



# PICKING THE RIGHT FLY FOR ANY FISHING SITUATION



The logo for Ventures Fly Co. is located in the bottom right corner. It features a stylized fly fishing hook with a fly attached, positioned above the company name "VENTURES FLY CO." in a bold, sans-serif font. A small circular emblem is located at the bottom right of the text.

# GUIDEBOOK #1

# BUG ROADMAP

- 1** INTRODUCTION
- 2** PART 1: BASICS OF MATCHING THE HATCH
- 3** CHAPTER 1: WHY FLY CHOICE MATTERS
- 5** CHAPTER 2: OBSERVATIONAL SKILLS
- 15** PART 2: SPECIFIC FLY PATTERNS
- 16** CHAPTER 3: MAYFLIES
- 27** CHAPTER 4: CADDISFLIES
- 31** CHAPTER 5: MIDGEES
- 35** CHAPTER 6: STONEFLIES
- 45** CHAPTER 7: SCUDS, SOW BUGS, TERRESTRIALS
- 52** WRAPPING UP & CONTACT US

# INTRODUCTION

If this is your first time with us here at Ventures Fly Co., welcome! I'm glad to have you in the community. If this isn't your first interaction with VFC, I'm stoked you're back!

The goal with this eBook – and really, all the content we produce here at VFC – is to help anglers improve. I know from my experience as a guide and fishing writer that one of the biggest pain points for anglers is learning to match the flies in their box to the bugs fish are actually eating.

This guidebook will walk you through that entire process. It's a crash course in learning to identify what fish are likely eating, matching that to a fly in your box, and putting more fish in the net. Like any skill, this one takes practice, but it's surprisingly easy to master.

So, grab your favorite beverage, get comfortable, and get ready to learn!

Spencer Durrant  
Guide, Writer, Host of the Untangled Podcast  
June, 2023

# PART 1

# THE BASICS OF MATCHING THE HATCH



# CHAPTER 1 - WHY FLY CHOICE MATTERS

I grew up fishing for trout, but I used a lot of lures and bait back in the day. My dad — understandably so — wasn't always willing to part with his fly rod, especially when I was younger. So, I spent a ton of time rifling through the lures at the local sporting goods store, trying to pick between what I thought looked good and what I thought the trout might like.

All these years later, I still go through that process, with flies instead of lures or bait. Learning how to pick the right fly for a given fishing situation was probably the biggest learning curve I faced when I decided to dedicate myself to fly fishing. I've talked to a lot of beginning anglers who feel the same way.

Picking the right fly is tough, especially if you're a self-taught angler. But it's a crucial skill that you have to develop if you want to put fish in the net. Sure, you might get lucky with a spray-and-pray approach, but that runs counter to what fly fishing is all about.

At its core, fly anglers are trying to present a reasonable imitation of a food item to a fish in a natural, lifelike manner. Whether that food item is a baitfish or a mayfly nymph, there's a technique to presenting that fly, *and* choosing it. You can have the best presentation technique in the world, but it won't matter if you're using the wrong fly.

And by wrong fly, what I mean is, using a fly that fish aren't likely to eat in that circumstance.

For example, say there's a good caddis hatch coming off on a river. The fish are almost certainly keyed in on caddis, and won't pay much attention to a pale-morning dun imitation.

Fly choice matters because it's at the heart of fly fishing. And it's not as tough as you might assume.

You don't need a PhD in entomology, and you certainly don't need to know the Latin names of aquatic insects, to learn how to identify what bugs fish are eating, and matching that information to a pattern in your box. It's a straightforward process that you'll quickly get the hang of.



# CHAPTER 2 - OBSERVATIONAL SKILLS

Picking the right fly starts with your ability to observe the world around you. Even without a knowledge of aquatic insects, you can pick the right fly for any fishing situation by looking at three distinct parts of the natural world:

- What's **on** the water
- What's **in** the water
- What's **around** the water

Let's dive into each of these in more detail.

## IDENTIFYING WHAT'S ON THE WATER

When you first pull up to the river, leave your fly rod in the case and just spend a few minutes observing the river's surface. You'll learn a ton from just five minutes of observing the water.

What bugs are on the water's surface? What's buzzing in the air? Are fish eating off the river's surface? If bugs and fish are active on the water's surface, then your fly choice is a no-brainer – you need a dry fly. If not, let's see what's happening underwater.



## IDENTIFYING WHAT'S IN THE WATER

Even if you see some bugs on the water's surface, it's always a good idea to check out what bugs are swimming beneath. The vast majority of a trout's diet is nymphs, so fishing a nymph is almost always a good bet.

Turn over some rocks and pay attention to the bugs you see. Simply observing what bugs are crawling around beneath the water's surface can help you make an educated fly choice. Take note of what you see, too – are the bugs small, or big? Do they have segmented bodies, tons of legs, and large tails? These details are key to picking the right fly.



# IDENTIFYING WHAT'S AROUND THE WATER

Lastly, pay attention to any bugs you see and hear in the grass or trees near the river. Cicadas make an awful racket, and grasshoppers can, too. Watch and listen to see if there are any terrestrial (land-based) insects that fish might be snacking on. Wind can knock these bugs into the water, and they're an insanely high-protein food source for fish that are always on the hunt for their next meal. Trout chase terrestrial insects with the kind of reckless abandon of kids running after an ice cream truck.

As you observe what's on, in, or near the water, you'll gather plenty of clues to help you make a good fly choice. So, let's go through how you use all this information to pick the right fly.

