GETTING into INSECTS

Why the study of bugs will help any fly fisher catch more trout.

BY CHIP O'BRIEN

ONCE CONSIDERED A Province of the Esoteric, the study of insects slowly enters the domain of common fisher-people like me. While many of us amateur entomologists don't give a rat's glutus maximus about Latin, we do want to reduce the hit-or-mystery of catching fish.

At least that was my motive: my early study of bugs developed from days when I would throw every fly in the box at feeding fish—knowing I hadn't a clue to their prey—and receive for my efforts only "the fin."

I looked to the masters for solutions and salve for my ego, devouring works by Gary LaFontaine and Ernest Schiebert. As much as they taught me, I still seemed always a step behind what was happening streamside, just outside the ring of the rise. Let me suggest that I was so frustrated that I eventually approached what seemed the dry subject of aquatic insects. I reasoned that an understanding of these small lives in the right hands—mine—might influence fishing fortune.

Today I can only marvel at how much torn hair and tooth enamel I could have saved, had I reasoned so well, so long ago.

Consider the obvious: selective trout are looking for an eneue with a specific appearance behaving in a particular way. While a fisher need not devote himself to the issue of "who leads" during the copulation dance of Panaeusphilus mayflies, unless he is Andy Burz, a fisher who recognizes the ritual and players will connect with more fish.

It's a process of distillation, deduction; a certain deviousness helps; and the more you learn about streamborn insects the better. Begin by keeping in mind a Sherlockian axiom: "Eliminate the impossible, and whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth." A. Doyle, if you can discover what fish are not taking, you're halfway there.

"Dead drift...dead drift..." was the mantra I'd been chanting for hours. I knew enough to identify bugs swarming through the twilight, flitting amidst bushes, as caddis flies. That tidbit of information had not produced fish numero uno, and so I wondered: "If fishing is so relaxing, why does the back of my neck feel like concrete?"

Finally, I threw a "last" cast, even as my mind was planning the rest of the evening. This time I neglected to mend the little Elk Hair, watching with only marginal interest as the bellying line swept my fly beneath the surface. It's obvious what happened next: I landed that fish and several more before darkness forced me from the stream. By then my neck was no longer the pressing issue. Instead: after all I'd heard about "dead drift," what was the trick to this swinging-sunken-dry fly routine I'd stumbled upon?

That question haunted me enough to seek information. First, the incidental—Brandee leucophora, I discovered, was the Latin name for my caddis; then the significant—mature females of some species dive under water to lay their eggs.

Light on. For the first time I saw a direct relationship between learning about bugs and catching fish. Now I skate dry flies often, whenever I suspect caddis are laying their eggs.

Fortunately, many bugs have been given popular names by anglers that are a whole easier to swallow than their Latin counterparts. "Blue Wing Olive" and "Pale Morning Dun" are not only useful descriptions of their object's coloration, but phrases as graceful and pleasing as the insects themselves.

Of course, local monikers can also confuse: what California fisher would recognize a "Speckle-Wing Dun" as Callibaetis, or a "Tiny White-Winged Quill" as a Trico? Given that some bugs are better known by their Latin names, a smattering of taxonomy is probably inevitable.

If, however, you chance upon a bood who uses Latin to make himself seem wise, creating clouds where clarity rules, you might remind him or her that nomenclature is not the name of the fly-fishing game. Oryou might simply inquire after the exact classification of Patoko's Great Balls O' Fire.

(By the way, don't worry about mispronouncing Latin names. Over the years I've become acquainted with several...
highly-placed professional entomologists, and they disagree. Take the tiny black and white *Tricosiphum* mayfly: one guy says "tree-corny-tho-des," the other insists it's properly "tree-co-rith-o-des." Who's right? Who cares? "Theo" works for most anglers.

The first step toward insect literacy usually comes early in the building of a fly fisher: noticing the similarity between flies recommended by local fly shops and those that crawl onto your glasses while you fish. If angling is good - fish falling for the mimic - it makes sense to remember the connection between the fly pattern and the bug encountered.

