

# Fly Fishing's Fall Bounty: The October Caddis

*By Bill Carnazzo*

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## THE MIDDLE FORK DRAINAGE



### October Caddis Victim

Fall days on Western freestone streams presage eager, hungry trout feasting on prolific October Caddis hatches amid nature's riot of light and color. But conditions can make the fishing challenging. Crystal-clear low flows require a considered, cautious approach to likely water. Flat light on short, dark, cloudy days causes line and leader to disappear amid spectral glare. Leaf-strewn freestone river bottoms snatch at flies drifted deep and make recognition of subtle strikes difficult. Those bulky indicators, seemingly so effective at other times, generate wind resistance and current friction that misdirects drifting flies and spooks thin-water fish. Fish inhabit different water than in spring or summer, necessitating different water-reading skills. Wind tosses line, leader, and fly off course, creating fatal surface or subsurface drag. Fog, rain, or snow obscure vision, steam one's expensive polarized lenses, render streamside rocks slick and dangerous, stiffen fingers, and cause general annoyance. The October Caddis hatch may or may not occur on any particular day, or may vary in time from day to day, depending on ambient conditions, including in-stream temperature changes.

Then there are those halcyon days when the weather, the hatch, the right flies, good tactics, and lady luck converge, and the fly fisher comes away from a day on the river groping for that favorite bottle of wine in jubilant celebration of angling prowess. But humility lurks just around the next bend in the form of utter frustration, when inevitably one or more variables change and the fish appear to have withdrawn mysteriously from the stream. Still, a solid working knowledge of strategies for dealing with the variables, an understanding of the biology and habits of the October Caddis, good fly imitations of the

various stages of the insect's life, and the use of proper fishing techniques will go a long way toward leveling out those peaks and valleys.

## The October Caddis



### October Caddis Larva

The October Caddis is the genus *Dicosmoecus*, which also bears the common name Giant Orange Sedge. It is a member of the family Limnephilidae, which includes an incredibly large number of case-building caddis fly species with different habits. Caddisflies, like arachnids in the terrestrial world, employ silk for survival. Some species use silk to create a net to filter food from the passing current. Cased larvae, including the October Caddis, use silk build protective homes by binding bits and pieces of rock and vegetation into tough, compact, expandable cases, then use it to seal the case and begin pupation. Anglers who poke around riverbeds surely will have noticed these large rock-and-stick cases.

Although entomologists do not always agree on what materials are used for the case, practical experience in collecting and observing these bugs confirms the commonsense notion that the insect will employ those materials most readily available. Streams lined with conifers will be populated by caddis fly cases built primarily from fir or redwood needles, perhaps mixed with small bits of rock and/or bark. As a result, most October Caddis cases will have a rather shaggy look and a dark-brown coloration. In the late season, before emergence, these cases are large – hook sizes from 2 to 8.

The October Caddis can be found in most Western freestone rivers and creeks. I have found specimens in the Truckee, upper Sacramento, McCloud, and Pit Rivers, in portions of Hat Creek, in all forks of the American River and in its tributaries, such as El Dorado Creek, the North Fork of the Middle Fork, and the Rubicon River, in the North and South Forks of the Yuba River, in the upper reaches of the Feather River, in the Mokolumne and Calaveras Rivers, in the upper South San Joaquin River, and in small streams such as Stony Creek.

From the angler's perspective, the October Caddis larva exhibits a number of important behavioral characteristics, including two different forms of "drift," or free travel downstream. The first type of drift

is accidental, while the second is an unusual behavioral characteristic that, in its timing, distinguishes the October Caddis not just from most other cased caddises, but from most other aquatic insects.

During the summer, growing larvae crawl about searching for food. Current sweeps them from rocks and bounces them along until the hapless larvae are eaten by trout or manage to regain rocky footholds. As a larva drifts along, its black head and legs are extended as it gropes for purchase. To the delight of knowing anglers, a portion of the bug's dirty-yellowish abdomen is also extended from its brown case. Properly imitating this tricolored shaggy food item in both appearance and manner of drift is essential to fooling fish.

