

# A FLY ANGLER'S INTRODUCTION TO PICKING A PATTERN

by Carl Haensel

It's the morning of your first fishing trip on a new trout stream. You've just driven three hours, and you've pulled off at a good-looking spot next to a bridge. You begin rigging your gear and preparing to head down to the stream.

Each fly angler in this situation faces a challenge—which fly to use? Many anglers have a favorite fly pattern or two, a “go-to” fly. There are times, however, when one fly pattern may be better than another. Consider this series of factors that will lead you through the steps of picking the best fly for the situation.

Before you start picking your fly in the field, there are some basics that you will need to learn. Start by learning

## Fly Selection Rules

- Don't decide on a fly until you get to the stream. Wait to rig your rod until you sit down at the stream and make some observations.
- Use a net. Remember to examine insects and minnows carefully. Regardless of the types of insects or minnows you might find on a stream, a small seine or fine-mesh net is indispensable for examining them. There are even some nets on the market that slip over your landing net.
- Bring at least three flies of a pattern to the stream. One to use, one to use after that big fish breaks off the first one, and one to lend to your buddy. Leave a spare fly at home, too.
- Believe in your fly. If you don't, take a break and consider your selections. If you don't believe in the pattern that you're fishing, you're not as likely to catch as many fish.
- It's not all about the fly. Presentation of your fly accounts for a huge part of your success. If the first 10 patterns don't catch the fish, the next 10 won't catch it, either. Move along and try for another fish, or change your presentation completely.—CH.



photos by the author

about the prey that predatory fish eat: Insects, crustaceans and fish. If you want additional information on these organisms and their life cycles, check the information on mayflies, caddisflies, stoneflies, crayfish, baitfish and many others on the Commission's web site, [www.fish.state.pa.us](http://www.fish.state.pa.us).

## Step 1: Where will you fish?

If you are going to fish for brook trout in a mountain stream, your box should hold different flies than a box for brown trout in a limestone spring creek. As a general rule, trout that live in more productive water, like spring creeks, are more finicky about which flies they will take. There are many varieties of food available to the trout, and they often are selective about what they eat. In those types of streams anglers should fish flies that closely resemble natural foods found there. In less fertile water, such as most of Pennsylvania's “mountain” trout streams, there is not as much food for trout to eat. In these streams, trout are more likely to respond to a fly that doesn't closely match a prey item that is actually found there.



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## Step 2: When are you going?

To select the right fly, there are seasons and cycles that you must consider. A smart first step is to find a local or regional hatch chart that will tell you which mayflies, caddisflies and stoneflies are hatching. There are insect hatches, especially mayflies, that occur only at a specific time of the year.

## Step 3: What time of day will you fish?

The time of day and weather play an important role in your fly selection. What do you think the fish will be doing in the next few hours when you start fishing? Will the grasshoppers in the meadow be warm enough to be active in the afternoon? Will there be a mayfly hatch in the evening? If so, the mayfly nymphs that are about to hatch might be active. Consider that an evening rainstorm or other inclement weather that has caused stream levels to rise can stop or delay an insect hatch. Furthermore, extremely hot weather or low stream levels can cause insect and trout feeding activity to occur primarily in low light levels and even during the night.

## Step 4: Stop and watch.

One of the most important things you can do at a trout stream is to stop, wait and watch. Look for information in the water, the air, and last night's spider webs. Insects, minnows and fish moving around will give you clues to which fly to pick. Plan to spend at least five or 10 minutes observing on every fishing trip, even on your favorite stream.

## Step 5: Put the pieces together.

None of the elements on a trout stream works independently. You must consider all the variables. If there are mayflies in the air and the trout are making splashy rises, take a closer look. Try to see if the mayflies in the air are the same ones that the fish are eating on the water. Then search your fly box to find something that matches them. You're in luck if you've tied some flies for the hatch that you're now seeing firsthand. Don't plan to use dry flies if you don't see any rising fish. While not a "hard and fast" rule, this strategy will help make your angling more productive, especially on Pennsylvania's limestone trout streams.

Trout can consume more than 80 percent of their food from underwater sources. If no insects are hatching, turn over rocks in the stream and look at what's on the underside to figure out what lives there. If you're going to fish nymphs, you don't always need to know an organism's Latin name. Just flip over a rock. If you see little crawly dark-brown things that look to be about size 16, tie on a fly that looks like that, such as a size 16 Pheasant Tail Nymph. If

## The Beginner's Fly Box

Unsure about which flies to bring out to the field with you? Here's a short list of flies that will provide you with something to use in many situations that you will encounter in Pennsylvania. These flies are generic patterns that don't mimic one specific insect or minnow perfectly, but they do an adequate job imitating several different ones.

Fly Pattern	Size
Blue-Wing Olive	14-16
Adams	12-16
Adams Parachute	12-16
Tan Elk Hair Caddis	12-16
Beadhead Pheasant Tail Nymph	4-18
Pheasant Tail Nymph	14-18
Beadhead Hare's Ear Nymph	12-16
Hare's Ear Nymph	12-16
Olive Woolly Bugger	8-10
Black Woolly Bugger	8-10

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If you're fishing for big trout, streamers can make the difference. Wild trout that exceed 16 inches in length eat a significantly larger percentage of minnows and other small fish. Feed them what they want—a streamer that looks like a minnow. Try using a small seine to take a closer look at the kinds of minnows in the stream. ☐



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