

Great Fall Fly Fishing



Memories

by Charles R. Meck

For years my fly fishing season ended with the white fly hatch on the Little Juniata River in central Pennsylvania or on the Yellow Breeches Creek near Carlisle. With the advent of Labor Day, I retired my fly fishing gear for another year. I usually rationalized that cooler weather made trout less active. I also believed that few streams held trout at the end of the season. How misinformed could I be? Many Pennsylvania trout streams hold ample numbers of trout at this time of year.

Not until the past decade did I continue fly fishing through fall. Trico hatches appear from late July through much of September. If no killing frost occurs early, the trico often continues. This hatch persuaded me to continue fly fishing into autumn.

I enjoyed those fall fishing trips matching that small hatch and began to realize that trout didn't stop feeding when fall arrived. In fact, I often found that trout feed more aggressively in fall than they do earlier in the season. Then, just a few years ago, I began extending my fishing season into October and November. The more I fished later in the fall, the more I liked it. Often you witness several days or a week of extremely good weather with abundant blue skies and temperatures rising into the 60s. Trout seem to sense the approaching winter season and often feed in a frenzy on

any remaining hatches. For the past couple of years I've enjoyed those fly fishing outings more than those unpredictable high-water early spring trips.

A few years ago, I told Craig Josephson of Johnstown about one of those great fall days of fishing I had just experienced. In three days of autumn fly fishing, I caught and released 15 hefty brown trout. Two of those brown trout measured 16 inches and one went 19 inches. Another measured 23 inches long and weighed about five pounds. All of this action occurred on a heavily fished public stream with no special regulations on its water—and even more importantly, at the end of the season. While all this activity occurred, few trout rose and I never saw another angler on the stream. I enjoyed fall fly fishing so much that I wanted Craig to experience it.



Stocked brook trout

photos: Mark A. Nale

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After I relayed the great fly fishing event I had just experienced, Craig had had enough—he asked if we could fly fish the same area the next week. I agreed and met Craig for a fall fishing trip to the lower Bald Eagle in central Pennsylvania.

An unusually cold fall morning gave way to a cloudless, warm afternoon. At this time of year, you encounter at least one liability if you plan to fly fish—falling leaves from nearby sycamores occasionally stuck to the fly and twisted the leader. By the time we entered the stream shortly after noon, the water temperature barely rose a degree to 55. I put on a pair of neoprene waders to protect me from the cold water. Only an occasional slate drake and little blue-winged olive dun appeared on the surface, but no trout rose. Not one other angler appeared on this five-mile stretch of water that afternoon. Fall fly fishing gives you the feeling of fly fishing on your own private stream.

Craig and I headed for a section of the Bald Eagle that had been kind to me on the past few trips. On the far side of this 100-foot-wide limestone stream, a heavy riffle entered a long, slow pool below. The pool extended well past a

slight right turn in the stream 100 yards below. Where the riffle ended and the pool began the water depth averaged 5 to 12 feet. Within 30 feet of where the riffle ends and the pool begins, I had caught all the heavy trout the week before.

After the first heavy frost, many of our limestone streams lose their cloudy color and become clear. The colder water temperatures kill the algae, which imparts the cloudy appearance to limestone streams. When limestone streams clear, usually in October, trout move out of shallower water where they had been feeding and into deeper, more protective pools. Trout tend to stay on these deeper pools throughout the winter. The lower Bald Eagle Creek has an abundance of these deeper holding pools.

Craig and I started with Beadhead Pheasant Tail nymphs. We didn't realize at the time that this pattern would work so well that it would be the only pattern we'd use all day. Mid-afternoon temperatures quickly rose into the low 60s under bright-blue skies, and any trout the stream would surrender quickly became an added bonus. I pointed to the pool where I had success the week before, and Craig began casting the nymph. Craig made five, maybe six casts before he set the hook on a heavy streambred brown trout. In an hour of fishing under the warm fall sun, Craig caught and released six heavy brown trout. In that hour of fly fishing

photo: Barry & Candy Beck



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with a beadhead pattern, Craig had moved about 10 feet.

Before we called it a day, Craig and I picked up six more trout. By 5:00 p.m., cool air and long shadows replaced the warm afternoon and Craig and I hiked back to the car. In four hours of memorable fall fly fishing, Craig and I did not see one other angler. In that short afternoon, Craig had caught and released his limit of trout.

