

# My Favorite North State Hatches

*While California trout are afforded a veritable insect smorgasbord during midsummer, selecting the right time, stage, size and color become crucial criteria for the pursuing angler.*

*by Don Vachini*

In my personal pursuit of Golden State trout, which often bridges the gap between high desert sage, forested canopies and backcountry waters near the clouds, I have relied heavily on caddisflies, mayflies and stoneflies, three significant insects that enjoy their hatching zenith during August. While one of the most pleasing aspects of fly-fishing is its complexity in determining, identifying and selecting suitable imitations, the entomological formula is somewhat complicated by the fact that these trout food forms have adapted to every type of ecosystem the state's diverse terrain has to offer.

An effective hatch-matcher quickly differentiates between adult and immature stages, but a systematic approach to fly selection and presentation should take into consideration the prevailing conditions of the water you intend to fish. Indeed, simple research regarding times, stages, sizes and colors helps translate bug knowledge and, in doing so, definitely increases odds for angler success.

## **HIGH-COUNTRY CADDIS**

In the Sierra Nevada backcountry above 10,000 feet elevation, food forms tend to be small and growing

seasons short. This is the scenario in French Canyon, Bear Creek and Humphrey's Basin, a trio of headwater basins located in the John Muir Wilderness between Fresno and Bishop.

Deep, rockbound lakes such as Three-Island, Brown Bear, Vee, Steelhead, Puppet, Desolation, Goethe and Royce Nos. 1-5 are desolate, inhospitable bodies of water nestled in cirques at or above 11,000 feet elevation which contain some of the largest golden trout in the world. With limited or no spawning, their densities remain small, but residents rou-

tinely approach 18 inches and will be in the 1- to 3-pound category — trophy-size for this kaleidoscopic species.

While late summer is their primary emerging period, caddis hatches in this talus-dominated locale are less abundant than at lower, heavier-wooded elevations. However, mature caddis are often swept up-canyon by mid-afternoon zephyrs and deposited on these treeless stillwaters, providing additional feeding opportunities.

While their metamorphosis takes place under water, full-grown specimens will vary from 1/4-inch to a lit-



*Crawling on hands and knees is a required tactic when pursuing trophy golden trout. Photo courtesy of Don Vachini.*

tle over an inch and are distinguished by long, threadlike antennae, no tails, wings folded like a tent over their backs while at rest and a very drab appearance. To be ready for a variety of color phases, I carry a stock selection of olive, green, brown and tan shades. While Goddard Sparkle and Elk Hair Caddis are great dry patterns, nymphs such as Pheasant Tail, Zug Bug, Beadhead and Beadhead Hare's Ear in sizes 12-18 imitate the pupae stage.

Trophy-sized goldens will let down

their guard slightly during morning and evening to snatch an adult form, but I have found the nymphal or larval stages to be more common to their diet. Guarded by 13,788-foot Royce Peak and surrounded by a sea of jumbled talus, I successfully worked a size 12 tan Caddis Pupa to perfection during a magical four-day trip in 1987, establishing five tippet class world records with the International Game Fish Association.

When in pursuit of record contenders, my sons, Jason and Matt, and

I often rely on stealth and presentation in addition to selection. Hiding behind shoreline cover or taking turns spotting for one another from higher vantage points, we have used varied Trichoptera imitations to claim a combined 17 tippet class standards from Goethe, Steelhead, Brown Bear and Puppet lake outlets in addition to the Royce Lakes chain during the past decade and a half.

For updated information regarding backcountry hatches, contact Culver's Sporting Goods in Bishop, (760) 872-8361.

#### TAILWATER, WILLOWS AND MAYFLIES

*Callibaetis* mayfly hatches are prominent in the streams of the Bridgeport area, and one of my favorite hotspots is the East Walker River below Bridgeport Reservoir. Benefiting from a high Ph level, a prodigious blue-winged olive hatch and relatively steady flows, which keep both nutrients and food washing through, this willow-lined water coursing through high desert sagebrush maintains one of the healthiest brown trout fisheries in the West. While most average 14 to 17 inches and commonly range in the 2- to 8-pound category, it is the pugilistic, double-digit leviathans that keep me coming back.

Attesting to its survivor moniker, this magnificent tailwater has weathered low flows, siltation and a recent fuel spill while flourishing under special regulations: artificial lures, barbless hooks and a bag limit of one trout 18 inches or better.

During mid to late afternoon, adult spinners — identified by pale gray upright wings, yellow or buff to olive tapered bodies and long, delicate tails — usually swarm the shallow riffles to mate, lay their eggs, then fall into the water. At this time, a Hen Spinner can be deadly.

Well adapted to either fast- or slow-moving waters, ranging from dirty to tan brown, but also cream, olive and black hues, and varying greatly in size, *Baetis* nymphs swim to the surface when fully grown and change into winged duns. While a Sidewinder No-Hackle is a suitable mayfly dun imitation, I have had more trophy browns slam a floating nymph than rise to a dry.

Although the truly hefty residents

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have a wide choice of victims, they are more inclined to seek a food source that expends the least amount of energy. Instead of pursuing the highly mobile duns, they are more apt to focus on the partially emerged or impaired insects incapable of fleeing.

Wading and high sticking some of the deeper seams and glides, probing an attractive run with a weighted nymph and large strike indicator provides a far different game than finessing slow-moving surface water. The stream's cloudy nature hides many angler mistakes, and its low visibility allows for 8- to 12-pound tippets. By my line of reasoning, a matching 6- to 7-weight, 8-foot rod is perfect here.

Although the best time is usually late morning, twilight can trigger the large browns to dine with reckless abandon.

My favorite nymphal imitations include Beadhead Prince, Royal Pheasant Tail and Quigley Par nymph in sizes 10-14. A variety of suitable mayfly matches include the Sparkle Dun, Pink Cahill, Pale Morning Dun, Comparadun, Thorax and Parachute,

while a selection of other full-hackled traditional style ties, all in sizes 10-18, should be present in the fly box. Parachute dry flies seem to float better, their wing posts are easily visible and their hackle fibers not only resemble insect legs but also position the fly in the surface film similar to an emerging insect.

For additional hatch information or current stream conditions, contact Ken's Sporting Goods, (760) 932-7707.

### TURBULENT-WATER STONEFLIES

Although several significant stonefly hatches take place during August in the mountains, my favorite stream is the McCloud River above its namesake reservoir. Fed by icy flows deep from the bowels of Mt. Shasta, subterranean seeps percolate through steep canyons of lava base rock and maintain a steady 40- to 44-degree temperature.

This classic trout stream primarily houses native rainbows as well as a few reclusive browns and brook trout. While the average trout generally reaches 14 inches, older residents

approach the 3-pound mark. The McCloud's gravelly bottom and abundant pockets, mini-pools, seams, eddies and undercut banks not only translate to trout, but a thick forest canopy and solitude appeal to the creek freak in me.

Four long, veined wings and yellow-orange upper torsos whose undersides are generally lighter than their topsides distinguish adults, but it is the immature nymphs which spend their early lives attached to underwater rocks and, as such, become major sources of food for trout. Turbulent flows frequently dislodge and sweep them downstream.

They are best imitated with nymphal offerings bounced through the currents with weighted nymphs in the 8-12 size range. Squirrel Hair, Woolly Worms, Yellow Jackets and Beadheads are best presented by a high stick maneuver with very little line touching the water. Set the hook with a swift, upward lifting motion of the rod.

For up-to-the minute information, contact the Ted Fay Fly Shop, (530) 235-2969. □

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