

MO Fly Fishing



The Flies of Winter

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Cold, Hard Facts

by Rick Hafele

When water temperatures hover near freezing, you need to be in the right place at the right time with the right flies. [Keep in mind that the winter fishing in the trout parks has water that remains somewhat constant around 54°.]

The days have grown short, the hum of insects is long gone, and air temperatures hover in the 40s or even the 30s. So what do these changes mean for aquatic insects and trout? You might think that aquatic insects in stream and lakes are less active and less abundant through the winter months. After all, terrestrial insects disappear when the weather turns cold and spend the winter sleeping someplace well protected from freezing temperatures. But aquatic insects are much different. In fact, the abundance of aquatic insect nymphs and larvae is typically *greater* during winter than during summer and late fall.

This is a reflection of the emergence patterns for many aquatic insect species. Most nymphs and pupae emerge into adults throughout the spring, summer, and fall. As a result, the number of nymphs and larvae drops significantly from late spring through summer. The newly emerged adults return to the water within days or weeks to lay eggs, and those eggs typically begin hatching in early to mid-fall. Thus, by the time late fall and winter arrive, a whole new generation of insect larvae is scrambling among stream-bottom rocks, actively feeding and growing even as water temperatures approach freezing.

While most of the action in the winter is underwater, there are a few species that emerge as adults through the winter. These hatches may not be as dense as those of warmer months, but they can still create surface-feeding activity from trout that have few options on top during winter. Since terrestrial insects are virtually nonexistent, trout must rely on aquatic species for food. Of course, trout feed primarily on the underwater stages on cold winter days, but they'll also eat those adult insects that take to the air.

Like any season, winter has its own rhythms of changes and activity during a typical day. Understanding those rhythms can help you decipher when, where, and with what to fish. With that in mind, let's take a look at what might be considered a typical winter's day of insect and fish activity.

Morning

Few winter mornings will find me standing knee deep in ice-cold water. However, that's not because fish can't be caught. It has more to do with my acceptable comfort-to-catch ratio, which has moved more to the comfort end of the scales as I have grown older. "Been there, done that" comes to mind as I contemplate frozen fingers and ice-clogged guides. But that's just me. As my uncle would say, "You can't catch any fish unless your fly's in the water,"

Mornings present the coldest water and air temperatures of the day. Since insects and fish are both cold-blooded – essentially the same temperature as the water they live in – winter mornings are not a hotbed of activity. Mornings, however, still produce "behavioral drift" – an increase in the activity of nymphs and larvae – and even a small increase in temperature from the warming rays of the sun may start some fish moving and feeding. Their primary food will be whatever nymphs and larvae are available on the streambed and drifting in the currents.

Winter insect populations are diverse, so take a few minutes to collect some insects from the stream bottom using a sampling net. Look for the most abundant and active nymphs wriggling in your net. That will be a good choice for a nymph pattern fished right along the bottom. If by chance you find that some of the insects are mature and look ready to emerge, then you might try a nymph fished closer to the surface. Because the winter population of insects can be quite diverse, it might take a little time to sort out just which bugs the fish are feeding on. Just because it is winter doesn't mean trout will be completely unselective in their choice of food.

I find it best to choose a nymph pattern that represents the most active types of nymphs present in the stream. Blue-winged olive nymphs, predacious stoneflies (such as golden stones), free-living caddisfly larvae (such as green rock

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worms), and scuds are good choices if these insects are present and even moderately abundant. Since they will usually be smaller than those found at other times of the year, you must pay close attention to the size of these nymphs.

Nymph fishing on a frigid morning will certainly hone your skills. The sluggish metabolism of winter fish means that their takes are softer and subtler than ever. It also means trout won't go so far out of their way to take your fly. Thus, reading the water and being able to detect the softest takes are critical if you hope to catch anything. A strike indicator is essential for such nymph fishing. Cast a short a line as possible to improve your odds of detecting a strike and setting the hook quickly; it seems that fish can spit out a nymph just as fast in the winter as in the summer. Also, keep moving and fish new water. Since many fish won't be actively feeding, you need to cover as many fish as possible to increase your odds of finding one ready to take a fly.

Midday

From about 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. is when you really want to be on the water in the winter. By 11, air and water temperatures have risen, fish are more active, and if any insects are going to hatch they will usually start between 11 and 1. Because so few insects emerge in winter, there is usually just one dominate species on the water, so you won't have a difficult time deciding what to imitate when a hatch occurs.

