

DRY FLY OR NYMPH?

by Ed Herbst

Having been outfished by Ian Lehr who swears by his High Flies Royal Wulffs, I am beginning to have my doubts about my size 16 Sawyers Pheasant Tail and Partridge and Hare's Ear soft-hackle nymphs – and confidence is everything in fishing.

I will never forget the first occasion when I caught a trout on the nymph by using a visual rather than a tactile method. Although I had caught the odd fish on a Woolly Worm by retrieving it and waiting for a tug on the line, I did not find this a very fulfilling way of fishing. I first tried using a strike indicator on the Smalblaar. I had threaded a small piece of orange fly line onto some yellow Stren monofilament which I incorporated in my leader about a metre from the nymph. I greased this section with Orvis silicone and put Orvis mud on the rest of the leader to get it to sink.

I was fishing Granite Basin, the run above Donkergat, when the indicator, and time itself, seemed to slow down. It probably only took a fraction of a second for me to perceive and then begin to understand the potential of what was happening, but it seemed to take forever. I struck in a trance-like way and to my joy there was resistance beneath the surface.

In the order of things it was of no consequence, a moment of utter insignificance but, to me, it will always be a memory to cherish and for the next few years I revelled in the subtlety of the method – and the success it brought.

I then dropped the strike indicator in favour of a buoyant dry fly threaded onto the last bit of mono before the tippet and butting against the knot. The majority of fish taken by this method took the nymph which, to me, emphasised and confirmed the superiority of the nymph over the dry fly.

However, after trying one of Ian's Royal Wulffs and doing very well with it, I began to have my doubts. After a lot of thought I have come to a tentative conclusion. It seems to be accepted that trout take ninety percent of their food beneath the surface but is this in fact true? The trout in Western Cape rivers rarely get enough to eat and I think they must take a fair amount of their food from or close to the surface. Furthermore the clarity of the relatively shallow water means that a trout can easily see and rise to the surface food.

Two studies, one in England and the other in the USA, show that trout eat whatever is most available and whatever is easiest to capture. In the spring when the majority of insect forms are emerging and are thus vulnerable, such emerging nymphs make up the bulk of trout food. However, for the rest of the time the nymphs' protective colouration, their maneuverability and ability to hide in cracks in the rocks or beneath stream detritus, makes them difficult to capture.

In *The Trout and the Stream* the late Charles Brookes writes; "I recently read two studies concerning floating flies and trout streams which I believe are of interest. These studies were made by the use of drift nets, and stomach examinations. They involved one stream in the East (of America) and one in the West.

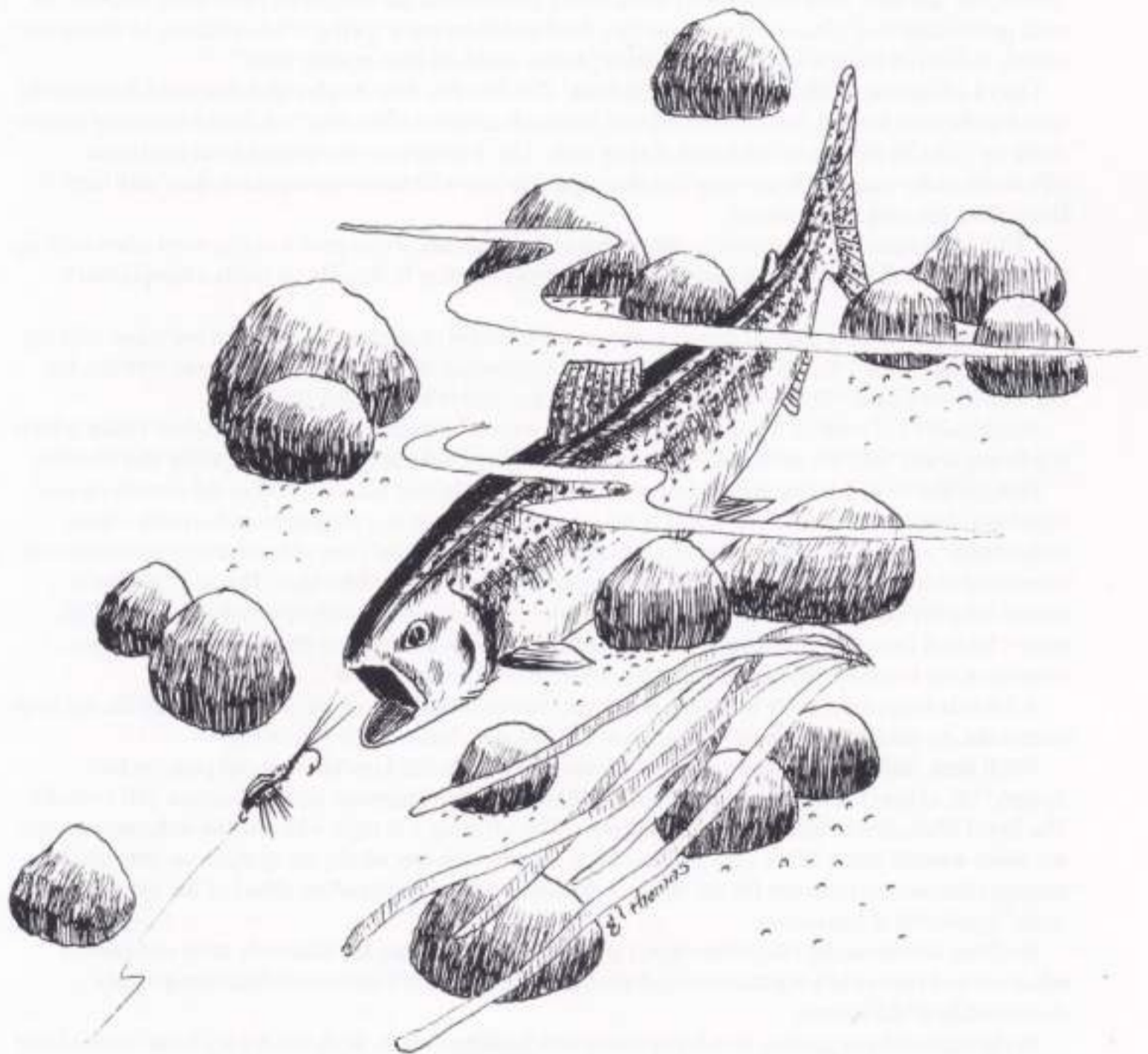
"The drift nets supposedly trapped all floating creatures in a certain area; underwater forms were ignored in this survey. To trap aquatic insects hatching all along the stretch under survey, nets were set every three feet, and insects were removed every few minutes to limit escape.

