Think Small in the Fall

Size 20 flies can be frustrating to tie and to thread on a light tippet, but a big trout on a tiny dry is adequate reward.

Anglers often overlook small flies—and for good reasons. First, there's the problem of simply tying on a size 20 or 22 fly to the end of your tippet. If you're in your 20s, you may wonder what I'm talking about, but if you've crossed over into that magical world of middle age or beyond, then you understand the challenges presented by tiny hook eyes.

Second is the belief that small flies catch only small fish. Even after years of experience prove this to be a fallacy, many anglers—including me—tend to hedge their bets and select flies slightly larger than the naturals. To us, the bigger patterns are easier to see and just look juicier, so they must be easier to see and more appealing to trout, as well. Unfortunately (or fortunately, if you're a trout), trout don't see the world the way we do. If they did, they'd probably starve within a week. To a trout, small is often beautiful.

Third, many anglers believe small flies can't effectively hook and hold big fish. However, because of the tiny sharp points and thin wire of small flies, they often penetrate a fish's mouth quicker and easier than a large fly does. Finally, most anglers simply don't realize the true smallness of many naturals. When was the last time you held your fly pattern side-by-side with the natural you were imitating?

From late summer through fall, the need to go small is even greater than at other times of year. This is largely a function of the life cycles of many important aquatic insects. All those adult hatches you saw in April, May, June, and July laid hundreds of thousands of eggs. For many species, those eggs lie quietly through the warm summer months until water temperatures begin to drop, whenupon the eggs begin to hatch. These young, newly hatched insects begin life very small, usually only a half-millimeter in length. Even after growing for several weeks, most remain small and require small flies—size 16 or smaller—to imitate them.

The other factor that causes small flies to dominate in the fall is that the major hatches of fall are also tiny. The late-season blue-winged olives are a size 18 or 20, and midges will typically be in the size 18 to 24 range—just right for testing the eyesight of any angler.

The solution to this problem is rather simple: Collect some of the naturals—nymphs or adults—that you're imitat-
ing, and place them next to your fly patterns. This will quickly tell you if you are seeing the world through magnified glasses. Then, don’t be afraid to fish a really small fly. Don’t let the media’s message that “bigger is better” influence your pattern selection.

**Small Fall Hatches**

Some of the most prolific small-fly hatches in the fall are the blue-winged olives (Baetis sp.) and tiny blue-winged olives (Acentrella sp., formerly Pseudocloeon). These species occur across all of North America and produce some of the best nymph and dry-fly fishing in the fall. Size 18s will be the largest you are likely to see, and if you look at the naturals carefully, you will probably need to choose 20s or 22s. The nymphs are active swimmers, and I find a small nymph pattern fished close to the bottom often works well in the morning before surface activity begins. When duns begin showing up, I like to switch to emergent patterns and, of course, dry flies.

However, don’t overlook the spinners of these small insects. Excellent spinner falls can occur from late morning to late afternoon. Rises to these tiny spinners are very easy to miss, so watch the water carefully. If you see the spinners swarming above the water, make sure to watch eddies and current seams below riffles for extremely light, delicate rises. (See Ed Egle's “A New Spin on Spinners” on page 32 for more hints on fishing spinner falls.)

Caddisflies also produce good fall hatches, many of which are in the small-to-tiny size range. The most important in many areas is the turtle-case caddis or Glossosoma sp. (See the July/August 2003 column for a detailed discussion of Glossosoma.) Fall hatches of this species can be quite heavy in mid- to late afternoon. Naturals run from size 18 to 22. Several species of Brachycentrus (American grannom) also produce good fall hatches. These are perhaps best known for their heavy hatches in April and May, but they rebound with good hatches again in the fall. These caddisflies run about a size 16, practically giants among the tiny insects of fall.

Fishing tactics for these fall caddisfly hatches are the same as for other seasons. Pupa patterns can be excellent during the hatch and should be fished from just below the surface to near the bottom, which generally requires the addition of some split shot to your leader. An up-and-across cast will allow the fly time to sink. Then let the fly swing up toward the surface like a natural emerging pupa. Adult patterns also work well when fished dry or below the surface to imitate the females that swim to the stream bottom to lay eggs.