The next course in many educations is to note the cyclical nature of hatches. When you fish a certain lake or stream for several years, you eventually realize that certain insects come and go during particular seasons. For example: if in July you notice Pale Morning Dun mayflies (Ephemerella) on Fall River, it's a bet worth taking that PMDs will hatch again these next July - and that the flies you succeeded with this year will work the next. Because insects have reliable cycles, we can predict with reasonable certainty what flies will catch fish at which times of the year.

First, the relation of pattern to fly, then when to expect what - now's the time for a field trip to your local fly shop or public library, there to inspect the rich literature of our sport. A number of renowned authors have produced outstanding books on insects written in English's language. If the very wealth of information you encounter gives you pause, do what I did: scan the indexes.

Which is tantamount to picking up Clift's Notes instead of reading Shakespeare off the page. Never mind this heresy - look for the names of fisheries you are familiar with, or for places you would some day like to fish. In my case I was pleasantly surprised to find that several famous writers had researched the insects of venues I angle often. In yours, you may discover that - Presda! -

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Upper right: A seine made of (for example) window screen material is an excellent tool for collecting aquatic insects.

Right: Preserve your insects in glass vials for reference when fly-tying.
Bugs
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If you've ever tried to skim floating insects (especially tiny ones) off the green water with your hands, you know it's not easy. Invariably the current will whisk the bug to one side or another - like grasping a six-legged greased pig. Better to carry a small aquarium net in your vest problem solved.

COLLECTING UNDERWATER insects is simple too, though it involves either buying or constructing a seine to filter bugs from the water. A functional seine can easily be made from several yards of screen (like a screen door) attached to a pair of upright dowels. Again, a couple of bunches at any hardware store and you're in business. To use, face downstream with the seine below you. Stretch the screen out and stick the ends of the dowels into the stream bottom. Hook up the gavel and rocks with your boots so that current carries debris into the screen. Then lift carefully, tilting the seine toward horizontal. Inspect. Along with freelancers, the screen will trap numerous bugs for collection and study.

Seth Norman, our own Master of Entomology, markets both display for preserved insects and a most ingeniously portable seine that breaks down to fit into a fishing vest. Ask for them at local fly shops.

Film cannisters make handy receptacles for storing captured insects until they can be preserved later. I keep several in my vest at all times. Be sure to remove samples from your vest in a timely fashion, or expect a smell which will irritate your hair when you get around to it...Once, while teaching a class, a lid came off a forgotten vial in my vest. The stench fairly cleared the room, and prompted some serious questions about my personal hygiene.

The best way to store insect samples is in rubbing alcohol - drugstore variety isopropyl - inside of clear glass vials. Unhappily, the alcohol does pose problems over time you will notice colors bleeding out of your samples, which makes it difficult to match your pattern to the original; and alcohol tends to make samples brittle, therefore fragile - this happens fairly often to remove them for detailed examination. Although professional entomologists use a mixture referred to as APA (alcohol, formalin, acetic acid) which resolves these incompatibilities, this embalming mixture is potent enough to cause cancer in humans...Perhaps it's best to stick with alcohol.

As to bottles, any number of producers come in clear glass - a trip through the dishwasher and a rubdown with paint thinner will take care of residual labels or glue. Since I live in gold-dredging country, I find the vials used by miners particularly useful.

LAST NOTE: Learning the bugs you see while fishing is no more absurd than learning about the birds or wildflowers. You'll find insects every bit as colorful, intricate, delicate and beautiful as anything in nature. Knowing about them will certainly add to your appreciation of a lake or stream's entire ecosystem, and could quite possibly attach you to a few more fish.

Fishing Embalmed
(An alternative solution)

Seth Norman notes that a cure for brittle-bug syndrome is the formula Sheridan Anderson reveals in Crippled Creek Mantra (Frank Amato Publications) an 80/20 blend of denatured alcohol (available from any hardware store) and glycerin (from a pharmacy). I've got a three-year-old Bellgrandite still as soft and supple as a girl I dated in high school. Probably just a coincidence that it looks so much like her father.\n
In emergencies, Seth has employed Smirnoff in a one to one ratio: One shot for me, one for the bugs - I like to see smiles in my vials. Lose the time, though, it cooks them. To handle these he uses soft tweezers that are also handy for picking smaller mayfly nymphs from the screen of his seine. As to the Perenreus californiae, 'Stick to a headlock. Way too many legs for a full-Nelson.'