstreams are so attractive to anglers, many suitable flies are available. They



include dry flies, unweighted nymphs, and soft hackles. If you are at a loss for clues, though, consider the parachute fly. On this particular day it worked about half the time.

The advantage of the parachute design is that it transcends the surface film -- body down in the trout's world, wing up in the air where you and I can see it. Think of the fly as a nymph with built-in strike indicator, more pleasant to use than a piece of plastic stuck to your leader. And if the parachute deceives even one stupid trout for you, you can do your forensic medicine and learn how to catch its smarter relatives.

The point is not to prepare for any particular mystery. You will never have a day exactly like the one described in this tale and neither will I, ever again. Repeating it would be less exciting anyhow. A mystery solved is a mystery no more. The endless satisfaction of fly-fishing comes from a drama of suspense played out on the best of stages.



(Sidebar)

The Detective's Kit

1. Insect net: Stitch fine-meshed netting (available in sewing shops) into the throat of your landing net. An aquarium net works as well but is less handy.

2. Magnifying lens: A collapsible 10-power model is enough to identify the genus of a mayfly, and sometimes the species.

3. Magnifying box: On the stream, the most convenient magnifier is a transparent plastic box with low-power lens built in. Unfortunately, these gadgets can be hard to find.

4. Scoop: Plastic or metal models are occasionally available in fly shops, but I prefer mine, which was made from a kitchen spoon by Vincent Marinaro. With hammer, file, and vice with anvil, you could make a similar small scoop -- and it does not take a big one to do the job. A semicircular scoop with rounded edges should retrieve a few insects from a sizable fish without damage.

5. Plastic box: Pick one that is white or transparent and small enough to fit in a vest pocket. Remove the top layer of the trout's stomach contents with your scoop, place in the box, add water, and stir to separate.



(Sidebar)

The Parachute Fly

Hook: Strong wire, 7-9 mm. overall length (Sizes 16-20)

Thread: Fine yellow or olive

Wing: White calf hair or synthetic yarn

Hackle: Blue dun, wound around base of wing

Tail: Fibers of same hackle

Body: One or two herls from pheasant tail twisted around  
tying thread and then wound on hook

Change the body from thin pheasant-tail herl to hare's-ear  
dubbing or fat peacock herl, depending on whether you want to  
imitate a nymph or dun or beetle. For the wing, use whatever  
color you find most visible.