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MAYFLY NO. 20

There's a new species on the block,
as Simon Cooper discovers



YOU WOULD THINK EVERYTHING THERE was to be known about the mayfly – the large sort we all get unnaturally excited about during the famed “duffers’ fortnight” – was known. They are big. They are brash. Even the feeblest entomologist among us cannot fail to put a name to a face when this particular hatch is on.

Since fly-fishing became a “thing” over two centuries ago I would hazard there are enough writings to fill a small home library which have examined *Ephemera danica* and its 18 fellows that fall into the select group of large mayfly species. But, in a recent edition of the *Entomologist’s Monthly Magazine* Craig R. Macadam and Andrew Farr announced the discovery of a new large British mayfly, the *Siphonurus aestivalis*, the first such discovery since 1942.

How it went unrecognised for so long is probably down to two things: historic misclassification and a better understanding of the preferred habitat of what we may now call the Early Summer Mayfly, as it was named by Macadam and Farr in March this year.

The actual existence of the Early Summer has been known for a long while; the Victorian entomologist the Rev. Eaton identified them in Norway in 1903. However, since then they have been, as entomologists would say, hidden in the keys. That is to say if you tried to identify an Early Summer against the entomological database of insect characteristics you would have concluded that your specimen was the well-known *Siphonurus armatus*. Nothing new to see here. Move on. However, if you were someone so fooled you are in good company. In 1970 the great Richard Walker lodged an *armatus* he collected from Darwell Reservoir in Sussex with the Natural History Museum. We do not know exactly why, but clearly, he thought something was amiss.

Leap forward to 2019, as a Dutch ecologist collects what he later identifies as two Early Summer nymphs

when walking the East Highland Way in Scotland. This in turn led Macadam and Farr to ask: was Walker on to something? Now, nymphs in themselves are not enough to confirm a new classification; entomology requires the identification of the adult male. Well, by way of the painstaking rearing of nymphs to adults in the Farr bathroom and DNA analysis the Darwell mayfly was finally identified as *Siphonurus aestivalis* and listed as a new British species in January 2021.

It seems the success of the Early Summer is due to its ability to fill an ecological vacuum presented by the creation of reservoirs which, as you well know, rise and fall with the seasons. The female lays her eggs in late April or early May (hence the Early Summer nomenclature) in the margins. The margins dry out but the eggs survive, hatching in autumn when water levels rise again. But not much else will have survived the yo-yoing of the levels so the Early Summer grows fast with little competition, reaching adulthood in six months as opposed to the two years of most large mayflies.

We know they are present in Inverness-shire, Yorkshire, East Sussex and Kent but with our newly found knowledge keen entomologists are sure to turn them up in locations in between. That said, to the naked eye it will be hard to differentiate from similar large mayfly so take a clue from the time of year and habitat. If it is late April or early May, in the slow flowing reaches of rivers, ponds and the shores of lakes and reservoirs, usually with much vegetation and often with a layer of rotting leaves, that insect catching your eye just might be the Early Summer Mayfly. ■

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