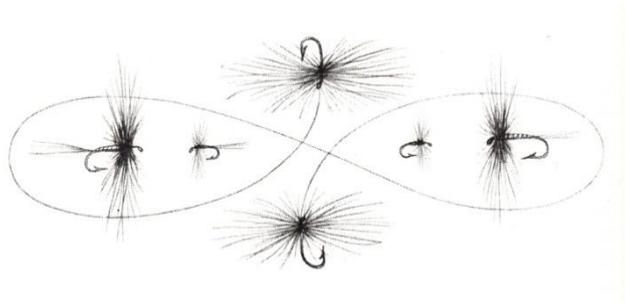


Chapter VII



Fishing with Spiders and Variants

During the season of 1946 I carried out an experiment that had been in my mind for a long time; to determine whether the dry-fly angler could limit himself to spiders and variants and still enjoy a reasonable success.

Not that eliminating the use of the old favourites appeals to me particularly - I enjoy the variety that accompanies the changing of flies to solve various fly fishing problems. But in order to determine exactly how effective the spiders and variants were, I had to use them exclusively. Except for a few changes to an imitation of the hatch for purposes of comparison, the spider and variant were the only flies used through the entire season.

The flies I used were from one to two and one half inches in diameter. They were tied on light No. r 4 or r 6 hooks, and only a few had a tail or a body. The spiders were either furnace or badger, or both mixed, and the variants a mixture of furnace and blue dun.

On a few occasions when the hatch was heavy and large fish were feeding steadily on the duns, an imitation of the natural was sometimes more successful than spiders or variants. But the largest fish I saw taken that season came to a big badger spider and the rod of Mead Schaeffer during a fine hatch. It was a lovely, bright female brown trout of about twenty inches, not weighed, as it was returned to the water.

I did not try to match the colour of insects on the water when fishing the spiders during 1946, but fished them more as a lure than as an imitation. Nearly all the large fish that rose came to a moving fly rather than one floating conventionally. The variant was successful only when it was fished in the orthodox manner with no movement imparted.

Whether the results of my experiment have any real significance I can hardly say. At least they indicate what so many have suspected, namely that the number of fish taken in a season on spiders and variants will only vary little from that which would have been taken on the usual assortment of patterns, provided that in both cases the fishing was done with equal care and confidence. Now that the experiment is off my chest, I certainly would not care to repeat it. It is more fun to carry a variety of flies and spend at least part of the time tying Turle knots than to cast continually.

However, I was thoroughly convinced of one thing - that if I had to be limited to one dry fly it would be the spider, without any doubt. It can be used in so many more ways than the conventional fly; it is effective whether the water is high or low, coloured or clear; and best of all, it brings up the large fish.

No doubt many anglers find spiders successful when cast and fished like any other dry fly. But in limiting themselves to that type of fishing they are apt to neglect the real function of this fly, that of being fished in movement.

The average trout of decent size is cautious about rising. If he can be located and cast to repeatedly without any mistake, in the manner of George La Branche, he can sometimes be risen. But one should know exactly where the trout is to use this technique successfully. This necessitates a greater than ordinary knowledge of the water.

With the spiders, if one knows approximately where a good fish may be expected, one stands a good chance of raising the fish by working the fly. This is almost like fishing all the water with a wet fly. It is one of the very best ways of locating a large trout and, once risen, the angler stands an excellent chance of hooking him.

The spider is a great boon to the mediocre caster. It is almost impossible to bring it down heavily, due to its long hackles and consequent air resistance. This is why it is such a grand fly to use under bushes, where the line must be driven with force to shoot the flat loop essential in keeping the cast close to the water. Trout, particularly brown trout, often lie very near the bank, across the current from the angler. This necessitates skilful casting with the conventional type of dry fly to avoid drag. There is nothing quite so unattractive to either the fish or the angler as a dragging fly under these conditions. And if the trout be of decent size, such drag almost always puts him down.

With the spider, however, such a situation offers one of the best opportunities, as the drag is deliberately created rather than avoided. There is a great difference between the drag of a conventional fly, usually with the body in the water causing a heavy wake, and that of a spider cocked lightly up on the tips of its long stiff hackles, with the hook not touching the water at all.

When the spider is cast, it may alight flat with the hackles forming a circle and the hook down; the leader curved in the air between the eye of the hook and the water. This is an unattractive position for the leader as well as the fly. Some anglers are content to fish their spiders in this way but I have found that it raises very few trout. But if the angler tightens slightly on the line, the fly will quickly turn up onto the tips of its hackles.

This motion is slight but deadly. To the trout it probably resembles a fly about to take off, and the rise will often come with a rush. Generally, the spider is a better lure when cast on its hackles. It is impossible to move it properly otherwise. And its greatest attraction is the lightness with which it moves.

