



THE 10 BEST FLIES FOR ENGLISH CHALKSTREAMS

An understanding of the trout's diet and seasonal hatches will help you reduce the thousands of patterns on offer to a manageable selection

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Estimates vary but there are something in the region of 6,000 fly patterns tied just to catch trout. Your job as a flyfisher is simple: to assess the conditions in order to bring that boggling array down to just a single pattern for a given fish at a specific moment. Since few of us carry a suitable algorithm around in our heads, this process is at best imperfect. But there is hope.

If you are looking for guidance, probably the worst ploy is to stop en route to the river at the local fly store. Not that this isn't fantastic fun – it is part of the ritual of any fishing trip – but as they like to say in the tackle trade, “flies are tied to catch fishermen, not fish”. You have been warned. The truth is you probably already have the perfect fly for the day in your box; it is just a question of knowing which it is.

Trout, especially chalkstream brown trout, are creatures of habit. Unless something momentous invades their space they will live out their three to five years of adult life within a few yards of the spot where they were spawned. In that time, they will progress from eating almost microscopic invertebrates to a smorgasbord of aquatic delicacies. When we consider what trout eat, “flies” are part of a wider story: snails, shrimps, ova, infant crayfish, caterpillars, grubs and moths are just a few of the other items on the menu.

At this point, perhaps, I haven't helped you much. I've widened rather than reduced the array of possibilities, introducing whole new vistas of food groups to which you hadn't given much consideration in the past, but don't despair. The process of elimination is easier than you think.

Firstly, you need to consider the life of a trout, which is, in truth, a pretty simple one. When not thinking about sex or survival a trout's only real concern is food and this dominates just about every moment of every daylight hour. A trout has to consume vast quantities of food each day and this is both its strength and weakness. For every item it eats, it will reject or ignore dozens of others.

As the angler, this is the biggest problem you face: your offering will be up for close scrutiny, compared and contrasted against the more numerous naturals. The quality of the cast, the drift, the thickness of the tip-pet and much more all come into play but,



Above: a trout will not rise to an *Ephemera danica* outside the mayfly season
Left and previous page: the writer and Lincoln Collins on the River Allen in Dorset

ultimately, it is your fly that will be the deciding factor. Of course, we have all seen the trout that has a rush of blood to the head, grabbing without discrimination as something passes, but that is the exception rather than the rule. For the most part, trout are methodical and measured. That is where you will win.

If you watch the evolution of a hatch on a river it is always a progressive affair. If the insects are ones you recognise it is a mistake instantly to start casting at every trout in the vicinity with your imitation. You are right to match the hatch but you are wrong to think you might goad the trout into action. They like to take things steady, eyeing up the stream of insects before finally sampling one. The second rise will come more easily, as will the third and so on. Once the fish has the taste of the naturals and has become

emboldened by them, your imitation is more likely to be taken. That is how you win.

As an aside, I have often wondered why, when a river surface teems with the real thing, a trout would ever deign to consider a man-made fly, however perfectly tied. After all, you can easily spot the difference from 10 metres away as your fly drifts downriver, so at much closer range, surely it's a pretty simple analysis for the trout? I can only assume that they react a bit like us humans when presented with a bowl of chips – you can't resist the one that looks a bit different.

If I were of a mathematical bent and creating an equation for fly selection, the biggest factor has to be the season. The food in and on the river varies with the time of year so you need to carry that basic knowledge in your head as to what hatches and when, if only for purposes of elimination. You can

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make it easy on yourself; I organise my flies in separate boxes for April, May, June and so on, then I have a generic box for those that work across the season. That is how I arrive at my top 10.

It is hard to overstate how attuned trout are to the changing of the seasons; the famous mayfly, *Ephemera danica*, is a good case in point. You would think that after three or four weeks of gorging on these huge morsels, the mayfly would be firmly lodged in the memory of a trout. But cast one to a trout any time outside the mayfly period and it will be ignored. Trout might not have a mighty brain but they are not daft; they need the comfort of familiarity.

