

MAY-FLY FISHING

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THE zeal of the confirmed angler is often puzzling to the uninitiated. The charitable may simply regard his zeal as misplaced; while to others he seems a sort of harmless lunatic, to be looked on with amused toleration. One of the stock comic situations has always been that of the fisherman returning home empty-handed. If wise, he will not try to argue with the Philistines; but secured in the faith by rich experience, he can in his turn afford to be tolerant.

Upon one thing only will he insist, namely, that it is not necessary to catch fish in order to be a happy angler. There must, of course, be at least a prospect of success, but the joy of fishing is not measured solely by the size of the catch. The sport appeals to something very deep-rooted in the nature of man, for the delight of the chase is a natural instinct, honestly come by. It is a temptation to go into the whys and wherefores of this, and to dwell upon the pleasures peculiar to fishing. But to do so would smack of an attempt at justification or conversion, and both should be renounced. Before leaving the general for the particular, however, one significant fact should be noted: on no other sport or pastime has so much been written, or, on occasions, so high a standard been reached. Witness Isaac Walton, or in our own time Sir Edward Grey's *Fly-fishing*.

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There are many varieties of sport fishing to be found in the Province of Nova Scotia, and the question sometimes comes up as to which is the best. Needless to say, it is one to which no unanimous answer will ever be given, for this is a matter of taste. If I may venture a personal opinion, pride of place should be given to may-fly fishing for speckled trout. At the risk of boring the readers of a University Quarterly, I shall try to give some idea of the nature of this sport, and to add a fragment of natural history which is not generally known.

In judging the merits of a particular kind of fishing, three factors at least should come in; the prospect of the catch, the attractiveness of the season, and the nature and technique of the fishing itself.

True to its name, the may-fly appears in the early part of May. Unfortunately the magnificent sport which it occasions lasts but

a few days. During this period the trout feed ravenously upon the flies, and show themselves more than at any other time. The odds in favour of a good catch are at their best; and, moreover, the trout, when hooked, fight most gamely in the cold water.

The time of year is pleasant; March and April have slowly dragged out their uncertain course, and the promise of spring which is so inviting one day is rudely withdrawn the next. By such tactics have they earned their reputation as the worst months in the Nova Scotian calendar. May is different. Spring is not only in the air, it penetrates one's very being. There comes upon a large proportion of the male population the impulse to go fishing, an impulse so insistent that it should properly be called a fever. There may be other outlets for long pent-up emotions—gardening and golf come to mind—but they can wait. When the word goes forth that the may-fly is on, the only thing to do is to go, and go at once.

Afoot or by car, fishermen laden with gear and provisions throng the roads leading from city or town. The frost has come out of the ground, and travel on the roads is inviting. The brooks are full, and running water is heard everywhere. Snow still lies in the deep woods. The fresh green of growing things is a new note contrasting with the accustomed dark tones of the evergreens. In shady spots the mayflower is still in full bloom. For some days bunches of it have been in the house, where its fragrance has stirred up thoughts of may-fly and trout. This association of a favourite fishing time with one of Nature's choicest gifts is not unique. There comes to my mind the so-called "strawberry run" of sea-trout and grilse at the height of the season for that incomparable berry; or the mushrooms in Margaree meadows during the salmon run of late September.

Coming to technique, we find the actual methods of angling many and varied. Each has its devotees, but out of the long experience of countless anglers certain opinions have crystallized. For instance, it is fairly generally agreed that fishing with a fly calls for greater skill and yields more enjoyment than the use of a worm or other bait. This does not mean that a skilled bait fisherman is the inferior of a poor caster, but merely that the use of a fly is more and more preferred as experience is gained by the average man.

Among fly casters there is a difference of opinion as to whether a wet or a dry fly is the better, and here again the trend of experience turns towards the latter. In fact it is possible for a man to become so enamoured of the floating fly as to find little pleasure

in any other method, and he becomes known as a "dry fly purist". Further one can hardly go in the hierarchy of angling.

