

Fishing the Beadhead Tan Caddis

by Carl Haensel

As I often do when fishing new trout water, I was recently standing in waders while holding a net in the water. It was early in the morning on a small trout stream in the mountains of north-central Pennsylvania. The sun had just cleared the horizon, and water poured over a small ledge into a series of cascading riffles, runs and pools.

While many of you may think that I was getting ready to net the first trout of the morning, I was instead standing with a small insect seine, and had not even started fishing yet. When I reach a new stream, I have an almost insatiable curiosity to find out what lives under the rocks, in the crevices and on the old leaves under the logs in the water. And—I know

from experience—if I take the time to check it out, I'll have much better odds at matching the organisms that live there with my flies and catching a few fish.

In this particular stream, I was not overjoyed at what I found. The first few tries yielded little in results. No mayflies, no stoneflies, no crayfish or scuds. What it did hold was a few caddisfly pupa attached to rocks. As I prospected around, I found that this was the predominant insect that I would find in this stream. Indeed, this is the case in many Pennsylvania streams. While you may not find mayflies around, it's pretty hard to find a stream that won't turn up some caddisflies.

There are a host of different species of this type of aquatic moth out there, and they tend to be a little more pollution tolerant than stoneflies and some mayflies. What does this mean to you the angler? Well, caddis larva and pupa in a variety of sizes and colors should always be in your nymph box, and caddisfly dry fly patterns are a must to include in

your vest as well. Picking which fly to fish on a given day on a given stream can be a challenge, so here are a few suggestions that you can follow.

First, start with your seine. If the caddis larva and pupa that you see are brown or tan, that's the color of fly that you should tie on. If they're green—well, you get the idea. Second, the beadhead version of

this fly will catch more fish in water that may be slightly off color, faster or have a higher gradient, or in low light conditions. Trout on the bottom of a slow pool in an ultra clear spring creek are unlikely to take a beadhead caddis imitation. Indeed, they are unlikely to take just about any fly.

A good rule of thumb was once taught to me by a man

who had fished for trout for over 75 years. "One active trout in a riffle is worth 50 trout on the bottom of a pool." Trout that are holding in the riffles of a stream are expending more energy than the trout holding just downstream in a slower pool. These fish have taken up an active feeding position, and are much more likely to hit your fly. Casting your beadhead caddis into the top of a riffle is the one of the best ways to fish it. It is particularly good as a lead fly in a two-fly nymph rig. Since it imitates a caddis pupa, a smaller caddis larva in a slightly different color is a great second fly.

Using your beadhead caddis as a dropper below a dry fly is always a good idea as well, and using the same type of insect for both flies often yields good results. A size 12 or 14 elk hair caddis is a good option in this situation, with the color of the fly being dependant on what caddisflies have been hatching on the stream. Fishing in this manner, you'll never know what fly might get the hit. ☐



Photo: Carl Haensel

This cold-weather brown trout took a beadhead caddis fished deep in a fast run. Remember to wear warm non-cotton clothing when fishing winter to help avoid hypothermia.