

Origins of the Dry Fly



The article that follows was reprinted by William T. Porter in a then new sporting periodical named "THE AMERICAN SPORTING CHRONICLE" (1843). It was short lived, passing into limbo after little more than a year of publication. Perhaps a gamble by Porter, who was then editing two others, ("The Turf Register" and "The Spirit of the Times"), it did offer some unusual articles. Few fly fishermen appreciate the simple fact that there is constant diffusion of knowledge in all matters relating to catching fish between the bait fisher and those who use the artificial fly. In this instance, the bait fisher had already encountered problems connected with fishing what was later to be called the "dry" fly. He also had made some long strides in casting a natural fly for distance. It should be remembered what was called the "floating" fly (artificial) was in use as early as the beginning of the 17th century when a cork body was invented. Note however that this may be the first recognition of "drag."

On Angling with the Natural May Fly

To the Editor of Bell's Life in London.

Sir - Having been a subscriber to your paper for many years past, and being an old fly-fisher, I have, of course, read the whole of Ephemera's communications which have appeared in it from time to time. From these I have frequently derived much pleasure, combined with instruction; and, for the able manner in which he handles his subject, I am sure he must be a good practical fisherman in all branches of the sport. His favorite pursuit, however, seems, like my own, to be that of fly fishing; and his general instructions upon this head, combined with his receipts for dressing the various kinds of flies principally in use, will be found extremely useful to the tyro. I have sometimes, it is true, had reason to differ with him upon some points; but as he and I angle in very different parts of the country,

and most probably in rivers which vary very widely in the character of the flies which they produce, I do not, for one moment, presume to say that he is wrong, or that I am right. For every experienced angler knows well that rivers only a few miles apart will produce the same "species" of flies, but with some trifling differences in them as to colour and size, and also as to the time of their being in season; and, the same fly which will be found very abundant (and consequently a good killer) upon one river, will perhaps be scarce, and of comparatively little use upon the other. To instance this, I may mention the Derwent and the Wye, both Derbyshire streams, running only a few miles apart, say three or four; and in fact, uniting their waters about six miles above Matlock. Now, upon the former the dun drake, and its change, the great red spinner, will be found a most killing fly, and is

much used by all anglers frequenting it; whilst upon the Wye, it is scarcely ever used by those who know the river well; indeed, I never recollect having any sport with it there.

To return to this digression, which I have made merely for the purpose of showing that no angler should suppose, that because the instructions which he may read, as to the best method of dressing certain flies, may not exactly correspond with what his own experience tells him is most suitable for the rivers in his own country, still he is not to suppose, off-hand, that they are not perfectly correct for the streams for which they are intended. The object of my present letter is to notice some remarks contained in Ephemera's communication of last week as to the best method of fishing with the May-fly, or as we term it in this part of the country, the drake. We (at least all such as pro-

fess to be adepts with this fly) use it in a different manner, therefore I am tempted to give your readers a short description of it, from which they may judge for themselves which is the most scientific and agreeable style of fishing, as well as the most killing. To commence with the rod which is used in open parts of the river; it should be 16 or 17 feet in length, and should be made as light as possible, taking care that just sufficient strength is preserved, and it should be particularly pliable and springy. No stiff rod will do for this fishing, as the angler would be continually cutting his drake off with such a one. The best reel lines which I have ever met with are the patent taper ones made in London, or at least sold by the London tackle makers, and the finer the better. To the end of the reel line should be attached a gut casting line about ten feet in length, which need not be very fine where it joins the line, but should gradually get finer, until the piece of gut to which the hook is attached should be as thin and round as can possibly be procured. If the water should be a little coloured, or if there should be a good supply of it in the river, you may then venture to use rather stronger gut. The hook which is generally used is one of Adlington's or Scott's No. 2, and, in order to make it as light as possible, I usually cut off a little of the shank, leaving only as much as is requisite for tying it on to the gut. Having now got rod and tackle ready, take your drake (which should be a freshly sprung one, and consequently brighter and more lively) by its wings, and pass the hook through the thick part of the body under the wings, and not between them, as Ephemera recommends. This description of rod and tackle differs greatly from his. He says - "The rod used should be about 13 feet long, light, and with a stiff top. In still, mild weather, you should fish with about four feet of line out, three feet of which should be good and moderately fine gut." This will at once be seen is only applicable to dabling with the fly, which, in fact, is the only plan he mentions. Now for the "modus operandi" upon my system. The angler should go to the lower part of the reach of river which he intends fishing, so as, in all cases where the wind permits, he may fish up the stream. Should the breeze be at all strong down the stream, this cannot possibly be done; for then even the most skillful drake fisher will find it impossible to avoid whipping off his fly. But let us suppose there is either a breeze up the stream or else none at all, which latter state of affairs I prefer. Then let him use rather more line than the length of his rod, say about eighteen or twenty feet, and proceed to throw his fly up the stream, first under his own bank, then all over the likely parts, until he reaches