In addition to having their cases accidentally swept into the feeding lanes of waiting trout, October Caddis larvae also cast themselves adrift deliberately. As Gary LaFontaine puts it in *Caddisflies*, "Amazingly, this is one of those case makers that abandons its case, possibly to build another, and slips into the current. Unlike stonefly nymphs, mayfly nymphs, or free-living caddis fly larvae, which exhibit a higher rate of behavioral drift at night, the drift phenomenon for the uncased larvae happens in the daytime. The peak is connected with water temperature and occurs at approximately 4 P.M." I have indeed observed this happening from middle to late afternoon, as the water temperature climbs. Anglers need to be prepared with imitations and tactics to imitate this behavior, as well.

Pupation begins in September. As they reach their full size, larvae migrate to the underside of rocks and attach themselves there with silk as they seal off the front of their cases. This larval movement also creates feeding opportunities for trout, because the bulky cases are quite vulnerable to the current's force, causing many larvae to bump and tumble their way to oblivion.

When metamorphosis is complete, the orange-bodied, tan-winged adult emerges. Here there is also some divergence of opinion among the bug folks: Some say that the pupa chews out of the case and crawls to the shallows to emerge through the surface film. Others have the pupa rocketing through the surface directly from the river bottom, to fly away as an adult. I have observed the adults hatching both ways. The point is that the emergers are a prime target once trout focus on them. Tactics for this brief stage of the insect's life differ from those aimed at the larval stage and must mimic the action of the pupa rising through the water column. From the angler's perspective, the issue of where they hatch – in the shallows or elsewhere – is relevant only insofar as it relates to where to cast.

In the final, often extremely prolific adult stage of the October Caddis' life cycle, at the peak of the hatch, clouds of adults flutter about the stream, usually in the late afternoon and evening. The females' egg-laying downward dips to the surface are generally ignored by the trout, which confounds anglers. Although theories abound regarding why trout ignore the adults, one plausible explanation is the insect's quirky, erratic, rapid flight makes capture difficult and only marginally productive. In other words, the ready availability of the larvae and pupae may explain the trout's apparent lack of interest in the adults. All of this changes in the late season. The adults' riverine flight becomes sluggish as colder, damp weather advances, and they begin to land fluttering on the water, only to become enmeshed in the surface tension. Sensing this behavioral change, the trout start taking the struggling orange morsels. Larger trout abandon their deep hidey-holes, often charging to the surface to whack an entrapped victim.

## **October Caddis Tight-Line, In-Line Nymphing**



### **Final Fall Fish on October Caddis**

Despite the prolific hatches and huge size of the October Caddis, attempting to catch trout taking larvae or emergers without properly employing the nymphing technique can be an exercise in futility. All nymphing techniques have a common objective: consistent, reliable visual strike detection through communication between the angler and the flies. “Visual” is the operative term in this paradigm. The angler who waits for the “feel” is missing most takes. That means using a short-line nymphing technique that I learned from my friend Ron Rabun many years ago.

The short-line technique that I find most effective in pocket-water situations is the tight-line, in-line indicator method. The heart of this system is line control – keeping slack entirely out of the line, from rod tip to flies. Slack between flies and indicator will absorb the indicator’s aberrant movement or action, and the indicator will reveal nothing. I suspect that many candidates for fish of a lifetime have been missed because of fatal slack. To maintain line control, the angler must accurately judge the location of the flies and their drift speed and move the rod tip downstream ahead of the flies while keeping the line and leader tight to them.

In this setup (see the diagram), there is a direct connection between the flies and the in-line indicator, which, unlike puffballs that will separate you from your fly, consists of three pieces of 20-pound monofilament, each about four inches long after the knots that join them are tied. The first and third pieces should be fluorescent orange (Amnesia works well), and the center piece should be fluorescent green. The two middle knots will be bicolored, which greatly aids concentration, since the eye tends to focus on these knots. One end of the indicator is tied to the butt section attached to the fly line, and the other end is tied to a 7½-foot 3X leader. The last 24 inches of the leader is cut off, and 30 inches of 3X tippet is added with two Duncan Loop knots that are left untightened and apart. Between these two knots, a 10-inch piece of 3X tippet is tied in with another Duncan Loop and tightened down after moistening. With the tippet and the leader in hand, the area between the two Duncan Loops is moistened, and they are pulled together tightly. The tag ends are then pulled tight and clipped. The result is a dropper that is perpendicular to the leader.