There are three hatches that consistently show up when the weather turns cold: chironomids, winter stoneflies, and *Baetis* or blue-winged olives. There are literally hundreds of species of chironomids in streams throughout the country, and many species seem to emerge only in the winter. Because there are so many species, it is important to carefully observe the naturals floating downstream to determine their size and color. The pupa, drifting slowly to the surface, is often the best stage to imitate. In cold water, pupae will hang in the surface even longer than normal before the adults emerge, so fishing a midge pupa in the surface film can be very effective. The cold conditions also result in more stillborn adults – adults that don't escape completely from the pupal shuck and end up dead or dying in the surface film – do dry patterns that imitate a struggling or dead adult can work quite well.

Winter stoneflies – primarily the family Capniidae and Nemouridae – are small (size 14 – 18), dark brown to black stoneflies that emerge aptly enough, and primarily in winter. I often see them during cross-country-skiing trips that take me along mountain streams. The dark adults look like ants running over the snow along the water's edge. The females of many species of winter stoneflies are wingless, which only adds to their antlike appearance. After mating on the bank, the females crawl or fly back to the water to lay their eggs. Most end up floating downstream, caught in the water's surface. Small dry flies that match them in size and color will often take some nice winter trout.

Blue-winged olive hatches can be a real treat. Depending on where you live, good hatches may occur anytime between November and March, and some winter days will produce hatches just as heavy as those on a good spring or fall afternoon.

Small nymph patterns work well before the adults start popping up to the surface. As adult activity increases, switch to small emerger patterns, and dry flies will work, too. Even when there is a good surface feeding activity, the fish are still more sluggish than normal, so presentation is critical – drift you fly right down a trout's feeding lane without any drag. Also, check the size and color of the naturals carefully. These will vary from stream to stream, and even week to week.

Afternoon to Evening

The sun drops below the horizon early in the winter, and when its rays disappear, the warmth they provided quickly disappears, as well. In my experience, this often results in a surprisingly quick end to both insect and fish activity for the day. Spinner falls or other egg-laying activity will not wait for the soft light of evening. If they haven't occurred by late afternoon, they probably won't occur until the next day. Likewise, fish seem to suddenly stop feeding when daylight fades. Switching back to some deep nymphs may pick up another fish or two, but I am usually ready to watch the sun set and notice how quiet and peaceful a stream can be in the winter. You can sometimes extend the time period of good fishing by half an hour or so by finding a stretch of stream where the sun is not yet off the water. Make note of the areas on the streams you fish where the sun's rays linger the longest. They will be the perfect place to end your angling day.

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Final Thoughts

First, clear winter days have very low humidity. This is not good for tiny adult insects that struggle to prevent dehydration. This can result in the interesting winter phenomenon that I call the "snowstorm effect." If you fish much during the winter, you will find that some of the best hatches occur on wet overcast days, especially when there is a good snowfall. My theory is that these days provide the humidity needed to protect the hatching adults, and somehow the nymphs underwater can recognize those conditions. Therefore, don't wait for a nice sunny day to spend some time on the water. An overcast, snowy day may be just the right conditions for some hot cold-weather fishing.

Second, hatch activity in the winter is compressed into a short period – an hour, for example. This means you will need to be in the right place at the right time with the right flies to take advantage of the brief opportunity. Being the first angler on the water doesn't matter in the winter, but you don't want to be eating lunch during the only hour of good hatch activity. Keep this in mind as you plan your day.

Third, spend some time looking in the stream for what insects are there for fish to eat. Many anglers assume that fish aren't selective during the winter and that any old buggy looking fly will work. However, because the diversity and abundance of insects peak in the winter, it is important to select a fly pattern that matches the dominant insect. Match its size and shape, and fish it in the best fish-holding water.

Finally, with some rare exceptions, a good day of fishing in the winter will not equal a good day during other seasons. Therefore, don't expect to see lots of rising fish or have the chasing your flies across the water. Successful winter fishing requires patience, good water-reading skills, careful observation, and good casting and presentation technique. If you can find and catch fish in the winter, you'll really shine when things warm up in the spring.

Rich Hafele has been studying trout streams with a fly rod and bug net for more than 30 winters. His most recent book is Nymph Fishing Rivers and Streams (Stackpole Books, 2006)

Small Brown Stoneflies

By Rick Hafele and Dave Hughes

Small brown stoneflies--some of which are black, not brown, are a winter hatch that is overlooked by many fly anglers.