the opposite bank. This is a very slow species of fishing, but it is obvious that it cannot be a rapid one, for only one fly is used, and that one must try every likely part of the stream; and in this way a good fisherman will frequently make a hundred yards of river last him an hour or two. But, perhaps, some of your readers may say, "How is it possible to reach all over the stream with a natural fly, and with one so tender and so liable to be cut on as the drake is. But, I can assure them, that with a rod and tackle of the description I have mentioned, it is, to an old practiced hand, a matter of no difficulty. The art of throwing the drake well is an extremely troublesome one to learn, and no one need flatter himself that he will be perfect in it after a few trials. In three or four seasons, perhaps, he may accomplish it tolerably; but ten or twelve years will not be too long a time for him to attain proficiency in it. When once learned, however, it will be as easy to him as throwing the artificial fly, and it will amply repay him for the time and trouble which he has spent over attaining it. A skillful drake-fisher will easily



throw his fly eighteen or twenty yards, and even then it will fall upon the water as lightly as if it had been blown on from the nearest bush. But when upon the water, another difficulty has to be contended with; for, supposing the fly to have been cast across the river, the chances are that the line, which lays in the water, will get pulled by the streams and eddies between the fisherman and his fly, until the latter gets dragged under water, or otherwise swims with so unnatural a motion as to alarm the ever watchful trout, in which case it is useless to try for him a second time. Practice, however, if it will not in all cases enable the angler to avoid this evil, still will enable him greatly to modify it. In throwing the drake great care must be taken to avoid anything like a sudden whip at the end of the line. The fisherman must take a good round sweep, and throw steadily, but at the same time lightly; and when once he has become an adept at it he may make pretty sure of every fish he sees rising, though at the distance of fifteen or twenty yards,

A strong arm is required to wield a rod of such dimensions, and some use two hands to it; but, if possible, I always prefer one, as greater nicety is always attained. The advantages of such a method of angling are obvious. You are not nearly so liable to be seen by the fish as when angling down stream, and when you hook one you can bring him down into water which has been fished over, without disturbing any which are rising above. Indeed, I have frequently taken five or six, one after the other, from the same bank in a very short time. Considerable skill is requisite, however, in knowing where fish are likely to be found, for as only one fly is used, much valuable time may be wasted in trying places where an experienced hand would never think of throwing. Indeed some men never learn this most important point, while others seem almost to have an intuitive knowledge of where fish will be if they are in the river. I have always considered it as the first lesson to be instilled into the mind of a young angler.

Should you see a fish rise, throw your fly about a foot above him, and let it float down over his nose, when the chances are three to one that he take it, and takes it well also, for fish thus hooked are seldom lost. Do not attempt to strike him, but give him plenty of time, for finding he has got a real fly, he is in no hurry to quit it. Tighten your line quietly after he has had time to shut his mouth, and you have him safe enough; but as you are fishing with fine gut, you must not be in too great a hurry to have him in your landing net if he is a heavy fish; and the largest trout are taken with the drake. In a bright, hot season, when the water is very low, and as clear as crystal; this plan of fishing upstream will kill three or four times as much fish as any other. Indeed, if practised by a skillful person, these otherwise adverse circumstances will make but little difference, provided your tackle is good, and the fish are in the humor for the drake, which is not always the case. Do not abandon a fish if he does not take you the first, second, or even the third time; for they frequently require teasing into it, particularly early in the season, before they have got acquainted with the drake. I have frequently taken a fish after he has refused even twenty times, and these are often the largest ones. But an experienced fisherman will generally soon perceive whether he is wasting time or no; for if the fish does not look at your fly as it passes over him, you may consider it "notice to quit." Ephemera says, "for all fish that feed on flies, it is a captivating cockatrice." Here, however, I do not agree with him. The trout is the only fish really worthy the attention of the drake fisher. No doubt greyling and also chub, when the latter unfortunately