Again, there is fairly general agreement that light tackle is preferable to heavy. A slender rod, light line, delicate leader of the finest gut and a tiny fly are objectives which need be limited only by the purse and the ultimate strength of materials. Thus the choice falls upon the use of a dry fly with the lightest of tackle. These demands are fully satisfied by may-fly fishing, as will appear from the sequel.

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The may-fly belongs to the ephemeridae. The family name is expressive, for the life of these flies is only one or two days. Another member of the family is the green drake, which appears on midsummer evenings. It, too, provides good sport, but that is another story. The may-flies appear around the borders of our lakes, being seldom found more than a few feet from the water's edge. They are capable of but a short flight, and are quite harmless. Indeed they are fragile things, clinging to bushes and stones. Those who have not seen them (and it is surprising how many there are) can have no idea of the enormous numbers in which they occur. On a piece of rock the size of one's hand there may be literally hundreds of flies, each with its wings erect, the whole looking like a great fleet of boats under full sail. After sitting by the shore for a few minutes, one's clothes will become covered with them crowding and crawling to the leeward side.

The life history of this insect is interesting. It exists as a larva throughout the winter, living in the mud on the bottom of the lake. In this state it goes through many transformations, casting its skin more than twenty times. When the ice goes out and the water has warmed up sufficiently, the larva comes to the surface. In a few minutes its latest coat splits asunder, and the fly emerges dry and perfect, and makes its way to higher ground. It is an interesting sight to watch the process. From a creeping larva, looking much like a very small shell fish, a delicate perfect fly miraculously appears. The empty cases lie on the water and are blown into corners by the wind, forming a scum of many millions of cast-off garments.

In the winged stage the fly works its way to higher ground or up on the bushes, occasionally making short flights. Many fall or are blown into the water, over which they sail gaily away across the lake toward the further shore. Few may reach there,

for in their helpless course they are perfect food for the trout, which gorge themselves upon them. It is here that the angler gets his chance.

Meanwhile those flies which have remained ashore undergo yet another transformation, in which there is a further skin-shedding, not only of the body integument but of the wing membrane as well. In this respect they are unique, for they are the only insects in which a moult occurs after the power of flight has been acquired. In the penultimate stage they are known as subimagos, and in the final stage, imagos. English anglers call them duns and spinners respectively. The scientist can make his exact descriptions, but for our purpose it is enough to say that the subimago has a fat brown body, while the imago is darker and thinner and has more fragile wings. When the wind drops and the sun is warm, they will rise in clouds as at a signal and hover in the air for a few minutes, filling the air with the soft sound of beating wings. The eggs are laid and sink to the mud on the bottom, where the life cycle begins anew; while the mature fly dies once its purpose has been achieved.

Observant fishermen had long been aware of two different sorts of flies, one occurring before the other. The earlier, being more robust, was immensely superior from the angler's standpoint to the later flabby, dark-bodied fly. There was considerable doubt as to the nature of these two sorts, some arguing that they were male and female, others that there were two distinct species. The mystery was solved when various specimens were examined in Ottawa through the courtesy of Dr. McDunnough of the Entomological Branch. The answer was simple. All were of the same species, the earlier being in the subimago stage and the later the imago. The species was identified as *Blasturus nebulosus* Walker, the second name deriving from the smoky patches found on the wings of the male imago, which readily distinguish it from the female. The males may be further distinguished by the large eyes, the much longer fore legs, and the characteristic forcep-like appendages at the posterior end of the abdomen.

When the majority of the flies on a lake are in the black or imago stage, it is a sure sign that the fishing is about over and that it is time to seek some other lake where the hatch is later in appearing. There is a lake not a mile from city limits, where in a warm corner the may-fly is out days before it appears anywhere else. Then again, there are lakes in remote and exposed situations

where the flies come last of all. With favourable weather and a judicious choice of lakes, the fishing may be followed for well over a week.

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Suppose it is a day early in May, preferably fine and warm, with just enough breeze to blow the flies out over the water. A party of old friends start out early for a lake which has been carefully chosen in the light of the experience of former years. The pleasure of anticipation has been well aroused by the recollection of these experiences and the preliminary overhauling of tackle.