It was a cold day not far past the winter solstice. Other than the dark green pine boughs, and the lighter green of the river, the only colors were gray, white, and black. The gray was in the sky, and the white came from the snow that lay two-feet deep right up to the river's edge. The small insect crawling across the snow supplied the black tint.

The insect briefly took flight, and then settled on quiet water about five feet from the bank. Within a few seconds, the nose of an 18-inch trout quietly broke the surface and the black bug disappeared.

It would have been easy to miss this incident. The black insect had few companions and, like most winter anglers, my senses were prepared for midges and blue-winged olive hatches. That's why it's easy to miss an important but less prolific insect: the little brown stonefly, sometimes called the winter black stonefly.

The Small Brown Stonefly Group

Insects that fly angler's call "black" belongs to a group of brown stoneflies; that's one of the quirks of aquatic entomology that we just have to accept. "Small Brown Stones" refer collectively to four distinct families of stoneflies: Nemouridae, Taeniopterygidae, Capniidae, and Leuctridae. These four families can be conveniently lumped together as Small Brown Stones because of their similar appearance and habits. They are a particularly numerous and diverse group in Western streams.

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With such diversity, hatches of small brown stones occur at many times of the year. The best hatches happen February through April, so winter is when they are most important to fly anglers. Even on a cold February day, small brown stones can be active and abundant enough to bring up a few fish, especially in the afternoon when the air is warmest.

Nymphs

Mature nymphs and adults of small brown stones range in size (excluding tails) from 1/4 to 1/2 inch long. Nymphs tend to be a uniform light to dark chocolate brown. Many adults follow a similar color scheme, but some may be black (called "winter blacks" by some anglers) while others are orange or reddish-brown.

Nymphs live almost exclusively in running water, although a few species occur in high mountain lakes. Moderate to small mountain streams typically have the largest populations of small brown stones, but they can also be abundant in large rivers. Most species prefer areas of moderate current with a bottom of large gravel or cobble. Nymphs feed heavily on wood debris and leaf litter. Areas where detritus collects around rocks and gravel provide excellent habitat.



Nymphs remain well hidden among bottom debris most of the time, so they are not a common food for fish until they are mature. Then they crawl out of the water and emerge on protruding rocks or logs. During these emergence migrations, many nymphs will be washed into the current and become easy prey for fish.

Adults

The wings of adults range from light smoky gray to gray with black mottling. Some species, primarily males, have short wings or no wings as adults. While these adults can't fly, they can crawl quickly over the ground.

Adults are small, unobtrusive, and easily overlooked--unless they happen to be crawling over a snowdrift. Adults mate on the ground or streamside foliage a few days after emerging. Ovipositing females do not form large swarms, however. Instead they oviposit sporadically throughout the day, attracting little attention from unobservant fishermen. Trout, however, seldom miss the opportunity.



Patterns and Tactics

While brown stones are important in two stages, nymph and adult, they are usually important in only one place: close to the river bank.

The first important stage is when the nymphs make their migrations from their midstream, river-bottom habitat to the banks. Once they're near the bank, they hang around in the water for a time, and then crawl out for emergence. Lift a few stream bank stones in late winter or early spring, and you'll see them there, gathered in little colonies that scuttle away from the light when you hoist the stone out of water. Trout follow these migrations, and feed on the naturals in the soft water in among inundated willows and boulders.

After the nymphs crawl out to emerge, the winged adults tarry on the terrestrial side of the same bank side environment. They are busy little fellows, moving quite agily when the slightest warmth revs their biological motors. They'll fall to the water, or make little sorties over it to lay their eggs, and trout will take them right where they took the nymphs: in the soft water along the banks. You need to be extraordinarily watchful to notice that this feeding, surface or subsurface, is happening. Then it's not difficult to match it. A size 12-14 Elk Hair Caddis in dark brown or black will usually do the trick. An upstream or up-and-across presentation often works well for nymphs. Present the fly along pockets and edges of moderately fast riffles. Even though the fly is near the surface a strike indicator can help significantly in detecting strikes. Polly Rosborough, in the classic *Tying and Fishing the Fuzzy Nymphs*, describes fishing small brown stone nymph patterns at a dead drift just under the surface, and it may be that it is not necessary to weight these nymphs. His Little Brown stone Nymph was designed for this type of fishing.

