AQUATIC MOTHS

They only come out at night, and trout eat them with gusto.

The notion of aquatic moths comes as a great surprise to many people. Even among fly fishers who study aquatic insects, few know that there are moths that pass their larval stage in streams, rivers, and lakes. I’m willing to bet that most anglers wade through riffles containing hundreds of moth larvae in plain view without ever realizing those bugs are there. And you’d be hard pressed to find any mention of aquatic moths in most angling entomology books.

Given the lack of attention paid to aquatic moths, you might think that there aren’t very many species, and that their populations are small. But the diversity of aquatic moths is quite impressive. Merritt and Cummins list more than 650 species in their book An Introduction to the Aquatic Insects of North America. About 350 species are found only in Hawaii. That still leaves more than 300 species living in the lower 48 states. Of these, about 150 species inhabit New England salt marshes and are of little or no importance to anglers.

Some 130 species live in lakes, ponds, and swamps, where the larvae feed on the stems or leaves of aquatic plants. And there are about 20 species that are common, and often abundant, in freshwater streams.

ALL IN THE SUB-FAMILY

Most of the common aquatic species of Lepidoptera belong to the family Pyralidae (which contains many more terrestrial species than aquatic) and the sub-family Nymphulinae. The most widespread genera found in lakes and ponds are Munroeia and Parapoynx. The most frequently encountered genus in streams is Petrophila. Sixteen species of Petrophila are spread across the continent, all living in moderate to fast currents of streams and rivers.

Recognizing aquatic moth larvae is fairly simple—they look like caterpillars in most respects. Unfortunately, it’s also a somewhat useless exercise because the moth’s larval lifestyle puts it pretty much out of the reach of fish. Petrophila larvae, for example, live on rocks in the riffles and cover themselves with a light-tan silk blanket that generally turns a yellowish-brown as it collects diatoms and algae, creating a natural camouflage for the larvae underneath. Once you recognize these oval-shaped, yellowish-brown, nickel-sized silk patches for what they are, you will begin to spot them by the dozens in cool to moderately warm streams.

It’s much the same for the lake-dwelling species (Parapoynx, Munroeia, Neocatachysta, and Synclita). Some make cases from leaves or pieces of plants, much like many caddis larvae. Others bore into the leaves and stems of the plants they feed on. Again, these larvae are out of reach and off the menu for the fish.

The pupal stage of the aquatic moths also goes on under cover. The pupae develop under thick silk blankets (stream dwellers) or on the undersides of leaves or insides of plants (lake-dwelling types).

THE MOTH AS A MEAL

The adult stage is the one that the fish get to eat, and thus is the stage that’s important to fishermen. Adult aquatic moths resemble adult caddis, but moths have shorter antennae; their wings lie nearly flat over their abdomens when not in use and
Almost every stage of the aquatic mayfly’s life goes on under cover. This stream-dwelling species, for example, spends its larval and pupal stages hidden under a silk blanket on a rock.

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are covered with flat scale-like hairs (the wings of caddis are covered with fine hairs). Aquatic moth adults range from 8 to 20 mm long, not counting antennae, and have light-colored wings with distinct brown or gray markings. Their life-spans can be as short as one day or as long as two months, depending on the species.

Aquatic moths generally emerge at night. Because of this, few anglers ever see the hatch, and fewer still ever fish during one.

When ready to emerge, the adult crawls through an escape slit the larva cut in the cocoon before pupation began. The adult then either swims or floats to the surface. This is quite different from caddis emergence, in which the pupae swim to the surface and the adults emerge in the surface film.

Depending on the species and location, adults emerge from spring through fall. Adults of Petrophila, for example, are common along western streams in July and August. During peak activity, I often see hundreds of adults along the grass-lined banks of rivers like the Deschutes in Oregon.

Mating typically occurs on shore. The females attract the males with pheromones, the moth equivalent of Chanel No. 5. In one rather unusual species, the female is wingless and entirely aquatic, while the male is winged and terrestrial. To mate, the female lifts just the tip of her abdomen above the water’s surface so the male may find her and mate.

After mating, winged females fly to the water and either swim or crawl underwater to lay their eggs. Stream-dwelling species lay their eggs on the sides of rocks in riffle areas. Lake species most often lay their eggs on the undersides of the leaves of aquatic plants. Egg laying, like adult emergence, normally occurs at night.
THE ANGLER’S ANGLE

If you’ve ever camped by a lake or stream and heard fish rising and jumping in the night, those fish may have been chasing aquatic moths. If you see aquatic moth adults along the banks during the day, then there’s good reason to suspect they’re either emerging or laying eggs at night.

Whether they’re emerging or laying eggs isn’t so important, since in both cases you will want to use a wet fly to imitate the submerged adult. Collect a few of the naturals, or at least get a good look at them during the day so you will know what size and color fly to use. Most species are pale with brown markings, and a size 12 to 16 light-brown or tan caddis, fished wet, works most of the time. If you’re on a stream, fish it dead drift in the riffles. If fish are rising you shouldn’t have any problem locating them. On lakes, cast out in the vicinity of rising fish (this will likely be near weedbeds), and let the fly sink a few feet, then begin a slow strip retrieve, pausing occasionally to let the fly sink a little. This should imitate the emerging or egg-laying adults.

You should also try your moth imitations on windy days. When the adults are abundant along the banks, a strong wind can blow them into the water, and a dry fly fished near the bank can produce some nice fish.

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Rick Hafle is no mere collector of moth-eaten insect lore; he’s a professional entomologist. An Angler’s Guide to Aquatic Insects and Their Imitations, which he co-wrote with Scott Rostader, has been published in a second edition by Johnson Books of Boulder, Colorado.