## OBSERVATIONAL SKILLS SUMMARY



BUGS FLYING OR  
ON WATER'S  
SURFACE



DRY FLY



BUGS UNDER  
ROCKS OR LOGS



NYMPH



BIG BUGS IN  
BUSHES OR  
TREES



TERRESTRIAL



## PUT IT INTO PRACTICE - MATCHING THE HATCH

You've used your observational skills and found some bugs that you think the fish are eating. Believe it or not, that's the hardest part of this entire process. Now, all you have to do is match the bug you found to a fly in your box. This is what we commonly refer to in fly fishing as "matching the hatch."

Where should you start when trying to match the hatch, though? Should you look for an exact match in your box to a bug you found in, on, or near the water? Or is it good enough to find one that's the right color?

In short, you want to match the hatch based on:

- Size
- Shape
- Color

Let's dive into each of those in greater detail.

## SIZE MATTERS

Some bugs are inherently bigger than others. Scuds – a popular nymph – are usually a lot bigger than midge nymphs. Stoneflies are often larger than mayflies, in both nymph and dry fly forms. So, the first step to picking the right fly is to settle on a pattern that's close in size to what you've observed on, in, or near the water.

If you see fish actively rising and eating bugs on the surface, you should turn to your dry flies. If there's not much surface action happening but you find plenty of bugs under some rocks, start sorting through your nymphs.

At this stage, only look for flies that are similar in size to the real bugs you just observed.

This is why you need a good variety of size among the fly patterns in your box. I like to carry nymphs and dry flies in sizes 12 – 18, because those tend to cover most of my fishing situations. The more you fish, the more you'll get a feel for the variety of size you need for your specific waters.



## SHAPE IS NEXT

After size, shape is the next most important factor to base your fly choice on.

Take a long look at the fly you're trying to imitate. For the sake of argument, let's say you found a bunch of bugs under a submerged rock, so you decide to tie on a nymph. The insects look like they're about a size 16. They look something like this:



This bug has a slender, segmented body, no real legs, and no real tail. Based on those characteristics, you decide that the zebra midge in your box most closely matches this bug. A zebra midge looks like this:



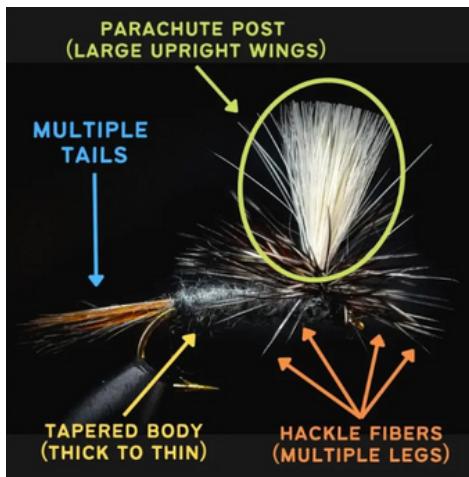
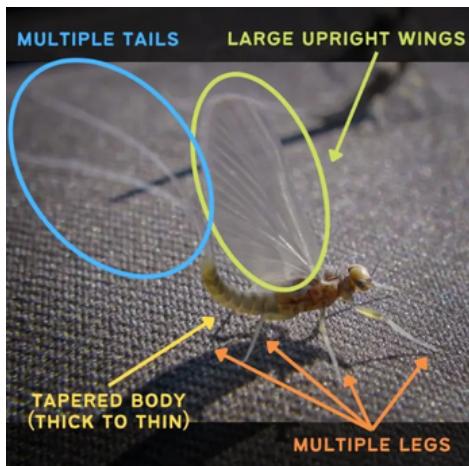
While the zebra midge fly doesn't look exactly like the bug you found under a rock, it's a pretty close match. That's what you're trying to do here – make a match to your flies that's as close as possible to what you found in the water. Most flies don't look exactly like a real insect, either, so don't expect an exact match.

If you decided to match a dry fly, you might have found a bug that looks like this, floating down the river's surface:



Let's say this fly looks like it's about a size 14, so you look through your dry flies to find some that match that size. Then, you start looking at this bug's characteristics. It has long, slender tails, a segmented body, and big wings.

Again you're not looking for an exact match in your box. Get as close as you can. In this instance, a Parachute Adams (see picture below) is a good match for the bug you found floating on the water.



## MATCH THE COLOR IF YOU CAN

The least important factor to match is color. Trout care far more about the size and shape of your flies than they do the color. If you have a fly in your box that's a perfect size, shape, and color match – awesome! If it matches size and shape, but it's the wrong color, don't be afraid to use it. The fish will usually ignore the color, so long as you get the size and shape correct.

Color becomes more important if you're fishing heavily pressured tailwaters. Fish that see a ton of flies from hundreds of anglers grow more discerning, and key in on certain colors. The more flies you have, the better chance you have to find a match, and start putting fish in the net.



# IDENTIFYING RISE FORMS

There's a final thing to look for when trying to match a dry fly hatch – the rise form.

A rise form is the disturbance a fish makes when it rises to eat a dry fly. Depending on what they're eating, trout create different rise forms. Reading the rise form can tell you if a fish is eating:

- Emergers
- Duns
- Cripples

Let's dive into each of those in more detail.

## EMERGER AND CRIPPLE RISES

Trout eating emergers create a unique rise form. Instead of seeing a fish's head when it eats, you only see the back and tail fin. This happens because fish are eating bugs as they travel to the surface or are stuck in the surface film – emergers and cripples.

The rise form on an emerger or cripple will be incredibly similar, which is why they're grouped together here.



