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**The Mayfly Nymph**

**By Cameron Larsen**

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Their names roll off the fly fisherman's tongue like the names of lost loves. Making the angler drool almost as much as the fish (if fish could drool). Hendricksons, Green Drakes, Pale Morning Dun. Just saying these names can do more to lower a fly fisherman's blood pressure than a month of yoga. Callibeatis, Blue Wing Olive, Tri-Co. If you are not in a state of Zen yet, remembering past fly fishing experiences, then you probably are not yet an avid trout fly fisherman.

For the novice, these names are the common names given to various species of the hallowed mayfly. The mayfly is to trout fly fishing, what the microchip is to the personal computer. Fly fishing never would have gotten off the ground if trout didn't leap up and ingest the adult mayfly, in a perfect display of sleek efficient survival. This microcosm of the food chain has sparked fly fisherman's imagination for generations. And has led to the explosion, we see today of the fly fishing experience.

But what about this insect called the mayfly. Let's take a closer look at the entire class of insect. The mayfly is so worthy of imitation for fly fisher's because they are varied, they are prolific, and they live where ever trout live with few exceptions. They require the same living conditions as trout, relatively clean and cool water. They can vary in size to the tiny Tri-co down to size 24, all the way up to the giant Hexagenia that can go up to size 4. Some can hatch virtually year around while others have a relatively specific and short hatch season. But despite all these variances there are some things we can learn about the species as a whole.

All mayflies begin their life cycle in the water, as nymphs. Now with the emphasis on keeping this simple, let me just break it down a little more. Nymphs can be classified in four distinct categories. They are: clingers, swimmers, burrowers, and crawlers.

Clingers are built broad and flat and like faster moving water. March Browns and Light Cahills fall into this category, their hatches are a little more sporadic, they can still offer excellent dry fly action. Their emergence is relatively quick do to the nature of water they ware found.

## The Mayfly Nymph

Swimmers like the Isonychias like pools, and slower runs and riffles. They are excellent swimmers and strikes for them tend to be vicious. They can hatch heavy or sporadic.

Crawlers also prefer softer runs and riffles. These species such as the Hendrickson's and Sulphur's have the hardest time emerging from their shucks. Therefore great fishing can be found drifting nymphs or emerger patterns just below the surface where fat fish love to slurp them up. Their hatches can be explosive and really send fish into a frenzy.

The burrowers like sandy or silt bottoms. They need the silt to burrow and survive. Their hatches tend to be legendary and very popular. These mayflies like the Drakes and Hexes, are large and infamous. However their hatches are very short-lived, and many people mark their calendars around them.

After the nymph stage comes the emerger stage, which we covered somewhat above. The emerger

stage is relatively new area of concentration for the fly angler. But it has exploded in popularity, as this stage is the most vulnerable for the mayfly. Not yet an adult and no longer a nymph, they are very clumsy in the water and are free floating as they rise to the surface. Whole groups of patterns have been designed just for this window of a mayfly's life.

For the novice fly fisher I hope this has given you a foundation for the appreciation you will surely grow to have of this class of insects. And for the ordained, now would be a good time to have your blood pressure checked. I will discuss the adult mayfly in a future article.

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## The Mayfly Adult

**By Cameron Larsen**

In our last article titled Mayfly Nymph. We covered the basics of the nymph stage of this crucial insect in the world of the freshwater game fish and fly fisherman. We now will cover the adult phases of the mayfly. Although most of its life is indeed spent as a nymph dwelling at the river or lake bottom. It is the adult insect that has truly captured the fancy of fly fisherman. It's the adults that were given the colorful names that we listed in the Mayfly Nymph article. And it is the adult that fly fishing elitists consider the only form worthy of imitation.

## The Mayfly Nymph

After spending a year or so as a nymph, the mayfly emerges to the surface. On the way, it sheds its outer skin, and pumps fluids into its wings. This emerging stage has caught on in popularity in the fly fishing world, as the mayfly emerger is extremely vulnerable. Many mayfly species are clumsy swimmers at best, and combine that with shedding their outer nymph skin, they become a flailing treat for the waiting trout.

Upon emerging they need to dry their wings. There they sit on top of the water, with their sailboat wings upright. The mayfly cannot fold their wings down, which also lends to their visibility for the waiting trout. At this stage they are called 'duns'. Usually duller in color, they can spend anywhere from a few seconds to a few minutes on top of the water. This is the stage where fly fishermen typically use dry flies to imitate the mayfly. Although each individual insect is only in this stage for a short time, mayflies can emerge by the thousands with the hatches lasting for several hours at a time. It is a joy of every fly angler to witness and participate in one of these hatches.

After drying their wings the mayflies fly to a nearby shrub, tree or bush. Not being very good fliers, their two or three tails, are thought to aid in stabilizing them, though to our eyes they appear like a lot for them to maneuver and carry. Here the duns molt into a second adult phase called spinners. Their second pair of wings now fully developed, they are also sexually mature. After a few hours or up to a day, they usually, though not always, return to over the water, where they mate. The males will swarm, and the females fly into the swarm and choose their mate.

After mating the females lay their eggs, and both male and female die. Trout also key on this stage as the 'spent wing' spinners give the mayfly one last chance to 'offer' itself to the awaiting trout. From our point of view it is hard to deny that the mayfly's life is nothing but a gift to the wild trout. And the recognition of this fact centuries ago was a gift of one careful observer to the generations of fly fishermen that have followed.

Cameron Larsen is a retired commercial fly tier and fly fishing guide. He now operates The Big Y Fly Company.

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