After cutting the dropper back to around five inches, I tie on an emerger imitation using a Duncan Loop. This loop is tightened short of the hook eye to allow the fly to dangle freely during the drift. Then I tie on a pupa imitation in using the same knot.

BB-size shot are squeezed onto the tippet between the two flies 12 inches above the point fly to allow the flies to drift at different levels in the water column. The proper number of split shot is a function of current speed and depth variables.

The rod of choice for this system is anything from a 3-weight to a 5-weight 9-foot medium-action stick. The leader, including the butt section, the in-line indicator upon which this system is dependent, and the tippet, should approximate the rod's length.

During most of the season, the larger fish stay tucked under foamy boils and lurk in deep slots and dark holes, so until the cooler weather of autumn arrives, fish this setup in current seams, boils behind boulders, foamy water caused by small falls or breakover ledges, in-stream obstructions, and other objects that slow the current's flow, and in particular, those dark green spots in and around large rocks, slots, or bedrock configurations.

The larger fish change their behavior, however, as the weather cools, the water thins, and colorful leaves adorn the current and the bottom beneath leaden skies. During late October and November, they are likely to be found feeding on shallow bars, in open water, and in the tails of pools. The angler who fails to understand this change and to adjust accordingly will be at a disadvantage. The most credible theory relates this behavioral change to the trout's instinctive sense of safety from predators in fall's camouflage of wild bottom color and flat light.

Casting the in-line, tight-line rig is not pretty. But since the object is to catch fish, aesthetics are irrelevant. What is relevant is where the rig is cast, because correct fly placement is critical to an effective drift. Since the tight-line method emphasizes a drift that begins upstream of the angler, the cast is generally quartered upstream. A perpendicular cast is occasionally needed where stream depth or strong current prevent safe wading to an ideal casting position.

The cast begins with approximately two feet of the fly line outside of the top guide, with the rig positioned downstream. The rod is raised to nearly vertical and held there momentarily. In other words, the cast is not one fluid motion. The rod is then snapped forward, with the tip pointing at the desired drop spot. Since the line and leader are stretched out by virtue of the cast, there is no initial slack, but the angler must immediately establish and maintain line control in order to keep the drift slack-free. As soon as the flies hit the water, the rod is lifted at the reel. If the tip is lifted, the flies will be pulled up from the bottom and away from the fish. For the tight-line method to be effective, the flies must drift at or near the bottom.

With the rod horizontal, the tip leads the flies downstream, keeping line, leader, and indicator taut without pulling the flies unnaturally. The flies should never be allowed to drift forward and slip under the rod, because this results in loss of line control – slack – and therefore loss of communication with the flies. The leader should enter the water at and remain at a 45-degree angle from the rod tip to the water's surface during the drift.

Careful attention to drift speed is essential. If the leader or indicator is moving at the same speed as the surface of the water, judging by bubbles or floating debris, the flies will be dragged along and move too fast because the current on the bottom is slower than on top because of the effects of friction. The remedy for this is to slow the rig with additional weight.

Because the first cast to a fishy-looking spot is often productive, a cautious, thoughtful approach is needed, along with an accurate cast and close attention to the indicator for any telltale aberrant movement. Make that first cast count!

Success during the fall October Caddis hatch requires Zen-like focus, skill in strike recognition, and proper striking technique, because the trout are lightning quick and most strikes are subtle and hard to spot irrespective of what type of rig and indicator is used. A few brief pointers therefore are in order.

Avoiding the “vertical” strike technique when fishing for trout will reduce fly-fisher stress and eventually increase hookups. When the rig leaves the water, a lot of unpleasant things can happen: acquiring or giving one’s guide an unwanted earring (in which case the guide is liable to become grumpy), getting practice removing massive tangles and knots, learning how to extract the rig from the canopy or berry bushes, or a combination of the above all at the same time. To eliminate this bothersome fuss, the angler should strike with a quick, horizontal downstream flick of the wrist. The rig remains in the water, allowing completion of the drift if the strike is not answered by the tug of a fish. Gravity does not bedevil rod movement, and the flies move unhesitatingly and directly with the strike. No earrings, leader snarls, or line-snatching trees or berry vines kink one’s day. The strike actually sets the hook. Life is good.