# DUN AND SPINNER RISES

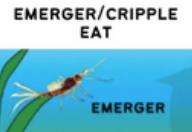
When trout eat duns, they create the classic dry fly rise form. Their head breaks the surface, leaving behind the “ring of the rise” we’re so familiar with.

Trout also eat spinners or spent-wings with a rise that looks like a dun rise. Spinners and spent-wings are two names for the same fly – the dead or dying mayfly that’s finished mating and “spins” back down to the water’s surface.

## RISE FORMS: EMERGER VS DUN



- You see a fish break the surface
- You **only** see the fish's back and tail fins



- You see a fish break the surface
- You see the fish's nose and head



# PART 2:

# SPECIFIC FLY PATTERNS



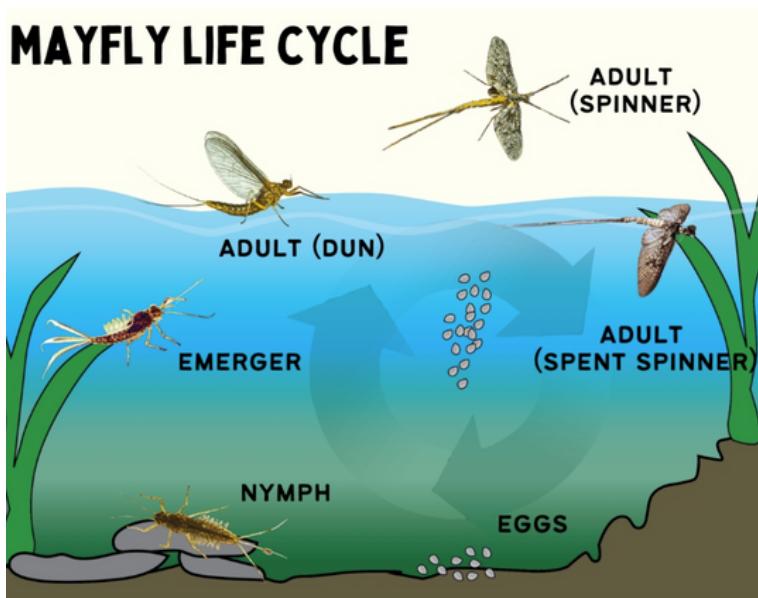
# CHAPTER 3 - MAYFLIES

Now that we've covered the basics of matching the bugs you see to the patterns in your box, it's time to level up your insect identification skills. Once you learn how to spot certain aquatic insects, you'll have a whole new level of confidence when it comes to tying on a fly.

## MAYFLY LIFE CYCLE

Before we get into the details of the bugs themselves, we need to learn about the life cycle of a mayfly.

Even with the huge diversity of species, mayflies all follow the same general life cycle. They begin as a nymph, become an emerger, hatching into the adult – or dun – version of the aquatic insect, before mating and falling, spent-winged, back to the water.



Now, the ability to tell if fish are eating the emerger or the dun can make or break your success during a mayfly hatch. We will cover that more in a minute.

Adult mayflies are characterized by their long, slender segmented bodies, upright wings, and forked tails. The nymph versions of mayflies are short, dark bugs with three pairs of legs, a segmented body, and clearly forked tail. They come in a variety of sizes and colors, all the way from a size 8 down to a size 26.

## MAJOR MAYFLY TYPES

With over 3,000 mayfly species on the planet, learning to recognize them all is an impossible task. On top of that, there are over 150 species of blue-winged olives!

Thankfully, we don't have to memorize each species of each type of mayfly. The old joke about a guy on a river in a tweed jacket, smoking a pipe, and calling mayflies by their Latin names exists for a reason – anglers like that are real. I've met them.

You don't need to be that angler. Thank goodness.

You do need enough actionable information, though, to identify bugs and pick a fly that matches what fish are eating. To that end, you should focus on knowing these mayflies in particular:

- Blue-winged olives (BWOs)
- Pale morning duns (PMDs)
- Drakes
- Tricos
- Callibaetis

# BLUE-WINGED OLIVES (BWOs)

Blue-winged olives (BWOs) are one of the most easily recognizable mayflies. Anglers look forward to the fall and spring hatches of BWOs because these bugs hatch thick enough to bring trout of all sizes to the surface – even big ones.

## RECOGNIZING BWOs

Blue-winged olives are the first and last mayflies to hatch each year. Early spring and late fall are typically when BWOs hatch in earnest. Spring BWOs come off from April through May, and fall BWOs hatch during September and October.

However, some mayflies hatch during the same time as BWOs. To tell them apart, remember that BWOs have the following features:

- Dark to light olive colored bodies
- Smaller in size, around 16 for a dun. Occasionally as large as a size 14
- Light blue wings



The patterns I'd recommend most for fishing a BWO hatch include:

- Parachute BWO – my favorite BWO dun imitation
- Frenchie – works well when fish are eating BWO nymphs
- Barr's Emerger – a fantastic emerger pattern
- Sparkle Dun – a good choice for either emergers or spent-wings

MONTH	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
BLUE-WINGED OLIVE <b>ACTIVITY</b>												

# PALE MORNING DUNS (PMDS)

Pale morning duns are, for me, the sign that summer is officially here. They begin hatching in earnest in June, and continue throughout the summer. Some of my best fishing is during PMD hatches on tailwaters.