I believe that the spider should be cast directly across stream, or down and across rather than up, or up and across. Then, when motion is given to it, it does not pull downstream in

the manner of the usual drag but across. The long stiff hackles also allow it to be fished directly down-stream, which can be very deadly.

As a matter of fact, it is surprising how really few fishermen ever fish the dry fly downstream. In salmon fishing it can be particularly deadly.

The sight of a leader at times is almost sure to frighten them and hence they will come more readily to a fly floated down to them from above. It is not at all difficult to let the fly down to the fish by casting more line than necessary, and checking the rod midway, the resulting slack on the water allowing the fly to float down naturally. By waving the rod tip, line can be fed through the guides to lengthen the float.

When the conventional type of fly has passed well below the fish, the line should be pulled gently to one side, well away from the fish, before it is retrieved. It is best never to stand directly above the fish but to one side. When using the spider downstream, however, it is not necessary to pull it away from the fish before picking up; the fly can be retrieved in short jerks upstream or diagonally across and up. It can even be "hung" over the fish like a wet fly. Some one of these different styles of presentation is very apt to raise the trout.

One of the great attractions in fishing the large spiders, or skaters, is that frequently the trout clears the water in rising, taking the fly on the way down. This somehow proves that the spider excites the fish much more than the conventional fly, as one rarely sees a similar rise to an orthodox type. This can be very disconcerting, as the angler is apt to strike too quickly on seeing a large fish in the air. But to me it is the rise of the fish that counts. It is by far the most interesting moment in the sport, and if I do not hook him, or if he breaks off, I still have experienced the supreme thrill.

Many anglers criticize the small hooks of spiders, and it is true that they make hooking more difficult, but once fastened they are not apt to pull out. I certainly had rather raise a big trout, even though I miss him, than fail to raise him at all. The spider seems to be the one fly which will bring large fish up several times if they miss at first, whereas I can remember very few brown trout of over a pound which rose more than once to the usual dry fly and the usual float.



The flies most effective on large fish are the very biggest spiders, those having a diameter of two inches or over. Unfortunately, it is difficult to obtain the hackles for them, as there are seldom more than a few on a neck which are long and stiff enough. This occasionally demands a sacrifice of colour for stiffness. I sometimes tie spiders by using one hackle of the colour I like, which may be a bit too soft, with another, stiffer one of some other colour that will not spoil the effect.

To make spiders act properly on the water, one should use gut no heavier than 3x at the point and I like a long leader of about 12 feet with about three feet of fine gut next to the fly. Size 4x is even better than 3x, as any increase of the delicacy of the action or the high-riding qualities of the fly is an advantage. In using the conventional dry flies, I believe fine gut is important because of the added flexibility which gives the fly greater freedom in the stream currents, not because it is less visible. The fly is more apt to act naturally, following the tiny changes of current as a real insect might. This is why Lee Wulff uses thread for leaders at times. He obtains a very natural float by throwing slack and allowing the currents to control the fly, the thread being so soft that it does not retard this natural movement.

It is surprising how often a rising fish which has refused the conventional fly will come to a spider. The change of type to one more like a lure than a natural fly is very apt to cause him to rise.

Variants are nearly as good a bet as spiders for general fishing when no hatch is on. Or they may be tied to resemble the colour of the insect and fished to the rise. For many hatches they seem to be more lifelike to the fish than conventional patterns, particularly when imitating insects of delicate form and coloration. Their light pattern is reasonably close to that of many naturals and is more realistic than that of the orthodox fly. This is due to the long, sparse hackle, with the small, light hook being held free of the water. The very light, airy effect of the dressing as a whole is an improvement over most conventionally dressed flies.

In tying my variants I design them for the type of water to be fished. For still water little hackle is used I in fact the entire dressing is made as delicate as possible. For broken water I make them bushier, and of the very stiffest hackle. The variant should always ride high on the water, as it is much more effective than when half submerged or in the surface film.

My own experience has proved that better results are obtained when variants are used with little or no movement. Occasionally bouncing or bumping the fly, when first cast, can help to raise a stubborn fish. This is best done on broken water, of course. When fished over rising trout or on smooth water I allow the fly to float as naturally as possible.

I have had little success in trying to imitate the spinner of the natural fly. For one thing, it is usually right in the surface film, its wings flat, and thus the fish gets a much clearer view of it. My long-continued efforts to imitate one variety of spinner with all manner of dressings ended long ago with a score which I will not even mention. I have given up all attempts at copying this irritating little bug and instead have concentrated on the use of variants. I must say that even now the score remains lower than I would like, but at least it is a great improvement.

From: *The Fly and the Fish*, John Atherton, (Freshet Press, 1951)