But when to strike? Simply put, strike any time that the indicator hesitates or moves abnormally. The culprit can be a rock, a stick, a leaf, particularly in the fall, or . . . a fish. Since the “take,” whatever it is, happens so fast, there is simply no time for speculation as to the identity of the culprit.

Finally, a word on playing hefty fall fish. With the oncoming winter, the water temperature curve flattens to a constant cold level, and the trout’s metabolism begins to slow. Any angler grandstanding during the tussle will cause excessive stress. Fall fish should be landed quickly, photographed immediately, and released properly. In aid of this goal, you should learn and practice several simple tricks. First, the rod should be held horizontal to the water, not vertically, like a flagpole. A vertical rod bounces vigorously and yields against a large fish’s runs, dives, and diversions, and it does not tire the fish rapidly. A properly handled horizontal rod, rotated from one side of the angler to the other, depending on where the fish is located, will tire the fish rapidly by forcing it constantly into the current and in different directions against steady pressure. Gentle handling and proper release techniques will minimize stress. Large fall fish are the river’s jewels and prime gene pool specimens, and they deserve to be treated accordingly.

## Frost Delivers the Frosting: Large Fish on Large Dry Flies



### October Larva

Along with the nastiness of the cold and damp of the last few weeks of the season comes a paucity of anglers and Mother Nature's late-fall gift to the hardest of the fly-fishing community: the opportunity to hook, play, and sometimes land very large trout on huge dry flies. Chilly days, exhaustion, and impending death slow the frenetic activity of the October Caddis adults. Somehow, opportunistic trout sense this oddity and respond with memorable rolling rises that elevate fly fishers' pulse rates and startle even the most jaded. "Where did that #@!\$%& monster come from?" is routinely heard from a cursing fly-fishing partner somewhere nearby in the fog, rain, or snow. And there's humor in watching ole' pard slip and slide on icy rocks, chasing a hog downstream in an often futile effort to land it. Yes, there is an occasional bluebird day when the air warms and gloves, ski hat, and one or two layers come off. I consider those few days to be treasures, because the fish still come to the dry fly while I bask in a bit of warm microclimate.

Weary eyes are grateful for the opportunity to drift huge October Caddis imitations through fishy spots. Big orange-bodied Stimulators can be very effective if drifted without drag in a high-floating attitude. Deer hair becomes waterlogged rapidly if the fly is dunked by current or poor casting. Shake-powder desiccants magically make your drowned fly float high and dry once again.

Casting for these caddis-gobbling fall fish is hardly classic. Save those beautiful, long, delicate casts for the casting pond or spring creek. I have found that the most effective presentation is made with a leader 9 to 10 feet in length, tapered to 3X or 4X, cast with about 10 feet of line outside the guides. Once the cast is made, the rod is held high to keep line and leader off the water, allowing exact fly placement and a drag-free drift. The combined length of this rig is 29 feet, not counting the angler's outstretched arm: 9 feet of rod; 10 feet of fly line; and 10 feet of leader, so it maintains adequate distance from the fish. This technique requires aggressive wading in some spots in order to be able to place and drift the fly properly. This is especially true if there are conflicting currents between the angler and the "sweet spot" or if the fly

needs to be made to hold behind a boil or in a backwater, as a natural insect trapped there would. But here's where the adventuresome, observant fly fisher can reap fall's October Caddis bounty, because those hard-to-reach spots are often where the largest fish will be found.