"The kinds and amounts of creatures in the nets were compared to the kinds and amounts in the trout's stomachs. In the course of the season, as it progressed, a change in preference by the fish was noted. Early in the season, the aquatic insects accounted for over 80 percent of the insects, both in the nets and in the stomachs. By mid-summer, the ratio had changed; aquatic insects accounted for 70 percent of the insects in the nets, but only 40 percent in the stomachs.

"By autumn the ratio of net contents to stomach contents had balanced again and percentages were in agreement. However terrestrials accounted for over 70 percent of the totals in nets and stomachs.

"The conclusions reached by the study groups were; 1. Over the year, terrestrial insects outnumbered aquatic insects on the study streams. 2. When aquatic insects were at a peak of hatching (spring) trout took them in almost exact proportion to their availability. 3. When terrestrials were at their peak (early autumn) trout took them in almost exact proportion to their abundance. 4. More terrestrials were taken in the course of the season because they were available for more hours of the day than were aquatics, which hatched more sporadically."

Brookes' conclusion? "Match the hatch when there's one on, but if there is not, look to terrestrials."



Trout on the nymph by Gerald Thomas

Later he says, "If I'm going to fish the water with a floating fly, I either go to a "shocker"-type dry fly or to a terrestrial." He defines a "shocker" type dry fly as a variant (such as the RAB) or a palmer-tied fly (such as the Bi-visible).

In a more recent book, *To Rise a Trout* by John Roberts (The Crowood Press, 1988) the author quotes a study by Dr J.V. Woolland in which the stomach contents of 105 trout from the river Dee were examined over a period of twelve months.

"The findings of interest to the dry-fly fisher were two-fold: 1. Aerial insects (particularly of terrestrial origin) formed the major part of the summer intake of trout. 2. Aerial insects became more common in the diet of trout with increasing age."

Woolland found that from mid-summer onwards "aerial insects were not only the single major food source, but that they were the majority food, being greater than the total of all other food sources. As trout grew older they consumed more surface food and from early spring to late autumn, in all but one month, terrestrial insects were taken in much greater numbers than aquatic flies."

Gary LaFontaine in his exceptional new book, *The Dry Fly-New Angles* says that even though trout spend more time feeding beneath the surface, stomach contents show that "adult and emerging insects make up 35 to 50 percent of the actual diet by item. The discrepancy shows that trout feed more efficiently at the surface. When they can rise regularly and with unerring accuracy, they take insects faster from the roof of the stream.

"This is the secret of the dry fly's effectiveness as a searcher. Trout prefer to rise even when nothing is happening on the surface, because they are naturally adept at it. Any fly on top is a temptation to them.

"During the summer months on many streams 50 percent of the insects captured are taken in or on the meniscus. Even when there isn't a hatch or an egg-laying drift in progress, the trout watches the top, and if some insect drifts overhead it's difficult for him to let the prey pass."

Incidentally LaFontaine's most effective attractor (non-imitative) dry fly is the Royal Trude, which is a Royal Wulff with the white calf-tail wing tied sloping backwards instead of upright and divided.

Perhaps the most convincing argument on why the dry fly is at least as good as the nymph on our relatively shallow streams is contained in the finest book extant on catching trout in rivers – Tom Rosenbauer's *Prospecting for Trout* (Dell Books 1993). "Trout can't see objects above the water well, especially in riffled water, but they can easily spot objects in the surface film. This may also be a reason why dry flies outperform nymphs when you're blind-fishing: a nymph drifting down at the trout's level is camouflaged against the bottom of the stream and against all the water upstream, whereas a dry is silhouetted against the sky, where it is far more visible".

All this is very convincing but there is another reason, albeit a local one to explain why the dry is so successful on our streams where, for much of the day, one does not see fish rising.

What then, makes me think that on our streams the dry fly need not take second place to the nymph? Or, to put it another way, what makes the Royal Wulff superior to my Pheasant Tail nymph? The key, I think, lies in the different techniques. When fishing a nymph with a strike indicator the two are about a metre apart. What I am looking for is the sort of water where the nymph can land and have enough relatively even water for the strike indicator to drift several metres ahead of the nymph so that it can signal a hit if one occurs.

And that is what makes the difference. I am specifically looking for relatively even stretches of water several metres in length so as to get enough drift to get the indicator to float along nicely downstream of the nymph.

In the process I am passing up a lot of water which contains fish. With the dry fly I can, with a bit of luck, use a slack-line, puddle-cast to drop the fly in that small spot of calm water between the rock and the fast current. It will only remain there for a few seconds before drag sets in but the result could well be a strike.

With the dry fly then, I am covering a lot more water, and spending more time casting than simply walking from one relatively smooth stretch of water to another.