So, after matching the hatch to the season, what else do you need to consider? The great delight of chalkstreams is that you are able to observe trout feeding, so adjust your tactics accordingly. Some people maintain that seeing a rising fish is the best thing you'll ever see on a chalkstream. I disagree.

It is spotting a fish that is about to rise. You can see that they are quivering with latent energy. Books describe it as "on the fin"; a fish just beneath the surface, with its body angled slightly upwards, fins flexing and ready to rise when the moment demands it. This is the time for a dry.

But fish don't feed on the surface all the time. They probably obtain nine-tenths of their food elsewhere. Watch for the other signs. If the fish is moving left and right in the stream, mouth opening and closing, it must be nymphing so use a nymph. Similarly, if it is kicking up the gravel with tail, head or body it is dislodging shrimps. Observe and you will quickly eliminate everything but the possible. That is the moment to delve into your fly box to tie on the pattern of choice. ■

Simon Cooper is a professional fishing guide and author. His Hatch Calendar is available to buy online. His latest book, The Otter's Tale, has just been published by William Collins, price £17.



Above: the writer has separate fly boxes for each month of the season. Below: the delight of chalkstreams is that you are able to observe trout

THE TOP 10 FLIES

Here is the content of my fly boxes. You can't cover every contingency, so keep it simple, stick to these reliables and you'll rarely get skunked.



BLACK GNAT

This is your all-purpose midge or gnat imitator. Along with some of the others in my top 10, have this in the smaller sizes as well. A size 12 will double for the Hawthorn in late April and early May. *Sizes 12-18; April to September*

BLUE-WINGED OLIVE

This classic chalkstream fly is the most widespread of the summer olives. Handily, the Pheasant Tail is a good imitation of the nymphal stage and the Parachute Adams the emerger. *Sizes 14-18; June to September*

CINNAMON SEDGE

There are more than 30 British caddis species but the ones trout are interested in are all fairly similar, so this one pattern will suffice. The smaller size will do when the April grannom hatch is on and the Klinkhamer imitates the emerger. *Sizes 10-14; May to September*

DADDY LONG LEGS

Not a river fly at all but these terrestrials (also called crane flies) are so commonly blown onto the water that trout go mad for

this big mouthful. Best fished in the surface film, so not too much floatant. *Size 8-12; July to September*

IRON BLUE

When the conditions are cold, wet and blustery in May, September and October this deceptively delicate fly is the one to turn to. Iron Blues just love to hatch in these conditions. *Sizes 14-18; May, September and October*

KLINKHAMER

This is the most modern fly of the 10, created by Dutchman Hans van Klinken in the 1980s. It's versatile, easy to see and will work all season. Imitates an emerging caddis or sedge, so classified as one of the two emergers in my selection. Choose the colour you wish, though grayling like red. *Sizes 12-14; all year round*

PARACHUTE ADAMS

The original Adams was invented by Leonard Hallady from Michigan, USA, in 1922; he named it after the first person to catch a fish with it, Judge Charles E Adams. I have to confess that the Parachute version is my "go to" pattern every time. It floats

like a dream, will take lots of punishment and is easy to see. *Sizes 12-20; all year round*

PHEASANT TAIL NYMPH

Without a doubt the most widely used fly in the world; you will find a variant in the fly box of just about every freshwater guide around the globe. It was created by Frank Sawyer during his time as river keeper for the Army on the Avon in Hampshire from 1928 to 1980. It is simple and effective, imitating all manner of chalkstream invertebrates. If you are not sure what to use sub-surface, this is your default. *Have weighted and unweighted versions, sizes 10-18; all year round*

THOMAS MAYFLY

A monster of a fly but the most effective *Ephemera danica* imitator of them all. *Sizes 8-10; May and June*

SHRIMP

At certain times of the year shrimp, or *gammarus*, account for 80% of a trout's diet. Ignore them at your peril. Pink or green. Weighted and unweighted versions. *Sizes 12-14; all year round*

