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ARE FLIES FADDIST?

Simon Cooper wonders why anglers lose faith in proven patterns



“FASHIONS FADE, STYLE IS eternal.” So said Yves Saint Laurent. I’m not quite a fishing icon in the same way that he was a fashion icon, but I think I’m bold enough to repurpose his words, “Fashions fade, the Blue Winged Olive is eternal.”

It is strange how fly patterns come and go. In my twenties, *the* stillwater pattern was the Montana, the original tying spawning dozens of variants. If you did not have a box of Montanas representing every colour in the rainbow, you were clearly behind the piscatorial curve. Similarly, out on the river, the Greenwell’s Glory was the first-choice dry-fly. I knew a keeper who successfully fished this, and only this, all season long. If in doubt, go for the GG was his catchphrase. But today, neither pattern holds the same sway.

There has definitely been an evolution, perhaps even revolution, on rivers. Traditional river dry-flies as first popularised by Halford gradually disappeared from fly-boxes in postwar Britain, the first wave of replacements distinctly American, spearheaded by the Wulffs. Like the Montanas, all manners of variants kept us excited beyond the staple Grey Wulff. Why were they so popular? Well, they clearly catch fish, which is the prerequisite of any fly, but they are decidedly much easier to fish than delicate, traditional dry-flies. The Red Wulff is more buoyant, durable and easy to see than the Royal Coachman that it has largely superseded.

But us fly-fishers are magpies; we like the next new shiny thing. As the late Lee Wulff wrote, “Each fly is a dream we cast out to fool fish.” The never-fail fly is always just around the next corner. So, as the Wulffs became old hat, Hans van Klinken was the European who swept away American entomological imperialism. His Klinkhamer is marketing genius. It was destined to succeed by virtue of its name alone, but actually it

was a game-changing fly because the choice of hook (Partridge Yorkshire caddis hook, in case you ask) in conjunction with his tying, which took the body as close to the barb as possible, meant it hung much deeper in the water than previous emerger patterns.

So, say, in 25 years’ time, will a future *T&S* columnist ask, whence went the Klinkhamer? The answer is probably yes, and for that we can likely blame fly-tyers, alchemists all, hunching over their vices in search of fly immortality. I’ll leave the explanation why to Dr J C Mottram, physicist, cancer research pioneer, and the man who explained the concept of camouflage in the natural world (he worked in the WWI British Naval Camouflage School). Dr Mottram was also a naturalist and fly-fishing author.

He said, “It is remarkable how flies gain a high reputation, are used by a great number of fishermen (*sic*), then gradually lose favour and, finally, are seldom found in the angler’s fly-box. I think the explanation lies in the fact that professional fly-tyers gradually and unconsciously alter the character of the fly until it comes to differ widely from the original and is of no particular interest to trout.”

Today, it is easy to source a Blue Winged Olive that is pretty well the facsimile of that illustrated in Halford’s 1886 book, *Floating Flies and How to Dress Them*. It might be a bit more trouble to fish than my other favourite, the Parachute Adams, but that continuity with those who trod the same banks and fished the same fly makes every fish on the Blue Winged Olive just that little bit more special. ■

Simon Cooper is managing director of Fishing Breaks, the leading chalkstream fishing specialists. He is author of Life of a Chalkstream and The Otters’ Tale. Follow his fortnightly blog on saving our rivers at fishingbreaks.co.uk