My final picks for late-season small hatches are the midges. Numerous species in a wide range of sizes and colors hatch...
**Small Flies**

**Krystal Flash Blue-Winged Olive Nymph**
- **Hook:** Tiemco 2457 or similar; size 18.
- **Thread:** Brown, 8/0.
- **Tail:** 3 to 6 light brown hackle fibers.
- **Body:** Tan to dark olive Krystal Flash twisted together.
- **Thorax:** Dark brown or gray dubbing.
- **Legs:** Pick out the dubbing from thorax.

**Krystal Flash Blue-Winged Olive Emerger**
- **Hook:** Tiemco 2457 or similar; size 18.
- **Thread:** Brown, 8/0.
- **Tail:** Light brown hackle fibers.
- **Body:** Tan to dark olive Krystal Flash twisted together.
- **Thorax:** Dark brown or gray dubbing.
- **Wing:** Small clump of gray CDC fibers.
- **Legs:** Pick out the dubbing from thorax.

**Blue-Winged Olive Harrop Dun**
- **Hook:** Mustad 94840 or similar; sizes 18 through 22.
- **Thread:** Brown, 8/0.
- **Tail:** 3 to 6 light brown hackle fibers.
- **Body:** Tan to dark olive dubbing.
- **Hackle:** 4 to 5 turns of quality light brown hackle.
- **Wing:** Gray CDC fibers, tied in front of hackle.

**Blue-Winged Olive Spinner**
- **Hook:** Mustad 94840 or similar; sizes 18 through 22.
- **Thread:** Brown, 8/0.
- **Tail:** 3 to 6 light brown hackle fibers.
- **Body:** Reddish brown dubbing.
- **Wings:** 5 to 6 turns of quality light gray hackle. Trim top and bottom.

**Peacock Caddis Adult**
- **Hook:** Mustad 94840 or similar; sizes 18 through 22.
- **Thread:** Brown, 8/0.
- **Body:** 3 strands of peacock herl twisted together.
- **Wing:** Fibers from a wood-duck flank feather, tied in on top and over the abdomen.
- **Hackle:** 4 to 5 turns of quality light brown hackle.

**Krystal Flash Midge Pupa**
- **Hook:** Tiemco 2457 or similar; sizes 18 and 20.
- **Thread:** Brown, 8/0.
- **Body:** 3 to 4 strands of Krystal Flash (color to match natural) twisted together.
- **Thorax:** Gray or brown dubbing or peacock herl.
- **Gills:** A small clump of white Poly Yarn tied perpendicular to the shank and trimmed short.
in good numbers through the fall and winter. Because of the huge variety of species, and resulting sizes and colors, it is particularly important to collect the naturals for proper fly selection. I almost always focus on imitating the pupal stage because fish seem to find pupae irresistible.

Midge hatches can occur almost anytime of the day, but in the fall I find them most common from late morning through afternoon. Midge fishing is often best where the currents are smooth and relatively quiet. Trout can be surprisingly selective to these little insects, so use light tippets, and make good presentations. Pupa patterns should be fished on a dead drift either in the surface film or a foot or two below the surface. In either case, you won’t be able to see the fly, so watch the end of your leader for any hesitation or slight twitch. This is a good example where the fine points and thin wire of the small hooks actually help the fish hook themselves.

Small Exceptions

Of course, there are a few exceptions to the “small in the fall” theory. Out West, September and October are prime time for hatches of the October caddis (Dicosmoecus sp.), which is a true size 8. Interestingly enough, even when these lumbering giants are abundant, I catch far more fish by imitating one of the small hatches. It’s a puzzle that I still can’t solve. Another exception that works anywhere in the country is large searching patterns, such as Woolly Buggers and streamers. This is especially true where brown trout are common. These fish are on their spawning runs in the fall and tend to attack these large flies as much out of a territorial response as out of hunger.

This fall, check the size of your fly patterns next to the naturals on the water, and then put aside your hesitation to go small. You might just find that smaller is bigger after all.

Fall often finds Rick Hafle fishing small flies in his favorite Oregon streams. Find out more about fall fishing techniques in Rick’s newest fishing videos, Fly Fishing Large Western Rivers—Winter, Spring, Summer and Fall at www.laughingrivers.com.