



In the spring, many nice trout can be found by picking the pockets in mountain trout streams.

# Spring Trout Fishing

Story and photos  
by  
Harry Murray

Some of the most exciting fishing one can find takes place each spring in the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia and North Carolina and in the Allegheny Mountains in Western Virginia. As these streams begin warming in March and April the trout's metabolisms tell them that it is time to begin actively feeding. Fortunately the aquatic insects also begin emerging from the stream bottom at this time, providing the trout a rich diet.

One of the most productive methods for catching these trout is the tactic that many anglers find the most enjoyable to use. This involves observing the specific insects that are hatching on a stream at a certain time and then selecting the best artificial fly to match that natural insect. This is called "matching the hatch."

The first major insect to hatch in large numbers on many of our mountain trout streams is the *Eperous pleuralis* (Quill Gordon) mayfly. The fly with which many anglers have their greatest success is the Mr. Rapidan Dry Fly, size 14. This is the fly I designed 20 years ago to match this and the March Brown hatch when two gentlemen in my fly-tying class asked me to design a fly that "matches several of the most important early mayflies, floats well and is easy to see." The Mr. Rapidan Dry Fly is so effective that some anglers use no other dry fly for the first two months of the season.

This mayfly begins hatching in good numbers in late March and lasts until the middle of April. The duns start emerging about 2 pm and continue until dusk. The spinners return to the stream at dusk to

mate and can be seen over the stream until dark. When these spent spinners and duns become concentrated on the stream you will see many trout rising to feed on the surface. It is great fun to go one-on-one with these rising trout with a Mr. Rapidan Dry Fly. Even if you didn't see trout actively feeding on the surface, you can still catch many trout by drifting your dry fly naturally on the tails of the pools and along the sides of the riffles at the heads of the pools.

The *Paraleptophlebia adaptiva* (Dark Blue Quill) mayfly hatch overlaps the Quill Gordon hatch and can last until late April. This is a small delicate fly and a size 16 or 18 Blue Quill Dry Fly is a good match. Cold days in the middle of April make it difficult for these little duns to dry their wings and fly away from the surface of the stream. When this happens they taxi out to the sides of the pool where they actually climb up the banks. I've seen them so thick on rocks and gravel along the streams that you had to be careful where you stepped in order to avoid stepping on them.

A good tactic when fishing the Blue Quill hatch is to cover the sides and back eddies of the pools with your Blue Quill Dry Fly because many trout hold there just waiting for the naturals to drift to them. If you spot rising trout, go one-on-one with these fish, but if you don't, just drift your fly in these areas and you will catch many of them.

The *Stenonema vicarium* (March Brown) mayfly begins hatching in early April and lasts until early May. This is the largest mayfly present in large numbers on many Virginia trout streams, and the trout feed heavily upon them. Recently I spotted 11 trout in one pool on separate feeding stations sipping in the natural March Browns.

The size 14 Mr. Rapidan Dry Fly will take many trout during this hatch by fishing it over the tails of the pools and over the strong currents at the sides of the



The rich feeder streams throughout Virginia provide the ideal habitat for wild trout.

pools. Many of the March Brown nymphs move from the middle of the streams to the sides of the pools prior to hatching and are exposed to the trout during this mini-migration. By carefully watching the foot-deep water on the sides of the pools you can often observe the trouts' splashy feeding on these nymphs. Some of these trout will take the Mr. Rapidan Dry Fly, but oth-

ers prefer the size 14 Mr. Rapidan Bead Head Nymph fished upstream by dead drift using two Scientific Anglers indicators on the leader to help detect the strikes.

A favorite natural fly for both the trout and the anglers in the spring is the *Isoperla bilineata* (Little Yellow) Stonefly. Both the density of this hatch and its longevity make this delicate bright yellow

fly well worth matching. It starts appearing on many streams in late April and becomes very heavy in May.

Many of the Little Yellow Stonefly nymphs live in the moss below the waterline on boulders on the sides of the pools, and the trout feed heavily on the adults that hatch in these areas. Drifting your dry fly along these boulders will give you many nice trout. During the early part of this hatch the size 16 Murray's Little Yellow Stonefly fished on a 9-foot 6X leader is very effective. However, as the streams get low in late May you will usually catch more trout by using the same fly in size 18 and switching to 9-foot 7X leader.

The *Ephemerella dorothea* (Sulphur) mayfly finishes out our spring hatches, and it's a dandy. These little gems start showing up in the middle of May, and they can last well into June. Ed Shenk's Sulphur Dry Fly in sizes 16 and 18 is my favorite for matching this hatch. The duns start emerging in the middle of the afternoon and continue until dusk, becoming thicker as the day progresses. The spinners



Jeff Murray uses a cautious approach to fish for a large rainbow trout he saw rising to feed on adult mayflies in the spring.



The Mr. Rapidan Bead Head Nymph is a great fly to use in periods of high water in the spring.

start returning to the stream for their beautiful mayfly mating dance about two hours before dark and continue until dark. Consequently, during the last hour of the day you have the greatest concentrations of Sulphur duns and spinners on the water, and the trout go on a feeding spree.


I can well remember hiking into a remote section of a Blue Ridge trout stream with my son Jeff to camp and fish for several days. The sun had already dropped below the western ridge of our steep hollow, and darkness was fast approaching when we reached the area where we planned to camp. However, when we discovered that every pool had many trout sipping natural Sulphurs from the surface and we could catch several trout from each pool, we chose to fish as long as we could see our flies on the water and set up out tent in the dark.

Yes, springtime in Virginia is a wonderful time to be on a trout stream. The action is challenging and catching the wild trout is very gratifying.

For timely information showing hatches and fishing conditions, the author displays a weekly "stream report" on his website at [www.murraysflyshop.com](http://www.murraysflyshop.com). For detailed information of many of the best streams in Virginia, see his book *Blue Ribbon Streams*, which is available at the above website.

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