

Fishing the Blue Quill

by Carl Haensel

Pennsylvania trout streams host a large number of small, grayish mayflies that hatch throughout the season. Although they comprise several different species, you don't have to be an entomologist to catch fish during a hatch. However, to fish to any hatch of small mayflies effectively, you have to be prepared.

Look for gray, overcast days as a sign that you should be on the lookout for a hatch. Before you leave home, make sure you have some Blue Quills in a few different sizes. Similar mayfly patterns such as Blue-Wing Olives should be in your box as well, and maybe even a few emerger patterns in a similar size.

When you get to the stream and see a hatch, watch and wait. Get down on your hands and knees and observe what the fish are actually doing. It's virtually impossible to stand high above them and see how they are feeding, plus it spooks the heck out of most trout. Start asking questions. Are the fish making splashing rises chasing emerging mayflies? How big are the mayflies? How are they riding on the water? If you see plenty of dark little "sailboats" drifting down the stream, with trout sipping them in one by one, then you're in luck. It's a classic small mayfly hatch. Once you've analyzed the rising fish, catch a few of the mayflies that they seem to be feeding on. Remember, there can be multiple hatches at the same time, and the fish will not always be feeding on the largest or most obvious insect that is hatching. If the tiny mayfly in your hand looks similar to a Blue Quill, tie one on and get ready to start casting.

As you begin to fish, approach any trout feeding on small mayflies cautiously. They will not be as aggressive as when they are feeding on a caddisfly hatch, and they can be put down easily. Avoid selecting a cast-



This rainbow inhaled a small Blue Quill as it floated downstream through a pod of rising trout. Remember to keep forceps handy to facilitate hook removal of a deeply hooked fish.

ing position that is directly downstream of the trout that you are targeting. Casting from this position will "line" the fish repeatedly, and they will stop feeding. Instead, get slightly to the side and below the fish that you are targeting. Remember to always work the closest fish to you first. You will catch more fish this way,

and avoid spooking fish, too. If the trout that you are casting to is feeding in quick sequence, your cast can be significantly different than if it is feeding slowly. A trout feeding in quick sequence, such as every three or four seconds, is swimming just under the surface of the water. It can only see objects on the surface that are a foot or two

in front of it, depending on its depth. If this is the case, cast so your fly lands just a couple of feet upstream of the trout, and drifts directly over it. Remember to sweep your rod downstream when the fish takes to get a good hookset. If the fish is rising in a slow rhythm and not taking flies continuously, that means that it is going back to the bottom or to a holding lie between feeding. To catch this fish, you will need a longer drift, depending on the depth of the water that the trout is holding in. This is a key rule of dry fly fishing. The deeper the water, the longer the drift required. You do not want to cast directly above the trout in deep water, since, even if the fish sees the fly, it rarely will dart directly to the surface to get it. When fishing to trout rising to mayflies, the fish may lazily rise to the surface, follow the mayfly, and then suck it in. They may do this with your fly, and you should plan the drift of your fly before you cast. Keep in mind, your first few casts to any fish are your best shot at catching it. ☐