Just about all areas of the state hold great streams with ample fall populations of trout. Look for a stream with streambred or holdover trout populations.

Lloyd Williams of Dallas, Pennsylvania and I took many fall trips to one of northeastern Pennsylvania's top trout streams, Bowman Creek. Lloyd used his old standby the Wulff Royal Coachman. Look in the back of Lloyd's car any time of the year and you'll find his rod connected and a fly attached to his line. Invariably, throughout the summer and fall, that line contains a Wulff Royal Coachman. That attractor pattern landed many fall trout for him.

You can also experience a successful trip on some of the great northcentral freestone streams. Phil Baldacchino lives near Hammersley Fork and regularly fly fishes Cross Fork and Kettle creeks during fall. With fall foliage and stream-bred brown and brook trout in spawning colors, you can readily enjoy the total experience when you fish these streams.

Which flies does Phil recommend? He's found that ants and other terrestrial patterns work well. Toss in an occasional mayfly hatch like the little blue-winged olive dun and you're ready for some late-season fly fishing. But most often you'll find Phil using his old standby, a red-bodied Humpy. Don't question success with the Humpy pattern—Phil's had many productive fall days with that pattern on Kettle for more than a decade.

What about hatches? Add a hatch to an already inviting experience and you can see how fall fly fishing can rank high in a category of memorable trips.

In addition to slate drakes, you'll encounter plenty of Baetis or little blue-winged olives and blue duns. Carry patterns to match these hatches in sizes 18 to 22.

Southern Pennsylvania streams like Falling Spring Branch near Chambersburg often hold fishable trico hatches in the fall. Trico hatches at this time of year usually appear from 10:00 a.m. until noon. I've seen them continue on overcast days well past noon.

If you fish Tulpehocken Creek near Reading or Quittapahilla Creek near Lebanon in the fall on a relatively moderate day, you'll likely see tricos appearing. Both streams hold a good supply of trout in the fall and a respectable trico hatch. I found that the Green Weenie works exceptionally well on both streams if you miss the trico hatch.

Several years ago Alan Bright of Spruce Creek and Phil Camera of Cleveland, Ohio planned a fall day of fly fishing on the Little

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Juniata River. We arrived on a productive section of the river just above Petersburg around noon on a cool, drizzly day. The air temperature barely rose above 50 degrees, but hatches began around noon and continued until well past 4:00 p.m.

First, a small blue dun appeared on the surface. Phil tied on a size 20 Blue Dun and caught several small trout on the pattern. About 3:00 p.m., a much larger slate drake appeared sporadically. A size 14 Slate Drake that Phil Camera switched to caught a half-dozen trout before the hatch waned and the late afternoon became unbearably cold. Trout almost sensed that this might be one of the last feeding days remaining until winter, and the feeding frenzy continued for almost four hours.

Make certain you take some soft-hackled flies that copy some of the later-season caddis emergers. Caddises continue to emerge until late fall. Carry caddis patterns in sizes 12 to 16 and in body colors of green, brown, and tan.

If dry flies fail, try sinking patterns and fish them deep. I add some weight to my sinking patterns when I tie them because I detest casting a fly with lead shot attached to the leader. I've found that about 12 to 15 wraps of .015 lead added to a size 12 wet fly keeps it near the bottom under most conditions.

Try patterns tied with beadheads. I said earlier how effectively the Beadhead Pheasant Tail nymph works. Carry other beadhead patterns like the Hare's Ear in sizes 12 to 16. If you don't see any action near the surface, fish the beadheads on or near the bottom.

Don't forget to carry some Green Weenies for fall fishing. Tied with only chartreuse green chenille on a size 10 long-shanked hook, the Green Weenie will prove a valuable tool in fall fly fishing. I've experienced many days when trout refused almost every other pattern except the Green Weenie. At this time of year, fish the Weenie near or on the bottom for best results.

Central Pennsylvania streams like Penns Creek and the Little Juniata River hold some late hatches and plenty of trout even in late fall. Some of the finest fishing I experienced on Bowman Creek in northeastern Pennsylvania occurred in those last remaining pleasant days of fall. Don't overlook southcentral streams like the Yellow Breeches and Falling Spring Branch, and southeastern streams like the Quittapahilla near Lebanon and the Tulpehocken near Reading. □