## RECOGNIZING PMDS

The PMD hatch overlaps with brown and green Drakes, so you'll likely see some PMDs mixing with those bugs. Luckily, PMDs are easy to identify. They have the following features:

- Light-yellow colored body
- Usually larger than BWOs, often a 14
- Clear, gray wings



The patterns I'd most recommend for a PMD hatch are:

- Parachute PMD – great dun imitation
- Hare's Ear – one of my favorite mayfly nymphs ever
- Sparkle Dun – a good choice for either emergers or spent-wings



## DRAKES

Drakes are among the biggest mayflies, which makes them a special treat for trout. Some of the biggest fish you'll catch all year will likely come during a Drake hatch. Drakes are among the first big flies to hatch, and they come off right before, or during, runoff. That combines to make them an easy, must-have meal for trout just waking up from a long winter. Drakes come in two general varieties, for angling purposes – green and brown. Green Drakes hatch in mid-May through June, and Brown Drakes hatch immediately after the Green Drakes.

Since Drakes are such large flies, they're easier to spot and identify. Green Drakes, as their name implies, have a vibrant green body, while Brown Drakes have an earthy brown body.

- Green body for Green Drakes, brown body for Brown Drakes
- Long, segmented body
- Large – up to a size 8



The flies I'd recommend most for fishing either a brown or green Drake hatch are:

- Green Drake Dun – a classic pattern
- Purple Haze – a great way to mix it up on pressured waters
- Flashback Pheasant Tail – time-tested nymph for big mayflies



# TRICOS

A trico is an extremely small mayfly that hatches in huge numbers. They're common on tailwaters, and trout love them because tricos can't escape as quickly as other, larger mayflies can. Tricos hatch later in the summer, starting in July and going through August.

## RECOGNIZING TRICOS

Tricos can come in a variety of colors, but they're always small, and always have three tails. While small, they still maintain the classic mayfly body shape. Remember that tricos hatch in July through August. This is outside the window of other mayflies, and most midges. So, if you see small flies buzzing around the water's surface that time of year – and you observe trout eating them – it's a safe bet those flies are tricos.

- Dark colored body, usually black, brown, or green
- Extremely small – size 18 to 26
- Classic mayfly shape



Some flies I'd recommend to have along during a trico hatch:

- Parachute Trico – a must have for fishing this hatch
- Griffiths Gnat – a great choice if the fish are eating bunches of tricos at once



# CALLIBAETIS

This mayfly hatches in stillwater environments (lakes and ponds), and is one of the most exciting hatches you'll ever fish. Callibaetis mayflies hatch in large blankets, which causes the trout to eat without any care in the world. They'll often rise for callibaetis flies in a straight line, making casting for these hungry fish an easy task of placing your fly just ahead of the trout. This hatch occurs during May all the way through August.

## RECOGNIZING CALLIBAETIS

These are larger mayflies with pale, earth-tone bodies. They have exceptionally thin bodies, but otherwise have the classic mayfly profile.

- Larger, sizes 12 – 16
- Earth-tone color
- Thin, slender bodies



The flies I'd recommend you have along for a callibaetis hatch include:

- Parachute Adams – a classic fly that still slays today
- Light Cahill – great for the smaller, lighter callibaetis hatches later in the summer

MONTH	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
CALLIBAETIS ACTIVITY												



# CHAPTER 4 - CADDISFLIES

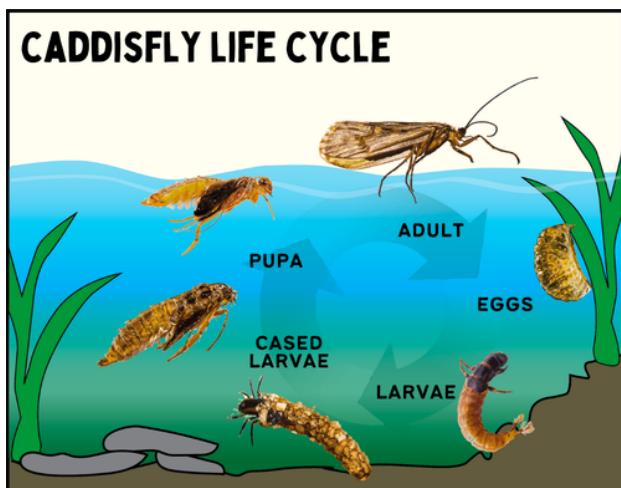
Caddisflies might be the most abundant food source in most trout rivers. These flies are a favorite of both fish and anglers. Caddisflies hatch for a long period of time, providing consistent fishing opportunities as the mayfly and stonefly hatches wind down.

Caddisflies are also among the easiest of the aquatic insects to both identify and imitate.

## CADDISFLY LIFE CYCLE

Unlike mayflies and stoneflies, caddisflies have both a larval and pupal stage. In layman's terms, that means there are two stages of caddis nymphs. With mayflies, for example, there's only one nymph stage.

A caddis hatches from its egg and spends the first part of its life as a larvae. At this point, a caddis looks like a small worm with a heavily segmented body. Caddis are usually some interesting shade of green at this point in their life.



After the larval stage, caddis grow into a pupa. A pupal caddis builds a cocoon in which it lives until it's ready to hatch as an adult.

Now, something important to note here: you've probably heard the phrase "cased caddis." Caddis are pretty ingenious little bugs, and often build small cases out of rock and other river debris, in which they live as a larvae. Their cocoons look similar to these rock cases, too. A cased caddis pattern can be used to imitate both a larval or pupal caddisfly. Not all caddis larvae live in cases, however. Some are "free-swimming"



So, back to the life cycle – once caddis are ready to hatch, they emerge quickly to the surface where they escape the water as quickly as possible. Unlike mayflies, caddisflies spend as little time as possible on the water. In fact, adult caddisflies almost never willingly drift along the water's surface until it's time to mate. If you see an adult caddis drifting on the water's surface, it's probably a crippled adult.