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Besides dry flies and nymphs, Soft Hackles can produce well during a hatch of small brown stones. Two of my favorite patterns are the Partridge and Orange with fur thorax and the Pheasant Tail. Apparently small brown stone adults float poorly and often sink just below the surface. Soft Hackles make excellent imitations of the drowned adults.

Fish your Soft Hackles in the same areas as the dries: along the banks and under overhanging vegetation. Cast across or slightly down-and-across, and mend line to keep the fly from dragging across the current.

It's often a wise strategy to fish a nymph as a dropper beneath a dry. Cast this tandem rig along the banks, especially where high water works back among willow and alder roots and boulders that might normally be above water. That's where trout are most likely to feed actively on either stage of this insect group.

The Blue-Winged Olive Hatch

By Scott Richmond

If you trek to a river to fly fish for trout in the next couple of months, you'd better know how to fish the blue-winged olive hatch. Find out here.

Deschutes River, late February. From the bottom of the canyon, gray is the only color visible beyond the rim rock. From that leaden ceiling, raindrops fall for awhile then stop, uncertainly.

However, the picture is much more pleasant at my feet than over my head: trout make silver streaks, like flashbulbs going off, as they feed on emerging mayflies. Many aggressive, wild restdies, averaging 14-16 inches, are active in the back eddy. Each is bright pink; it's not their year to spawn.

A few more raindrops fall, and a wind gust makes me turn up my collar. Something other than the wind gives me a shudder, though. Did I turn off the car's lights? Should I run a mile back down the road and check? More flashes in the river; they're taking blue-winged olives in a major hatch. I have the right flies, I know what to do, and I have the river to myself. When's the next time it will come together like this?



When I reached the car a couple of hours later, every single electron had drained out of the battery, and it took several hours and a three-mile walk to get it going again. But it was worth it to catch over a dozen restdies on a dry fly on a winter day. Batteries are easier to recharge than souls.

From September through April, blue-winged olives (BWOs) hatch on western rivers, but the hatches are strongest mid-February through early April. More than one angler has told me that the best dry fishing he ever had on the Deschutes was in February--during the BWO hatch. On the other hand, it's an unreliable and unpredictable hatch. When it's good, it's very good. And when it's bad . . . well, it's still nice to get out and be on the river. Below, you will find basic BWO biology, flies and tactics, and a few special hints to help you get the most out of the hatch

Biology

Blue-winged olives are mayflies from the family Baetidae. Entomologists can have endless debates over the number of distinct genera and species within this family, but those discussions are of little value to anglers. The general appearance, habitat, and life cycle of these insects are quite similar, and that's what matters to fish and fishermen. Any western aquatic insect listed as a Baetis (properly pronounced Bee-tiss, not Bait-us), Pseudocloeon, or Dipheter qualifies as a blue-winged olive, or BWO.



BWOs are "swimmer" mayflies, meaning they are slender and flip their tails to propel themselves. Most species live where the water flows at a slow to moderate pace. They inhabit the small spaces between river rocks, and graze on diatoms and algae.

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One species prefers the kind of riffly water you associate with stoneflies (see a previous article). BWO nymphs have a habit of drifting in the current, especially near sunrise and sunset; we presume they are searching for a new lunch counter.

At maturity, nymphs buoy to the surface, the skin splits, and the winged dun crawls out. After a brief rest on the river's surface, the dun flies off, molts into the spinner stage, and mates. Females return to the water to lay eggs. Some females lay eggs by crawling underwater down logs and rocks.

BWOs vary in color and size, but most duns are small (matched by size 18-22 dry flies) and have smoky-blue wings. Body colors range from gray-olive to brown. Nymphs are dark brown.

Throughout the West, BWOs are abundant enough to be interesting to trout and cause selective feeding. In the winter, they are a staple of the trout diet. That makes them vital to fly anglers.

Flies and Tactics

Trout will be most receptive to BWOs when large numbers of insects are present and are most vulnerable. This means:

Nymphs are drifting near the bottom almost every day from September through April. A Pheasant Tail Nymph is a good imitation, but the traditional Gold-Ribbed Hares Ears particularly effective in September because the BWOs present at that time have two light-colored abdominal segments that are well-imitated by the fly's gold ribbing. In September, dead-drift the fly in the water just downstream from a riffle (where the river deepens and slows) is very effective. The rest of the year, concentrate your nymphing in water with a slow to moderate flow.