happen to be in a river, will occasionally take the drake; but the former certainly prefer smaller flies, and I have seen times, when the drakes have been floating in swarms down the surface of the river, and scarcely one has been taken by a greyling. Besides their mouths are too small to admit so large a fly readily, and even if you succeed in raising a greyling, the chances are, that he cuts off half-a-dozen flies before you hook him. Still, there are times when they will rise pretty freely at the drake, and then never fish for them. But as a general thing, I never fish for them. They are good customers for the artificial fly, and for that I leave them. In a river such as the Wye at Bakewell, when there are five or six greylings to one trout, some little experience is necessary to enable the angler to discriminate between them when they are rising, and many persons unaccustomed to the river lose much time in throwing for the former, and with little chance of success in the most difficult of streams, where they are bad enough to take with even the best and most accurately made artificial flies. Having now given your readers a des-

cription of the manner in which the drake or mayfly is used by all good anglers in Derbyshire, I take my leave of them, with the assurance that if any one will be at the trouble of practising it till he is tolerably perfect, he will never dabble with it again.

In my opinion, no description of fishing is so pleasant and exciting as it is; and, at the same time, I must add that I consider none so difficult to do well. In this part of the country many persons call the drake "the fool's fly," thereby meaning that any fool can kill fish with it. But this is meant to apply to dabling with it, and to a certain extent, no doubt, an inexperienced hand may have some sport with it when the river is pretty full of water and the day cloudy or windy, as he can then poke his rod over the bank and let his fly float down; and in this manner he will be almost certain to raise a few unwary fish. But let the water be low and bright and the sunshine in full splendour, without a cloud to obscure his face, and the tables will be turned: truly, he may "toil all day and catch nothing." Before concluding, allow me to correct an error

of Ephemera's, which appeared in one of his letters last summer, but which I cannot lay my hand upon at this moment. Speaking of the comparative merits of winged flies and hackle ones, he says "that at Bakewell, in Derbyshire where they are no mean judges, they prefer them made as hackles." But here he is under a mistake.† The up-winged duns of many varieties (and by the way, most difficult to imitate accurately) are the standard flies for the Wye; and all the most scientific fishermen who flog its waters make these flies winged. Experience has taught them that they will take two or three fish when a hackle fly would take one. These duns are troublesome gentlemen to make correctly, and we make many of them from very different materials from what I have ever seen recommended in print. Indeed, with the exception, perhaps, of the orange dun, and that only sometimes, I have never seen any London flies which I should have liked to use upon the Wye. I remain, sir, yours, &c.,

Hawthorn

Rowsley, Derbyshire, May 16

In 1838 I bought flies at a shop in Bakewell, and found them all hackles. - - - Ephemera.

† Ephemera is well pleased to be able from the evidence contained in Hawthorn's excellent letter to return him conscientiously the compliment. We differ I perceive on some points, but if Hawthorn will refer to E's articles, and read them attentively he will find the difference less than he states. E knows Rowsley well and passed some pleasant days at the Peacock at the foot of the bridge where the Wye runs into the Derwent. Hawthorn's communications (I wish other local anglers would follow his example) will always be

acceptable to the columns of "Bell's Life" should they be, like the present one, rife with practical piscatorial information. What the Editor of this paper wants, for Ephemera has had the pleasure and honour of his acquaintance long enough to know his desires, he is not vague, fanciful and speculative writing, relative to sporting subjects, but information containing plain facts.

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**WAS PRESIDENT
BENJAMIN HARRISON
A FLY FISHER?**

That Harrison built a sanctuary in a wilderness as his Grandfather before him, seems to have been forgotten by his biographers.

The photo taken from the book "Nat Foster" by Bryan Curtis, 1897, suggests the 23rd President of the United States (1889-1893) was a lover of the outdoors. Berkeley Lodge is located in the Adirondacks, noted for their fishing and hunting. As a boy, he may have vacationed with his grandfather and the remembrance may have prompted a return to the mountains. Kay Brodney, our researcher at the Library of Congress, reports no information at all in the files. Help would be appreciated.

