

About 1550 words,
including sidebar

Datus Proper
1085 Hamilton Road
Belgrade, MT 59714
(406) 388-3345

SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

Today's trout have seen nothing like this.

The Old-Timer

It was ~~Scotty~~ Chapman who got me started down the fly-fisher's path backwards. He was the best angler in Yellowstone Park, when I was growing up, the fisherman who could "catch trout where there weren't any trout," as one of his fellow rangers put it. ^{He} ~~Scotty~~ was also the only person I knew who fished upstream with a traditional winged wet fly. The one I saw on his leader most often was just ~~an old~~ coachman -- least-secret pattern in the whole world -- but nobody, including me, could make it perform like ~~Scotty~~. *The Old-Timer.*

In the seasons since then, I have still seen no one else using the old method. Maybe it seems outmoded to a generation that grew up with sink-tip lines, split shot, and strike indicators. ^{*The Old-Timer's*} ~~Scotty~~ Chapman's way of fishing does not even require fly-flotants and stiff rods, which came along in the next-to-last wave of technology. Our ancestors could have fished the upstream wet fly five hundred years ago and probably did, though the instructions they left behind are open to interpretation.

My personal learning disability was a notion that wet flies were for innocent trout. The usual way of fishing them was to cast toward the far bank, more or less, and let the line swing in an arc down and across the stream. The pull of the current kept the line tight, making it relatively easy to hook the fish. They might even hook themselves. It was a relaxing method and good under the right conditions, but it was not for educated trout under a bright sun.

The upstream wet-fly method is more closely related to dry-fly fishing. The best way to learn, in fact, is to start with a dry fly on fast water -- but leave the floatant off. Make short casts upstream, or up and slightly across, and strip in line as the fly sinks and drifts toward you. Keep it as free as possible of unnatural movement. Trout will, however, tolerate slightly more drag in a sunken fly than in a floater.

The hardest part is striking. Rising trout may be visible if the fly is barely under the surface, but with experience you will want to fish deeper, and then you will see no splash from the fish, no twitch of the leader. For a visual clue, try the coachman. It is a pattern with traditional values -- not the moral kind but color values in sharp contrast, dark body and white wing. With polarizing glasses, you can follow such a fly in the depths of a clear stream, especially if it is winged with real calf-tail. The hairs are slick, dense, irregular, and crinkly, which makes them hard to tie but highly reflective.

Somebody has written that trout prefer to feed either on the

bottom of the stream or at the surface. Let us give thanks for such advice, which has created a sort of private fishing preserve for mid-water flies. The calf-tail wing holds the coachman suspended in the current, hovering. Perhaps tiny air-bubbles caught in the crinkles also remind fish of emerging caddisfly pupae or other hatching insects. I don't know, but something about the fly gets trout worked up.

There are no miracle methods, mind you -- just ways that work when conditions are right. They were not quite right last year on Talking Rocks Branch, in the Virginia Appalachians. The winter had been dry and the water was already low in May, but I fished upstream with the coachman anyhow. The old wet fly just seemed to fit the season, what with leaf mold steaming on the banks and dogwoods blooming in a dark forest.

My bamboo rod was soft, by modern standards, and it presented the fly without drying the wing. I let the coachman hang in the current below me, after most drifts, and then used a single false-cast or none at all. The fly entered the water twenty feet or so upstream and the current pushed it toward me, helping to put a little slack in the tippet. A high rod kept most of the line off the surface, reducing drag.

The coachman dawdled past sunken logs and shadowy caves, facets of the wing catching stray sunbeams. My casting arm had an easy job but my brain worked as hard as it ever does, willing the fly to wink out. Sometimes, when the sun's angle was right, the whole show was visible. Native brook trout appeared from nowhere,

drawn but cautious -- instants at the incandescent core of fishing.

Three or four small fish took the fly in the first quarter-mile. They were hungry, alive, and spooky, like me. Thunder grumbled from the mountains, the faintest of upstream breezes ruffled the hair on the back of my neck, and the talking rocks sounded more and more human as I worked upstream.