Emerging duns. Because BWOs are small, the surface of smooth water is a barrier to them, and many are trapped just below the surface or must struggle to break through the water's surface tension. At this point they are highly vulnerable to trout, and they are frequently taken just subsurface. Several patterns work as emergers: try the Baetis Cripple or CDC Cripple. Olive or brown-olive bodies work best. The best places are moderate to slow runs and back eddies. The presentation is the same as if you were fishing a dry fly. John Smeraglio, owner of the Deschutes Canyon Fly Shop in Maupin, has an effective strategy. He casts a Soft Hackle upstream, then lifts the rod as the fly drifts back towards him ("high sticking"), then lowers the rod as the fly passes. At the end of the dead drift, he lets the fly swing across in the current. Strikes can come either on the drift or on the swing.

Drying Dun. As the dun dries its wings, it is helpless to escape. A dry fly work can work quite well in back eddies and slow runs. Good patterns include the Sparkle Dun, CDC Comparadun or Parachute Baetis.

Egg-laying Female. BWO spinner falls are seldom important on western waters, but females that crawl below the surface to lay eggs are often knocked loose and are taken by trout. A Soft Hackle works well here. Put a small shot on the leader and cast upstream, giving the fly time to reach the bottom. Then jig the rod to give the fly some action.



Additional Tips

Fish the back eddies. During a hatch, back eddies are usually more productive than runs. The duns get trapped and seem to circle endlessly--or until a trout sucks them down. For a trout, the back eddy is a quiet, safe place where meals are presented on an endless "lazy susan."

Learn to make slack casts. To overcome the intricacies of a back eddy's currents, learn to make pile casts and wiggle casts. These slack line casts will give you a few precious moments of drag-free drift.

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Don't ignore subsurface opportunities. Too many fly anglers ignore the subsurface action offered by emergers and egg-laying females.

Cast to foam lines and current pushes. When fishing back eddies, watch the lines of foam. The current that concentrates foam also concentrates insects and the trout that eat them. Cast so your fly lands in the foam line. Sometimes the current surges and creates a "push" of foam. When this happens, cast to its leading edge; that's where the trout are.

Sometimes you need a finer leader. On streams such as the Metolius and Fall rivers, you often need to go to a 7X tippet because of the clear water and fussy trout. On the Deschutes, however, a 5X tippet is usually adequate, but sometimes you need the flexibility of a 6X tippet so the fly will wiggle more naturally in the current.

Separate yourself from the crowd. One winter day on the Deschutes, I encountered one of the most massive BWO hatches I'd ever witnessed. I cast my Sparkle Dun into the back eddy, where it joined thousands of natural insects. A trout would rise; I would strike . . . then curse as I realized the trout had taken a dun two feet from my fly. My imitation was excellent--too excellent, since I couldn't distinguish it from the multitude of real insects. I solved the problem by tying on a slightly darker version of the same pattern. Now I could spot my fly in the crowd. The trout didn't care that it wasn't an exact match, and I had outstanding fishing.

Nothing is certain. I've never spent a winter day on a Western stream when there weren't a few BWOs hatching in the early afternoon. Never! But the strength of the hatch is notoriously variable, and it often fails to gather enough energy to interest trout. The best days are overcast and drizzly; the worst are warm and sunny. But some sunny days have produced outstanding hatches; conversely, I've sat shivering in a cold rain expecting a major BWO hatch, then saw only a handful of duns and one small, half-hearted trout that rose--once. If you go to the river you might have a decent hatch and good fishing, but if you stay home you are certain to catch nothing.

Scott Richmond is Westfly's creator and Executive Director. He is the author of eight books on Oregon fly fishing, including *Fishing Oregon's Deschutes River* (second edition).

Winter Midges

By Jeff Morgan

What do trout eat most in winter? Hint: it's not what most fly anglers cast to them. Here's a couple of fly patterns that will help you be productive during the cold months.



As a mild November turns into a frigid December; the idea of rising trout is something most anglers tuck into the back of their mind until spring . . . or at least until after the Super Bowl. Days are filled with holiday shopping, football bowls, holiday parties, and--if there is time to chase lethargic trout--lots and lots of indicator nymphing.

We all have our favorite winter indicator rigs. Mine is a Pupator and a small cream egg, to match the abundant whitefish spawn of the season. Other anglers like the trusty Prince and a tiny Pheasant Tail dropper. Following a winter rainstorm, some will tie on one of the most loved, loathed, and at times deadly flies, the San Juan Worm.