Adult caddisflies are easy to spot – they look almost like moths. They have long, tent-like wings that fold against their body, which is usually slightly tapered and comes in a variety of colors. Caddisflies have long antennae facing forward off their head, and fly with a fluttering motion.

MONTH	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
CADDISFLY ACTIVITY												

Caddis hatch from late spring (usually around Mother's Day) through fall. Some of the biggest hatches occur an hour or so before sunset, especially during summer.

## MATCH THE CADDIS HATCH

Now that we know what caddisflies are, their life cycle, and the rise forms trout create when eating caddis off the surface, we're ready to dive into matching a caddis hatch.

Really, matching just about any caddis hatch boils down to the following:

- Match the size of the caddis on the water/in the air
- Match the color of the caddis on the water/in the air
- Match the hatch stage if trout are keyed in on something

As with any hatch, you want to match the size of your fake bug to the real ones on the water. Size is the most important factor to consider when choosing a fly to imitate a real aquatic insect. Most caddis fall between a size 14 and 18. You'll rarely need anything outside of that range.

Caddis hatch with a wide variety of colors. From light tan to dark gray, you need to have a lot of colors of caddis in your box.

Some fish, especially on heavily-pressured rivers like tailwaters, will get picky about the color of the caddis.

The only caddis that sort of breaks this mold is the October Caddis. This bug is huge, has a bright orange body, and hatches in late fall – often in October. The October Caddis is usually the last big bug to hatch on any given trout river.

Finally, you may find some trout that really only want an emerging or crippled caddis, instead of the adult. Trout tend to care a bit less about this than they do with mayflies, but it's still a good idea to have a solid collection of emerging, crippled, and adult caddis patterns in your box.

Speaking of patterns – these are the ones you absolutely need while on the water:



ELK HAIR CADDIS



PARACHUTE CADDIS



CADDIS LARVA



MOP FLY



PHEASANT TAIL

- Elk Hair Caddis – the GOAT of caddisflies
- Mop Fly – a fantastic free-swimming caddis nymph imitation
- Olive Caddis Larvae – a must-have if fish are eating caddis nymphs
- Flashback Pheasant Tail – can be used to imitate a cased caddis if needed
- Parachute Caddis – great for imitating egg-laying or emerging caddisflies

# CHAPTER 5 - MIDGEES

According to renowned guide Pat Dorsey, midges make up as much as 50% of a trout's diet in certain watersheds – not unlike the percentage of my diet that's made up of potato chips...

Kidding aside, midges really are that abundant. They're stacked in racks at every trout gas station and grocery store on the planet, in just about any flavor you can imagine.

Dorsey has guided on Colorado's South Platte River for decades now, and he's an authority on midges. In an article for *Fly Fisherman Magazine*, he says that anglers who are intimidated by fishing midges are often worried about using "spiderweb tippets and minuscule flies."

That's a fair concern, but not all midge fishing has to be done with tiny patterns. As with any other aquatic insect, you'll be successful at fishing midges once you understand and recognize their life cycle.

## WHAT IS A MIDGE?

Midge has become a bit of a catch-all term for any small fly, so it's important to note here: midges are a distinct species of aquatic insect. Midges are small, yes, but not every small fly is a midge. Midges are a distinct insect, just like caddisflies, mayflies, and stoneflies.

And as with caddisflies and mayflies, there are a ton of different types of midges.

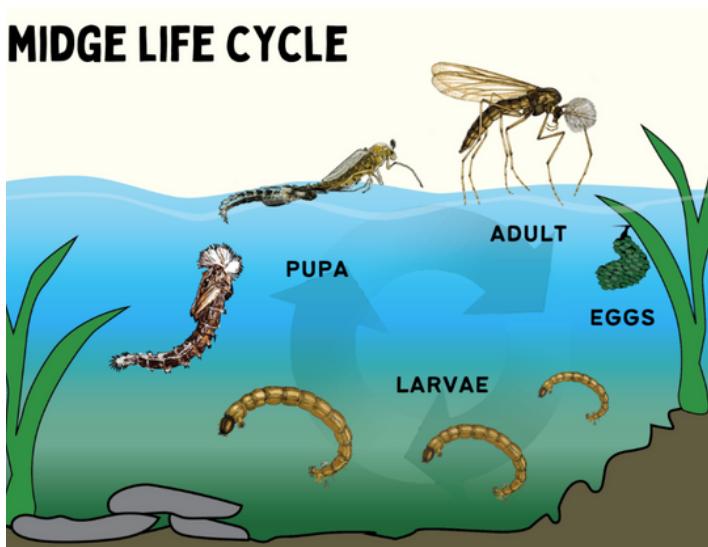
Like those bugs, though, you only need to understand the following before you're ready to fish with midges:

- Midge life cycle
- What a midge looks like
- Best patterns to imitate midges

Even though midges are tiny bugs, they're not all that tough to fish. Even midge dry flies are simple, and understanding these bugs gives you a tool you can use year-round. Just this past winter I caught a 22-inch cutthroat on a midge dry fly. So, don't let the size of a midge prevent you from fishing one.

Now – let's move on to the need-to-know info about midges.

## MIDGE LIFE CYCLE



The midge life cycle is similar to that of mayflies. A midge starts life as a larvae, when it looks like a short, curved worm with a segmented body. If you overturn rocks to look for bugs in a trout river, you'll almost certainly find a few midges wiggling around.