A tramp through swampy paths, for which rubber boots are essential, takes the party to the lake. If a boat be available, so much the better, but this is mainly a convenience in getting to the desired spot quickly. The actual fishing is nearly always done from the shore. An ideal spot is a point off which the wind is blowing, with bold water coming up close to the shore. On the way a keen watch is kept for signs of fly on the water and of rising fish.

It is well to pause a moment and survey the tackle to be used. The rod is very light, and the line need not be long. On the end is fastened a long length of fine gut (2X). The hook is No. 16 size, hardly bigger than the letter J of this print. It is snelled, that is, attached to a small length of gut by which it is joined to the leader. It might be noted that it is well to have two or three of these hooks soaking in the cast box ready for use. They are fragile and easily broken, and this little precaution may save precious moments when the trout are rising.

The gear having been connected, the leader and line must be greased with deer fat or some patent preparation so as to float on the water. One or two bits of cork may be attached to the line, partly to assist in floating it, but mainly as a guide to the eye in distinguishing the lure on water crowded with flies or broken by the wind. Then a good may-fly is caught and impaled on the hook. Therein lies one of the great secrets of success. When dropped on the water, the fly on the hook should sit up with wings set just as the natural fly. Some anglers try putting two or more flies on the one hook, but it is doubtful if this is as effective. Now the lure must be launched on the water. The gear is too light and the fly too fragile to permit easy casting. All that can usually be done is to waft the line upward and allow the breeze to carry it out. It is not so easy to put out a perfect lure as it sounds. Many times the fly will come off or lie drowned on the water, particu-

larly with the frail imagos. Such a lure is almost useless, and should be retrieved. Many attempts have been made to evolve a method of attaching the fly otherwise than by impaling it, but no satisfactory way has yet been found. Artificial may-flies too have been tried and found wanting.

When the fly lies correctly on the water, there is little to do but wait tensely until it is taken by the trout. It takes a keen eye and a quick reaction time to hook the fish which has seized the lure. A moment's delay, and it has disgorged the fly. It is impossible to strike too soon, for the fly is taken without warning. However, the action of setting the hook must not be done with a heavy hand, as then too often the angler is left with a line from which the hook is missing.

This sort of fishing is known locally as "midging", and is quite different from the sport practised at other times. Make no mistake—it is an art. Good fishermen have been ready to give up in despair on their first attempts.

Suppose a few flies are floating on the water, and trout are busily feeding upon them. You drop your fly on the spot where it is likely the trout will appear next. Suddenly you hear a "plop", and the fly alongside disappears in a swirl of water and a glimpse of back or tail. An instant later a similar fate will befall another fly nearby. Will yours be the next? The tenseness of this moment is surpassed only by the satisfaction felt when a perfectly timed turn of the wrist sets the hook home.

Next few minutes produce a battle which is not too one-sided, for the trout often proves victorious. Careful handling is necessary, too, for the tackle is not strong enough to bear the weight of the madly struggling fish. When played and brought close to shore, it must be lifted out with a landing net. The man who lands a two-pound trout on such gear is literally exhausted at the end of the struggle.

Such episodes are the excitements of the day. For a few minutes the trout will rise so freely that the water is said to be "boiling". Then comes a pause, lasting perhaps for hours, in which not a trout rises. To attract them, the fisherman will drive out numbers of flies from the bushes, and send out whole flotillas which go sailing across the lake unharmed as far as the eye can reach. Sometimes bunches of dead leaves will be thrown out for the same purpose, but often to no avail. The trout is a temperamental creature and is not to be coaxed. Indeed at the rate at which they gorge themselves it is a wonder they are able to move after the first few hours' feeding.

In the lulls there is time to smoke a pipe and tell fish-stories. Then too a meal can be prepared and eaten on the shores of the lake; but if the fish start rising again, there is no time to finish dinner, for such moments are too precious.

So passes the day—periods of intense excitement separated by calms when there is time to look about and talk and think. One thought likely to arise is that year after year the mayfly will return, and as long as life and even a small measure of health are granted, the same pleasures will gladden the angler's heart.