If you checked the stomach contents of a few dozen fish during the winter months, you would certainly find some of those eggs, aquatic worms, and Baetis nymphs and cased caddis larvae in stomach samples. However, day-in, day-out the midge is by far the most numerically dominant food for winter trout.



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Like the word "Spey," the word "midge" is a term fraught with assumptions for the angler. Many people hear "midge" and tense up, fearing the inevitable difficulties threading gossamer 7X tippet through the tiny eye of a size 22, 24, or (gulp) even a size 26 black pattern that would be impossible to see on the surface anyhow. While effective midge fishing often involves fishing small, dark flies on light tippet, we needn't lock ourselves into a rigid mold when it comes to midge patterns.

Larvae/Pupae

Substrate disturbances from current turbulence or wading anglers make midge larvae more available in rivers during the winter. However, the tiny size of these insects and the speed of any moving current make the relative difference between larvae and pupae miniscule, so one imitation for both should suffice.



There is a wide variety of proven midge pupa patterns, from the venerable Brassie to the WD-40. All are effective during most midge activity and are easily tied by anglers.



However, most tiers have trouble keeping the thorax and abdomen slim on small midge patterns. That's why I started tying the Minimus. This pattern is a simple, mini-sized variant of the several of the old still water chironomid patterns from the 1980's.

The Minimus is kept thin by only using a very fine silver wire rib, 8/0 thread body, and Ice-Dub thorax. The white CDC gills at the head and tail of the pattern are optional, and largely decorative (they don't help the fly float); however, they don't add much bulk to the fly.



This pattern is quick to tie and you only have to change the thread to change the body color. Olive-dun, brown, black, and tan are standard midge body colors, but some of my best success with this pattern has come with chartreuse and hot-pink bodies.

Adults

After browsing through hundreds of professional stomach sample reports, as well as doing my own sampling, it's clear that adult midges compose a tiny proportion of the average stream trout's diet. Adult midges, unlike mayflies and like caddis, remain on the water's surface for an extremely brief interval. A trailing "v" wake behind adult midges is a sign of their restless nature. Adult female midges lay their eggs by crawling down rocks or logs and laying eggs directly on the substrate. The same egg laying behavior in caddis and Baetis mayflies can result in heavy, selective feeding by trout. Yet, paradoxically, this behavior in midges seems relatively ignored by trout.



However, there are two times where imitating adults can be effective. The first is during cold or wet weather, which retards the ability of their tiny wings to dry. However, unless the fish are rising to midges, fishing a lone imitation is a slow, cold, and not very effective proposition.

Occasionally, however, you will see clusters of mating midges drifting or hovering on the surface of a stream in a whirring, buzzing mass. This is one of the rare occasions when adult midges can be particularly effective, since the large mass of insects is easier to imitate and more realistic than a single solitary midge floating down the water. Because clustered midges are both natural and big enough to move a fish more than a few inches, I prefer to imitate them rather than single adults.

The old reliable pattern for this cluster is the Griffiths Gnat. Rene Harrop and others improved on this fly by adding a tuft of white CDC as a wing, making the fly more visible and helping it to float a bit better. When playing around with the CDC Griffith's Gnat, I decided to forgo the hackle and peacock altogether, and simply dub a small, loose body of dun and black CDC--and BOOM!, the Dustmop was born.

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The combination of blended colors and light a whirring mass of adult midges. Since the suspend one or two dropper pupae and function



surface imprint gives an excellent impression of pattern is all CDC, it floats well enough to as a strike indicator.

Like most cluster midges, this pattern is most effective in larger sizes, such as 16-22. Sometimes the pattern can be torn up after a couple fish, and if you rib the fly with 7X tippet, it should hold up better.

Being Thorough

Thoroughness is the key to proper midge fishing. Trout in cold water will not move to hit a tiny nymph, so you have to put it on their nose. This means that midges are not effective "searching" patterns, but can be productive if you locate a pod of whitefish or trout or are fishing a lie where fish can be fairly accurately located (major seam or a back eddy). Don't fish midges if you want to cast twice to a lie and move on. Strikes to midge imitations often occur on the fifth, sixth, or seventh apparently identical drift, because the fly was just an inch or two closer to that lethargic trout.

The most important thing with midge fishing is confidence. Don't worry about acquiring an encyclopedic collection of patterns in a variety of colors and sizes. You can rarely play match-the-hatch with midge patterns: they must be fished so thoroughly you can rarely give them a fair shot if you're changing flies every 10 minutes. Find one or two favorite patterns in a couple of sizes and stick with them.

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