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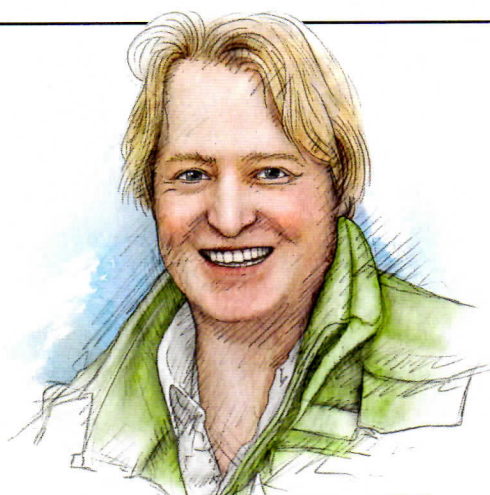
BIG
SALMON
ON A
HITCH



12-PAGE TROUT-FISHER'S GUIDE TO THE PEAK DISTRICT

OUR PICK OF THE BEST
RIVERS, STILLWATERS,
SHOPS AND HOTELS





CHALK TALK

Mysteries of the mayfly

Their lives may be longer than you might think, suggests

Simon Cooper

MAYFLY. IT IS A WORD HARD-WIRED into the psyche of just about every fly-fisher. If you don't make the hatch in any given year, it is enough to live it vicariously through the boasted exploits of friends, safe in the belief that next time around you will be there. For sure. But for all the ubiquity of *Ephemera danica* - you're as likely to find them on the Thames as the Test - we are alarmingly ignorant about much of their life. Why do they hatch when they do? And how is it so synchronised? Do they really live for just 24 hours? What is the purpose of their existence?

Like much of Mother Nature, mayfly are, for all the complications of their life, simply part of the food chain. When hatched they are classified as, in one of those wonderful scientific turns of phrase, aerial plankton. A few minutes on a river bank will quickly prove the point. Ducks, not generally the brightest birds, gather line-abreast across the river, gobbling down every insect that floats their way, beaks darting left and right in rapid fire to ensure no survivors. The swallows swoop and dive. Frogs are less animated, lying in wait for the unsuspecting to come in range of a curling tongue. We humans are not alone in loving the mayfly.

As for the trout, the mayfly hatch is really just a culmination of months of mayfly feeding. For every insect you see on the wing, there are more, by a factor of many hundreds, swimming as nymphs beneath the surface. The mayfly nymph is a monstrous thing. Huge. Much bigger than just about any insect-like thing you'll scoop from a river. Trout love shrimps. They provide a burst of energy. Mayfly nymphs have the same effect and a good deal more.

Of course, for much of its life the nymph is a burrower, living in the gravel out of harm's way, but come the spring it will head for the shallows in preparation for times to come.

Perhaps more extraordinary than the sheer number of mayfly is their uncanny ability to appear in the air with such impeccable timing: diaries of the chalkstreams' fishing greats going back centuries record the first "hatch" at around the end of the second week of May. Today that remains true. And that seems to be the case regardless of the weather. A cold May. A hot May. A wet winter. A dry winter. Despite dozens of meteorological variations, our ephemeral friends arrive, give or take a day or two, bang on time every year. It seems the triggers are more to do with the length of the day and the intensity of the light.

HOW LONG THEY LIVE IS A LITTLE MORE CERTAIN.

Conventional wisdom is that their lifecycle is two years: 20 days as an egg, one day (?) as a dun and 700 days, give or take, as a nymph. In fact, they can go from egg to adult in only one year or as long as three years. The extremes are noticeable. One-year mayfly are significantly smaller than two-year-olds, while three-year-olds are bigger still. The cause is probably water temperature: in rivers where temperature is rising over time, the cycle moves towards one year.

You might wonder why I put the question mark beside the length of the dun's life. Many fishermen believe mayfly only live for a day, or less. After all, the fleeting nature of their existence gave rise to their name. However, I'm with Frank Sawyer in questioning whether this is really so: he observed that a huge hatch one evening did not necessarily correlate with a huge number of egg-laying females the next. And likewise a meagre hatch one day might be followed by a carpeted river the next. Sawyer posited that mayfly could live for weeks. I am not so sure about this, but I am certain they will easily survive for a number of days. They need to. Having to hatch regardless of the weather is all very well, but being born in the eye of a storm is hardly conducive to egg-laying. In Dr Cyril Bennett's seven-year study into the

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lifecycle of the mayfly, published in 2007, he recorded the total collapse of the mayfly on Surrey's North Wey in 2000 when prolonged high winds and heavy rain prevented the females returning to the river. This was exceptional, but it illustrates a point: if a population were restricted to just a single day of fecundity, it would be an evolutionary time bomb.

So, it seems that our mayfly, for all its apparently fragile nature and transitory life, is tougher than it looks. It might flutter and dance. Excite us unlike any other insect. But in the end, like so many of God's creatures, millions of years of evolution have given it methods of survival that we should truly envy. **T&S**

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