

Fishing the Copper John

by Carl Haensel

Fishing a fast run on a Pennsylvania trout stream offers great opportunities to catch a dandy trout. A nymph that gets down quickly, offers some flash, and does a good job representing a tasty food item is just the ticket to catch fish in fast water. The Copper John is often just the right fly in this situation.

Created by well-known fly designer John Barr of CO, this fly not only is good in western rivers, but it has also produced fish in just about every location that it's been cast. To take advantage of its advantages, you have to fish it well. It often doesn't need any additional weight get it down to the fish, which can make a multiple fly rig much easier to fish.

Fishing this fly in fast water is a great way to start using it. Try using it as the lead fly in a two- or three-fly combination rig. The weight of the fly will help get it down fast, and the flash of this particular pattern is more likely to catch fish successfully in water where the fish have less time to analyze the fly.

This pattern is shaped like a large clinging mayfly or small stonefly. Its two goose biot tails look just like the tails of a stonefly. Anglers can tie or buy Copper Johns in a wide range of colors that can imitate most of the hues of small stoneflies and mayflies. Fish this pattern on a dead drift, and swing it up at the end of your drift, as you would fish other nymphs. Even with a heavy fly such as this, make sure to use enough weight to get down to the bottom of the run. Nymphs floating two feet over a trout's head in fast water are rarely effective.

This fly also can be an effective still-water pattern. Try fishing it in a count-down method. Then use a varied retrieve until you find a style that starts to hook fish. If you've not done it before, cast your fly out and count slowly until you begin your retrieve. If you're successful, you can replicate the same cast again. If you don't get anything, try a longer count to get your fly deeper.

Some fly anglers like to use a sink-tip fly line with this technique to keep the fly consistently at a deeper level in the water. Different retrieves that you can try include a rolled hand retrieve, which involves twisting the line around your hand to create a consistent style, or a pull-jerk retrieve. I've caught many fish on nymphs using the pull-jerk. After your countdown, strip the fly line in as slowly as you can bear, without snagging the fly on the bottom. As your stripping hand nears your reel, make a sharp jerk with your wrist toward your body. Then begin your slow strip again. This mimics the locomotion of many different insects. If you want to observe an insect that uses this



A nice brown trout caught on a Copper John.

type of movement exclusively, catch some dragonfly nymphs. Place them in water in the bottom of a bucket and watch them scoot along. Their "jet propulsion" system of movement is a great example of the kind of action you want to achieve in the pull-jerk retrieve style.

Wherever you travel, bring a few Copper Johns along. Fly anglers heading up to Erie to fish for steelhead should note that the Copper John makes an excellent steelhead fly. A large size 10 excels as a lead fly in a two-fly rig, with the second fly a small egg pattern or similar diminutive fly. Try tying it with a wide variety of colors of copper to hook up with steelhead in differing water conditions. Smaller sizes will also work for steelhead when the water is low and clear. Just remember to use a heavy wire hook on smaller flies that you'll be casting to big fish. There's nothing more frustrating than hooking a nice steelhead and then having your hook straightened. In other locations anglers have caught carp, panfish and even bonefish in tropical saltwater locations on the Copper John. You never know what might be next! ☐