## The Frauds of Fall



### Stick Caddis and Larva

October Caddis imitations are big, and that's good news. Tiny flies are fun, but hand me those big, meaty dogs anytime. The October Caddis hatch is what that hoary adage "Big flies, big fish" is all about. The selection I carry is quite simple. For the cased larva, I use Bill's Stick Caddis, conceived on the North Yuba River some 15 years ago and born at the vise shortly afterward. For the drifting caseless larva, my fly choice is a yellowish-orange uncased caddis larva pattern such as LaFontaine's Yellow Caddis Larva. By combining this pattern Bill's Stick Caddis, I can imitate both accidental and behavioral drift. For the emerging pupa, I use Joe Kimsey's Maggie, available at the Ted Fay Fly Shop in Dunsmuir. For the adult, I use large, somewhat shaggily-tied Stimulators.

The North Yuba conception of Bill's Stick Caddis occurred as I rolled rocks on a cold, misty fall day, trying to puzzle out my lack of success. What I found were large, shaggy, tubular cases that, when cracked, revealed a pale-yellow-bodied larva with a black head and black legs. The insects appeared to be pupating while attached tenuously to the underside of rocks. So I stowed a couple of specimens in a plastic urine-sample bottle for later investigation.

Since I seem to do my best noodling while sitting astride streamside boulders, I assumed the position and probed my nymph box for something resembling the dark cases, which I vaguely knew had to be a species of caddis. The closest thing I could find was a single dark-brown Woolly Bugger wrapped with



black hackle. After yanking the marabou tail off and giving the hackle a haircut, I tied it on, examined it skeptically, waded into a long, deep pool, and plopped the beast into the upstream froth. No, I didn't hook the Godzilla of trout, but I did begin to take fish as I gained confidence in the fly. I found that by adding varying amounts of weight to the leader, I could get the fly to tumble along the bottom and into good holding spots, just like a hapless natural torn loose from its anchor point.

After this epiphany, I identified the critter as an October Caddis larva. Following my fruitless pattern search, creativity and intuition took control. Opting for a body of rough brown dubbing instead of chenille, I fumbled awhile with various materials to imitate the tiny twigs, rocks, conifer needles, and sundry detritus that formed the cases of my now glycerin-entombed specimens. Settling on some bluish-brown feathers from the back of a ring-necked pheasant, I poked around for some black dubbing to imitate the head and plucked a few black hen hackles for the legs. With all of these items mounted securely on a lead-wrapped size 8 streamer hook, I admired the assembled mess and crafted a half-dozen more in preparation for the next day's field test. They worked, and the rest is history. Although periodically modified with the addition of a short marabou tail, a yellowish dubbed collar to imitate the body of a "peeking" insect, a black bead at the head, and the substitution of pheasant tail barbules for pheasant back feathers, the fly's basic structure remains the same today as it was 15 years ago.

Here's a little secret: The critter itself begins as a tiny case that grows during the season, so why not tie the imitation in small to progressively larger sizes and fish it all season long? How should it be fished? Three suggestions: on the bottom, on the bottom, and on the bottom. The same suggestions apply to fishing the uncased larva imitation. Tie it in increasingly larger sizes as the season progresses and the larvae grow and fish it deep.

As an imitation of the emerging pupa frantically heading toward the surface and emergence, Joe Kimsey's Maggie gets results. Joe ties this creature in a rough, shaggy form that, when immersed and drifted, suggests a pupa with its wings and antennae laid back along its sides. Trout will grab this fly on the swing, as well as during the early part of the drift, so it pays to watch the indicator closely throughout the drift.

Little need be said regarding the ubiquitous Stimulator, except that its color must be in the midrange of the orange spectrum and the wing should be a medium dun color. In my experience, it pays to have both tidily-tied examples with stacked wings and nicely wrapped hackle and some tied in a shaggy format with unstacked deer-hair wings and oversize hackle. The shaggy ones seem to work best in the last days of the season, when the expiring adults struggle their last in the surface film.

Pattern information and tying instructions for Bill's Stick Caddis may be found [here](#) in the GBF site fly tying area. You can find the pattern for Gary LaFontaine's Yellow Caddis larva in his Caddisflies. For the Maggie, I suggest calling or visiting the Ted Fay Fly Shop in Dunsmuir, 2310 Dunsmuir Avenue, (530) 235-2969, [info@tedfay.com](mailto:info@tedfay.com), to get the bird's-eye lowdown. Instructions for the Stimulator can be found in Randall Kaufman's Tying Dry Flies.