

# Mayflies

*Jerry Hobbs*

I recall sitting on the banks of the Ohio River in Illinois on an early evening in 1988 in the midst of a mayfly hatch. I was not fly fishing, but wished I was. Mayflies were so numerous they looked like a carpet. I know I could have counted two dozen on my skin at one time. What a time to be without a fly rod!

Mayflies are easy to identify, since they have 3 extra-long tail filaments, both as nymphs and as adults. They are not true flies since in the adult stage they have 2 pairs of wings (true flies only one pair). They are the only insects which hold their wings pointing straight up when at rest (see illustration). Mayflies undergo incomplete metamorphosis, having 3 (not 4) stages in their life cycle: egg, nymph, and adult. Nymphs bear some resemblance to adults, but lack wings and reproductive organs. The eggs hatch underwater and become nymphs, which are easily recognized by their 3 long, slender tail filaments. The nymphs feed on vegetation, mostly, and spend 1 to 3 years underwater. During this time they molt 10 to 20 times, growing from 1 mm to as much as 3 cm (1/16" to 1 1/4").

Mayflies emerge as adults at a fairly predictable time of year and even time of day in some localities. This depends on the species, the habitat, and weather conditions, but can still be more or less predicted by knowledgeable and experienced anglers.

Nymphs become subimagos; called duns by fishermen because their wings are dusty in appearance. They live only long enough for their skin to harden so they can fly to nearby vegetation where they molt again to become an imago, or spinner. These duns and spinners are the adult mayflies.

Spinners have functional sex organs and their sole role in life is to mate, which occurs in the air, usually over water.

Adult mayflies do not have functional mouth parts. They do not feed and live very short lives, sometimes only 1 or 2 days. After mating the males die, the females live a few more hours, depositing eggs in the water to start a new generation. Most females lay their eggs a few at a time by dipping their abdomen into the water while in flight. In most species the female lays 500 to 3000 eggs (rarely as many as 12,000). Eggs can hatch almost immediately, or wait up to 11 months before hatching and becoming nymphs. Fishermen refer to different mayfly species by various names. You will hear: Baetis, blue-winged olive, pale morning dun (PMD), Isonychia, green drake, march brown, and brown drake, to name a few.

Try turning over rocks in lakes and streams to expose the nymphs and watch for the emerging duns. The more you know about the insects the better you can predict hatches and swarms. This way you have a better chance of matching the hatch and catching more fish.

As Charlie Meck and John Rohmer mention in their book *Arizona Trout Streams and Their Hatches* (98), hatches in Arizona are really mixed up and predicting them with any certainty is difficult, due to the extreme environmental conditions throughout the state. However, it is usually early morning or late afternoon in the summertime.

If you're ever in the midst of a major mayfly hatch, you will remember it forever. You're surrounded by these beautiful insects and the action of fish feeding on them in the water is frantic!



## Go-To Flies When Mayflies are Hatching:

Wet: Denny's Callibaetis Nymph, Hare's Ear tied sparse in gray, Pheasant Tail Nymph, Big Bear Baetis

Dry: Adams dubbed sparse, Ginger Quill, Hairwing Royal Coachman

-Ron Robinson