The next stage is the pupal stage, when a midge gets ready to emerge as an adult. A midge pupa is shorter, fatter, and more heavily segmented than the larvae.

Finally, a midge becomes an adult, which is characterized by a slim body, small head, small legs, and short, flat wings tucked against its side. This is when midges look similar to mosquitoes.

Midges hatch year-round, even during winter. Their abundance makes them a constant food source for trout in virtually every river.

MONTH	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
MIDGE ACTIVITY	YEAR ROUND											

## MATCHING THE MIDGE HATCH

Matching the midge hatch is like pairing the right chips with your sandwich – do you go for the classic plain potato chips, or opt for something spicy to give your meal a kick? The choices are just about endless.

That's how it can feel when you're picking a fly to match a midge hatch. With so many options, where do you even start?

Start by looking at the real midges on, or in, the water. Then, you want to pick a fly based on these characteristics:

- Size: This is the most important factor when choosing a fly. Your fly needs to be the same size as all the real bugs you see in or on the water.
- Shape: Midges all share generally the same shape, but this is still important when picking a fly.
- Color: Color is the least important characteristic to match with your fly. Some fish on heavily pressured waters might get picky about color, but most don't.

## GO-TO MIDGE PATTERNS

- Zebra Midge – a time-tested, classic fly that works everywhere
- WD40 – perfect for adding variety to your midge larvae patterns
- Shop Vac – a fun pattern for midges that are close to emerging
- Rainbow Warrior – not really a midge pattern, but works well in some instances
- Griffiths Gnat – perfect for imitating a cluster of midges
- Parachute Adams - This fly really can imitate just about any bug!

# CHAPTER 6 - STONEFLIES

Stoneflies are the Corvette of the bug world. Fast, nimble, and unquestionably attractive, in a mechanical sort of way. You'll stare whenever you see one, but spotting them isn't completely uncommon.

Trout treat stoneflies in a similar fashion. Usually, trout at least look at a stonefly as it drifts by. Unlike Corvettes, though, stoneflies garner attention from almost all trout.

These big bugs are a high-protein food source that most any trout will go out of their way to eat. When stoneflies are hatching in good numbers, trout tend to behave without their trademark skittishness.

That's part of what makes fishing stoneflies so much fun. You get to throw big bugs – which are easy to see on the water – and often enough, you'll catch big fish. That's also why you need a well-rounded knowledge of stoneflies, so you can join in on the fun of fishing with them.

By the end of this chapter, you'll have read all the need-to-know information about these big ol' bugs.

## WHAT IS A STONEFLY?

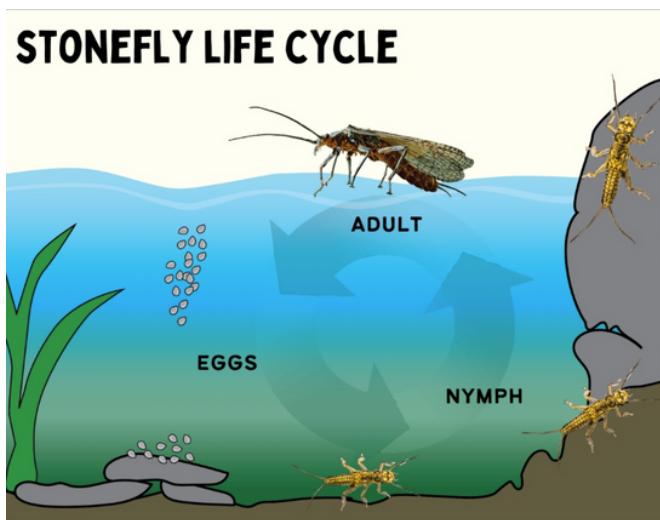
A stonefly is one of the largest aquatic insects commonly found in trout rivers.

Like most other aquatic insects, there are a few thousand different stonefly species in existence. For this post, we're only focused on recognizing stoneflies by sight and matching them with common fly patterns.

Identifying a stonefly is really easy. They have a unique shape and silhouette that few other bugs share. They also have a simple life cycle, making it easy to match stonefly nymphs to patterns in your fly box.

So, that's where we'll start – identifying stoneflies by their shape and silhouette, and learning their life cycle.

## STONEFLY LIFE CYCLE



The stonefly life cycle is deadly simple: they start life as an egg, hatch into a nymph, then emerge into an adult.

Stonefly nymphs look an awful lot like mayfly nymphs, but there are a few differences to note.

First, a stonefly nymph only has two tails, compared to the three or more of a mayfly.

Second, stonefly nymphs have long, thick antennas.

Stoneflies spend one to three years as a nymph, growing larger all the time. When they grow, they push through their old exoskeleton, leaving behind a “husk” that you’ve probably seen on rocks, branches, and streamside vegetation.

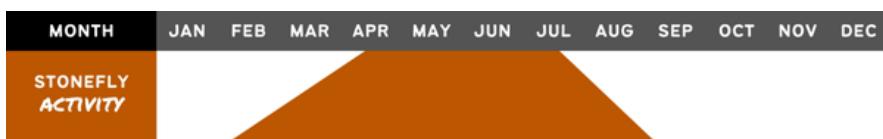


As an adult, stoneflies look a lot like their nymph selves. They have a long, thick segmented body, two tails, long antennas, and two pairs of wings that fold over its back when not in flight.



Stoneflies return to the river to lay their eggs, but unlike other aquatic insects, they'll do this multiple times before dying.