The rocks must have formed a single flat boulder, once, but the stream had broken it in half and eroded the fracture to an echo-chamber, crosswise to the current. In that voice-box the waves muttered words that I was too clever to understand. Ten feet upstream from the rocks, however, where the stream divided, a rising fish sent me a clear message. Two vigorous false-casts flicked the water out of the coachman's wing. The line fell across the rocks and the fly dropped onto the vee of current, floating. A heavy brook trout sidled over and took confidently.

The calf-tail wing works both ways, as you see. If you find a fish feeding on the surface, you can convert from wet to dry without changing flies. And on that day in the Appalachians, the coachman caught bigger trout when it was floating.

By late June, I was back home in the Rockies, where summer comes late. Indian Creek was clear but high, and a fisherman hiking out said that he had done no good. My weighted nymph did no good either, so I tied on the wet coachman, fished it upstream without faith, and hooked three rainbows in the first pool. One of them was big for the stream. In the next few hundred yards,

rainbows moved to the coachman in every decent pocket and brook trout responded in the slower water under the banks.

Rainbows are the most aggressive of trouts and brook trout are almost as greedy, though not as fast. Browns are more likely to insist on a fly resembling their food of the moment -- and yet the coachman evolved as a brown-trout fly in Britain.

By August, the run-off was long past, the sun was hot, and we could almost hear the grass growing. My companion was an excellent angler who had just caught some difficult trout in a weedy spring creek, so I took him to Canyon Creek for a change of pace. There was another reason, too. My wife had ordered five brook trout, which happen to reach peak flavor in early August, at least in my part of the world.

Canyon Creek's bottom consists of one boulder after another -- each of which seems to shelter a trout -- so my friend tied on a stonefly nymph. It ^{seems} ~~sounded~~ like an obvious choice to both of us.

I hiked a mile further and fished upstream with a wet coachman, just because casting it was a pleasure. The brook trout turned out to be moody -- never a surprise. The rainbow trout, on the other hand, were determined not to let my fly hover in vain. They chewed off the hackle, then the body, and continued to take the white wing. I did not strike when I could identify a rainbow in time, but even so at least twenty had to be released from a barbless hook before enough brook trout volunteered for dinner.

My friend was honest as well as competent, and he reported

that his nymph had caught one fish only -- a rainbow. Neither of us could understand why the trout had passed up a realistic, modern fly in favor of an antique.

Maybe ^{The Old-Timer} ~~Scotty Chapman's~~ method was simply the only artifice that had never been tried on Canyon Creek's trout.

Maybe the fish saw something in that fly which was invisible to us humans.

Sometimes we
And ^ ^
Maybe anglers should accept ~~some~~ gifts without asking reasons.

(Sidebar on next page)

SIDEBAR

(Photo of fly)

The Calf-tail Coachman

- HOOK -- Size 10, sometimes 8 or 12, in stout wire. Measure to be sure. Overall length of hook should be from 12 mm to 19 mm, with 16 mm (size 10) a useful mean.
- THREAD -- Black.
- TAIL -- A few fibers from a golden pheasant tippet. The tail is optional, and trout do not seem to notice it.
- BODY -- 3 to 5 herls from a peacock's tail. Spin them around the tying thread and wind over a good bed of thread.
- WING -- Calf-tail fibers with fine crinkles but no big kinks. Pull out the longest fibers and comb out the fuzz. Wing should extend slightly beyond bend of hook.
- HACKLE -- Natural red-brown cock's hackle from an inexpensive neck. Avoid stiff saddle hackles. Wind the tying thread through the finished hackle to help it withstand abuse.
- ADHESIVE -- Spar varnish applied before winding the body, in the butts of the wing hairs, and on the head.

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11/94

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call Jean with corrections ASAP.
(800) 227-2224 X 5290

November 1994
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In season after season since then, I have yet to see anyone else use this old method. Maybe it seems outmoded to a generation that grew up with sink-tip lines, split shot, and strike indicators. The oldtimer's way of fishing does not even require fly-flotants and stiff rods, which came along in the next-to-last wave of technology. Our ancestors could have fished the upstream wet fly 500 years ago and probably did, though the instructions they left behind are open to interpretation.

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More that work

7:31

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