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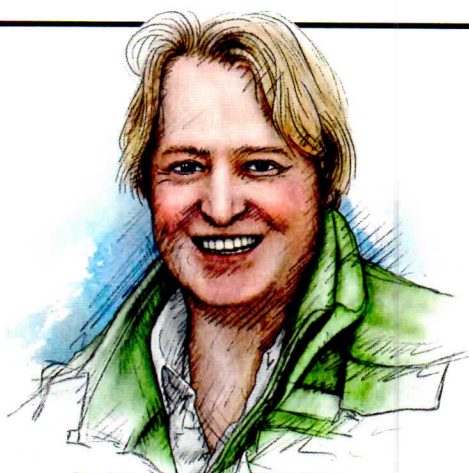
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CHALK TALK

Shooting fish in a barrel

New columnist **Simon Cooper** looks forward to May on the chalkstreams

MAYFLY. YOU'D THINK THAT was a word that would send the blood coursing through the veins of every fly-fisher. But apparently not. From time to time I end up in a conversation that takes an odd turn; some people simply say mayfly is all too easy and once done it is done forever. Reaching for that book of quotations I am tempted to rework Dr Johnson. Surely when a man is tired of mayfly he must be tired of life?

Maybe it is just me. Through my formative teenage years, I was starved of mayfly fishing, dispatched to boarding school and university, headmasters and tutors unwilling to release me from my studies. I tried to make the case that *Ephemera danica* was a higher calling but, not all together unsurprisingly as non-fishers, they were unconvinced. I should have taken a page from J Waller Hills. In his *A Summer on the Test*, as a serving officer he persuaded his regimental medical officer, as Izaak Walton would say "a brother of the angle", to give him a sick note in the midst of the First World War.

I suppose I can see the point being made; mayfly fishing can be ridiculously easy, shooting fish in a barrel. But the hatch is one of Mother Nature's most amazing tours de force. It is entomology writ large. From the struggling emergers breaking the surface film to the clouds of huge insects that drift like gunsmoke across the water. And sometimes, the fishing isn't easy. In that vast smorgasbord of naturals your pale imitation is often ignored, then ignored again, before you finally try another pattern to be ignored yet further.

At that point, my advice is to sit down and watch. Fishing isn't always about fishing. It's about being subsumed into the natural world. Witnessing the apex to millions of years of evolution. It is an extraordinary few weeks. And I will never lose that sense of awe and privilege to be a tiny part of it.

Hatching this month

Football managers like to talk about games of two halves; that is May for you. First half, hawthorns; second half, mayfly. By rights the hawthorn fly, as a land-based insect, should not even feature in the trout's diet. Legend has it that *Bibio marci* lays its eggs beneath the roots of the hawthorn bush. There is no real evidence for this - the name probably reflects the fact that it likes to swarm around the flowering hedgerows. Looking much like a giant house fly, with long dangling legs, it is vulnerable to spring gusts that swoosh it on to the water and thence into the jaws of hungry trout.

The hawthorn tends to come and go quickly so there is often an interregnum before the mayfly starts in earnest. In this period, you will often see a few rogue *danica* but rarely do the trout take them. Why, I have no idea. The hawthorn must be equally unfamiliar but they are still taken. Regardless, you are better to keep your mayflies dry and concentrate on olive patterns until the fish start taking the naturals.

And once they do, be open-minded about the patterns you pick. Despite, or perhaps because of, the huge selection on offer, the trout do switch between emergers, fly on the wing, and spent. If they switch, so should you.

"In that vast smorgasbord of naturals your imitation is often ignored, then ignored again"

The keeper's fly

You'd struggle to find a River Test keeper who has more chalkstream in his blood than Jon Hall. Born and bred in Hampshire, Jon went to Sparsholt College, had his first job on the Testwood salmon beat and then extended his trout education with a stint on the Winchester College Itchen water. He then combined the disciplines on the Lower Itchen Fishery until he moved to his current home at Broadlands in 2010.

Jon is in no doubt that when the mayfly first emerge, the largest Grey Wulff in the shop is the thing. "As big as a shaving brush," he says. As the trout get picky, he likes something with a detached body; the John Goddard version works well. Towards the end of May, Jon has his own particular spent pattern but his top tip is to trim the bottom hackle of your own or shop-bought patterns so they sit dead flat on the surface.



Jon Hall's Spent Mayfly.

■ Simon Cooper is managing director of Fishing Breaks, the chalkstream fishing specialists (fishingbreaks.co.uk). He is the author of two books: *Life of a Chalkstream* and *The Otters' Tale*.