While stoneflies can hatch from February through August in some rivers, the hatches tend to get the most intense from April through August.



## IDENTIFYING STONEFLY HATCHES

Unlike caddis or mayflies, most emerging stoneflies don't get stuck in the surface film. When a stonefly nymph is finally ready to become an adult, it migrates towards land and sheds its old exoskeleton, leaving behind that classic stonefly husk. That movement towards land is a behavior trout will key in on, and that's the closest to mayfly-like emergence behavior that most stoneflies demonstrate.

Once on land, stoneflies shed their exoskeleton and start taking flight. At this point, they'll really only return to the water if they fall off a log, tree, or branch near the river, or to lay their eggs.

This is important to review, since "matching the hatch" in the sense of using the right emergers, cripples, spinners, or duns, doesn't really matter when fishing stoneflies.

What matters is recognizing a stonefly when it hatches, then identifying a good patterns to imitate that bug. Now, stonefly hatches are very much time-dependent. Certain stoneflies only hatch during a specific time of the year, and often those hatches vary from river to river. Spending time researching the stonefly hatches in your area will always pay off.

For example – salmonflies hatch on the Henry's Fork from May 20 through June 10. They hatch on the South Fork – not too far from the Henry's – June 20 through July 5.

Knowing what stoneflies are hatching, and when, is key to getting in on the great fishing these bugs provide.

So, with that in mind, let's take a quick look at some of the major stoneflies that hatch, some of their characteristics, and patterns to match them.



# SKWALA

When it hatches: March – April/May

The skwala is the first stonefly of the year to hatch, and can come off in late February given the right conditions. Usually, the hatch kicks off in earnest in March, and it'll last until runoff hits in most areas.

Skwalas are smaller than other stoneflies, and are usually dark brown in color.

Skwalas don't hatch on every trout river. They're common in Montana, Oregon, and Washington.



# YELLOW SALLY

When it hatches: May – June/July

Yellow Sallies are another small stonefly, and start hatching in May. They'll last through June and July, depending on where you're fishing.

Yellow Sallies are super easy to identify – they have thin, yellow bodies with bright red spots near their tails.



# SALMONFLY

When it hatches: May – June/July

Salmonflies are probably the most famous of all the stoneflies that hatch. These giant, orange bugs draw anglers – and trout – from across the country to fish their emergence throughout Montana and Idaho, specifically.

These are among the biggest stoneflies you'll fish, and they're easy to identify thanks to their bright orange color.



# GOLDEN STONEFLY

When it hatches: June – July

Golden stones are more commonly found than salmonflies. They're not as large, but they can be just as fun to fish. I've had some truly excellent days fishing golden stones in late June, after runoff subsides on many of the streams here in the Rockies.



# KILLER STONEFLY PATTERNS

Matching a stonefly to one in your box really only requires that you know what stoneflies are commonly hatching in a given river, at a certain time of year. Early on in the year, I have some extra skwalas in my box.

As I get into May, I have Yellow Sallies, salmonflies, and golden stones on hand. I usually put my stoneflies away in favor of hoppers come mid-July. I will, however, keep stonefly nymphs in my box year-round.

With that in mind, these are some of the flies you absolutely need to have to get in on the action that a good stonefly hatch offers.

- Fluttering Salmonfly, size 8: this is a great salmonfly imitation
- Yellow Sally, size 12: you can also use these in size 14 for some hatches
- White Chernobyl Ant, size 10: this is a do-all pattern that can imitate golden stones
- Orange Stimulator, size 8: this is another great salmonfly imitation
- Black Rubber Legs, size 8: a fantastic all-purpose stonefly nymph imitation
- Golden Stonefly, size 14: a good stonefly nymph pattern for late-season fishing



FLUTTERING  
SALMON FLY



YELLOW SALLY



CHERNOBYL  
ANT



STIMULATOR



RUBBER  
LEGS



GOLDEN  
STONEFLY

# CHAPTER 7 - SCUDS, SOW BUGS, & TERRESTRIALS

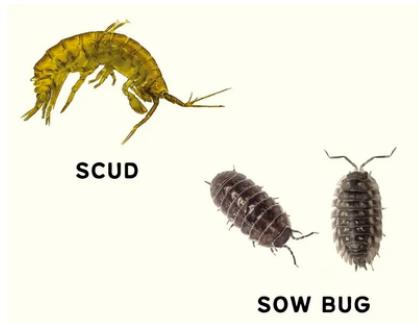
Imagine you're on the high school basketball team. You get to travel to all the road games, you bask in the general adoration the school showers on you, and you enjoy the time away from class. But there's just one problem – you ride the bench. You're not a starter. You only get garbage time minutes, when the coach decides you can't do anything to mess up the game's outcome.

If scuds and sowbugs had feelings, they might feel that way. They're aquatic insects, but they don't get the same love mayflies and caddisflies do. We all probably have a scud and sowbug pattern in our boxes, but we don't call on them nearly often enough.

Terrestrials, on the other hand – they're like football players. Great at what they do, but they're only effective a few short weeks out of the year.

All kidding aside, I do think we tend to overlook the value of scuds, sowbugs, and terrestrials as anglers. Today, we'll take a look at different situations when you want to use these bugs, as well as some go-to patterns that you can fish with confidence.

# WHAT ARE SCUDS AND SOWBUGS?



While you may hear these bugs referred to interchangeably, they're not. A scud is a different insect from a sowbug, although they're incredibly similar. The folks over at [The Missoulian Angler](#) put it best: "A scud is oval in shape while the sowbug has a flat profile. Both behave the same in the water, as both are basically freshwater shrimp."

