Snipe Hunting

Two weeks fishing in Montana sounded like a good idea. Several years had passed since my last trip to the Holy Land of trout streams, and I was excited to fish there again. But good fishing cannot be guaranteed on any trip. When my wife and I arrived in Livingston in early July, thunderstorms danced around the mountains like an extended Independence Day celebration. The result was a Yellowstone River that looked like a dirt road after a cattle drive. After a week in Yellowstone Park—and more thunderstorms—it was time to move on.

The Missouri River was better. Big fish slurped tiny trico spinners every morning. The problem was that the trout had memorized every trico pattern ever invented, which made for a humbling experience. We finally found ourselves on an upper section of Rock Creek, east of Missoula. After days of searching for clear streams and happy trout, this trip was beginning to feel like the proverbial snipe hunt. I didn’t realize how right I was until the next day.

Rock Creek is what I call a “fishy” stream. The good water is small enough to identify easily and then get to, yet large enough to have a complex mixture of fish habitat that produces many trout in the 14- to 16-inch range. The upper section is populated mostly with westslope cutthroats. Rainbows and browns become more common as you move downstream.

The first morning showed no sign of surface activity, so it seemed logical to start fishing with nymphs—but what nymph? To find out, I took my trusty kick net to a nearby riffle and kicked up several bottom sam-
size and hidden within the first thoracic segment, is virtually invisible. The color of most specimens I have collected is dark olive to rather bright green.

Snipe fly larvae inhabit rocky riffle areas. They feed on other small insects and must move about to hunt, increasing their chances of getting washed into the current. A research study of which stream insects are most available to trout ranked the snipe fly larvae 13th in availability out of 95 aquatic insects evaluated. This put them ahead of many better-known insects, such as little yellow stoneflies (15th), green rock worms (17th), and net-spinning caddisflies (18th). Thus, when the larvae are abundant, they are also available to feeding trout.

Another characteristic of the larvae causes them to stand out rather dramatically: When placed in a tray of water, they twist with rapid, convulsive twitches. This movement makes them hard to miss in a sample tray of stream insects, and it may make them easy targets for trout.

The larval stage is the only important phase for the fly fisher. Pupation occurs on land near the water, so pupae are not available to fish, and there is no need for anglers to imitate them. Adults also offer little opportunity for fish to feed on them. Females lay their eggs on vegetation overhanging the stream, and thereby avoid becoming food for trout. Most adults are predacious and feed by catching smaller insects out of the air.

**Rock Creek Secrets**

After looking at the insect samples I collected from Rock Creek, it seemed clear that snipe fly larvae were the thing to imitate. However, I didn’t have any patterns tied specifically to mimic them. Fortunately, their size, color, and general shape are quite similar to green rock worms, so I tied on a size 12 Green Rock Worm nymph that I always have in my fly box. I added a split shot about 10 inches above the fly for extra weight, and I placed a strike indicator about four feet above the split shot. This seemed like just the right setup for fishing the pockets around boulders in the riffles and the deeper slots along some of the banks.

I cast quartering upstream and let the fly and indicator drift downstream through likely holding water. It worked. But besides catching fish, I also got an interesting lesson about the effectiveness of fishing multiple flies.

I often use two nymph patterns at the same time. On Rock Creek I decided to use a Green Drake nymph along with the green rock worm imitation of the snipe fly. A few of the fish were taking the Green Riffle Worm, and I was taking a cutthroat out nearly every spot that looked like the fly. Everything was going great until I got hit on the bottom and lost my flies. I didn’t have time by rerigging with just a sirf fly—the Green Rock-Worm nymph.

Suddenly, I was no longer looking for fish even though I was fishing the same kind of water as before. After about 30 minutes I had no hits on any flies. After about 30 minutes I realized that I was not fishing the same water as before. I put two flies on and went downstream so I could back up through the same water I had just fished without success. Bang! I was caught another fish again, and this time on the green rock worm pattern. After four or five fish, I went back to the single Green Rock Worm setup.

This example of how changing just one small part of your setup can significantly change your success. At least I know I’ll be ready the next time I go on a fishing trip and can start hitting more fish.

**Correction**

Due to a production error, the insect on page 25 of the summer issue was misidentified. That PMD is a dun, not a spinner.

Rick Hafle enjoys searching for unusual insects to feed trout all over the West, where he has worked as an aquatic biologist for the past 30 years.
I often use two nymph patterns at the same time. On Rock Creek I decided to use a Green Drake nymph along with the green rock worm imitation of the snipe fly. Most of the fish were taking the Green Rock Worm, and I was taking a cutthroat out of nearly every spot that looked like I should. Everything was going great until I got hung up on the bottom and lost my flies. I decided to save time by rerigging with just a single fly—the Green Rock-Worm nymph.

Suddenly, I was no longer hooking fish, even though I was fishing the same kind of water as before. After about 30 minutes, I decided to experiment. I put two flies back on and went downstream so I could fish back up through the same water I had just fished without success. Bingo! I was catching fish again, and still on the green rock worm pattern. After four or five fish, I went back to the single Green Rock-Worm setup. I added extra split shot to compensate for the missing second nymph. Again nothing. Once more I switched to two nymphs, and once more started hooking fish.

Obviously, two flies worked better than one, but why? I added extra weight when fishing the single nymph, so I don’t think getting to the same depth was a problem. I really don’t have an answer, and there is no way to know what was really happening. My theory is that two flies somehow caught the attention of trout better than one, and once I had their attention, they went for the Green Rock Worm. I’ve fished a single nymph on many other occasions without a problem, so I know two flies aren’t always better or necessary. But this was an interesting example of how changing just one small part of your setup can significantly change your success. At least I know I’ll be ready the next time I go on a fishing trip and end up on a snipe hunt.

Rick Hofman enjoys searching for unusual insects and feeding trout all over the West, where he has worked as an aquatic biologist for the past 30 years.

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