That's the best way to think of these aquatic insects – they're freshwater crustaceans. According to guide – and noted bug expert – Pat Dorsey, scuds are commonly found in tailwaters and spring creeks. That's because they prefer rivers with relatively stable flows and temperatures, which you'll find in both those water types.

## HOW TO FISH THEM

There's no trick to fishing a scud or sowbug pattern. These are nymphs, so you'll fish them as part of a nymph rig. Both of these bugs work best when fished as a bottom fly, or very close to the river bottom. Scuds and sowbugs generally don't move far up the water column.

# WHEN TO USE THEM

If you're ever on a tailwater or spring creek, you'll want some scuds and sowbugs in your box. Scuds are also must-have patterns for fishing lakes. Some of the best brook trout I've ever caught came on a scud.

MONTH	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
SCUD/SOW BUG ACTIVITY												

← YEAR ROUND →

There is no “hatch” of scuds or sowbugs, since these aquatic insects don’t ever leave the water. They’re a fairly abundant food source in tailwaters and spring creeks, so you can fish them year-round and see some success.

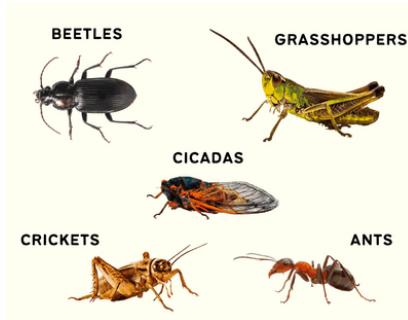
## MUST-HAVE PATTERNS

Most of these patterns are just rehashing the same basic shape, but there are a few that are absolute must-haves. Get them in sizes 14 – 18.

- Standard Scud – get this pattern in pink, grey, and brown.
- Ninch’s Cotton Candy – this was developed on the Missouri River, but patterns in this style work well just about anywhere.
- Ray Charles – the OG scud pattern.

Now that we’ve wrapped up these small nymphs, let’s move on to some bigger, meatier dry flies.

# WHAT ARE TERRESTRIALS?



Terrestrials – they’re wonderfully fun to fish, but they’re not available year-round. They’re like our annual fall pumpkin spice craze.

When they show up, they’re everywhere, and that’s all anyone wants. Once December rolls around, though, we’ve dumped pumpkin spice for peppermint.

That’s how it is with terrestrials. The window to fish these bugs is shorter than most other insects, but it provides some of the best fishing you’ll have all year.

In short, terrestrials are insects that live on land, but sometimes end up in the water, where trout readily eat them. Grasshoppers, cicadas, and ants are the most well-known terrestrials.

# HOW TO FISH THEM

Fishing terrestrials is just like fishing any other dry fly. You need a good drift in front of places where trout are likely to hold. In the case of grasshoppers, ants, beetles, or other insects, trout are most likely to take them closer to the bank.

These bugs tend to fall off, or get tossed around by the wind, from their perch on trees and grass near the water's edge. When they fall in the water, they make more of a splash than a dainty mayfly does when it lands on the water.



So, the big difference in fishing terrestrials and other dry flies is that you'll usually want to slap the water a bit with these patterns to make them look realistic.

# WHEN TO USE THEM

Terrestrials don't "hatch" in the way aquatic insects do. Cicadas will emerge from their subterranean hidey-holes, but grasshoppers and ants end up in the river largely by chance or get blown in by a gust of wind.

With that said, these are some guidelines that can help you know when the best time is to fish each of these bugs:

## Hoppers

Fish these from late June through the first big freeze in your area – anywhere from late September to November.

# Cicadas

Cicadas have a short window that varies from river to river. In general, though, June through August is the prime time for cicadas.

## **Ants/Beetles/Crickets**

Their season is similar to hoppers. Late June through the first big freeze.



## MUST-HAVE PATTERNS

If I could only pick one terrestrial pattern to fish the rest of my life, it'd be a Chubby Chernobyl. It's a do-all foam fly that imitates hoppers exceptionally well, but it can work as a cicada, ant, or stonefly if you're in a bind.

Aside from the Chubby Chernobyl, there are a few other terrestrial patterns that you should have in your fly box:

- Dave's Hopper – this is a classic hopper pattern that's been great ever since it was invented. Sizes 10-12 are great for this fly.
- Foam Cicada – this is the basic pattern for imitating cicadas. You'll want it in sizes 10 – 12.
- Black Ant – another classic that's proven its worth over decades. Sizes 12-16 are perfect for this fly.



CHUBBY CHERNOBYL



DAVE'S HOPPER



FOAM CICADA



BLACK ANT

# WRAPPING UP

That was a ton of information, but luckily, it's all here in this handy book. Refer back to this information as often as you need to really commit a lot of this to memory. And even though it seems like a lot, most of this bug knowledge becomes second-nature the more often you fish. The best way to apply all the stuff you learned in this book is to spend time on the water.

If something in this book wasn't clear, or you'd like additional information, don't hesitate to get in touch with the VFC crew!

- **Contact Us Page** at [www.venturesflyco.com](http://www.venturesflyco.com)
- **Email** - [liverellife@venturesflyco.com](mailto:liverellife@venturesflyco.com)
- **Weekly Podcast** - Submit a question.  
Untangled: Fly Fishing for Everyone
- **Youtube Channel** - Leave a comment. Lots of helpful videos and weekly tips!
- **Direct Message** - Social Media (Instagram, Tiktok)

We're here to help you have a great time on the water, so don't hesitate to get in touch.