

Fishing Flies

A Beginner's Guide



Fishing Flies

Insect life cycle is as follows: begin as **nymph**, hatching and drifting underwater, transition into **emerger** swimming closer to the surface, then into adult flying insect (**fly**) that comes out of the water, lands, and floats on the surface, before eventually dying and falling back down to the water's surface. Depending on the insect and biome, these cycles can occur at different periods throughout the year.

Fly selection comes down to three big factors, in order of importance: *Size + Shape + Color*. But don't be afraid to fish flies in all sorts of ways, regardless of their "intended" use. It's only wrong if it doesn't work. Just remember, fly selection and "matching the hatch" are nice, but **presentation is king**, so get out there and practice!

Nymphs

- ◇ *Imitates:* Primarily immature (nymphal) stage of aquatic insects, and sometimes emergers.
- ◇ *Design:* Usually smaller, often includes bead heads or lead wire to help them sink.
- ◇ *When to Use:* Effective year-round, especially when fish are not feeding on the surface. Since the majority of a fish's diet consists of nymphs, this method is reliable.
- ◇ *Fishing Method:* Fished below the surface, in lower water column, typically with a dead drift technique (matching the current speed), either under an indicator or by tight line nymphing (euro-nymphing). Can be used in a dry-dropper rig (dry fly paired with emerger or nymph).



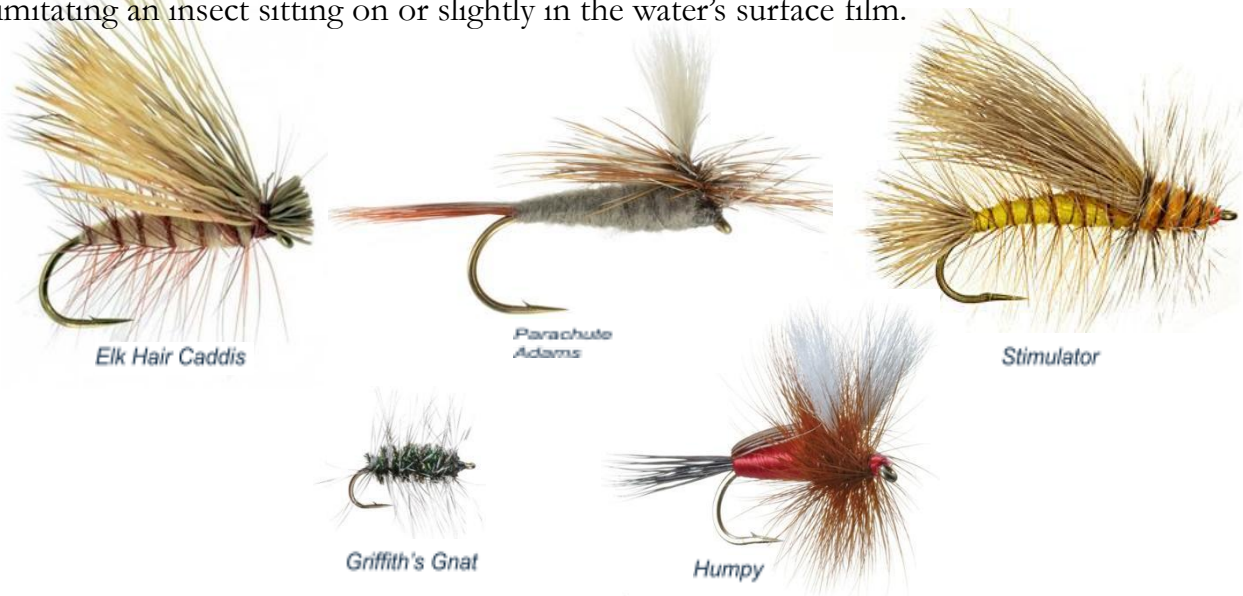
Emergers

- ◇ *Imitates:* Insects transitioning from nymphal to adult stage, who often struggle to break free from the film of the water's surface.
- ◇ *Design:* Similar to dry flies, tied to sit within or just beneath the surface film, often with trailing shucks representing the nymphal case, and small wings.
- ◇ *When to Use:* During insect hatches, when fish are rising but refusing traditional dry flies.
- ◇ *Fishing Method:* Can be fished with both a dry fly or as a nymphing technique. Fished near or slightly under the surface, often when fish are feeding just below the surface but ignoring dry flies. Can be used in a dry-dropper rig (a dry fly paired with an emerger or nymph)



Dry Flies

- ◇ *Imitates:* Adult insects (or “duns”) that, after hatching, land or fall back to the water’s surface.
- ◇ *Design:* Lightweight with water-repellant materials like hackle, elk hair, or deer hair to stay buoyant. Used exclusively by some purists.
- ◇ *When to Use:* When fish are visibly feeding on the surface, or during a hatch when insects are emerging from the water to reproduce.
- ◇ *Fishing Method:* Fished at water’s surface. Cast and allow to float naturally downstream, imitating an insect sitting on or slightly in the water’s surface film.



Wet Flies

- ◇ *Imitates:* Aquatic insects, drowned insects, or even small baitfish.
- ◇ *Design:* Wet flies are tied with materials that allow them to move naturally in the water and weighted to sink faster than dry flies or emergers. Sometimes referred to as **soft hackles**.
- ◇ *When to Use:* Useful when fish are feeding below the surface but not necessarily deep. They work well in rivers or streams when there's insect activity below the water.
- ◇ *Fishing Method:* Fished by swinging them across the current or with a dead drift. Wet flies can be presented at various depths, depending on how they are fished (e.g., under a strike indicator, swung, or retrieved slowly).



Streamers

- ◇ *Imitates:* Larger aquatic prey such as small fish, leeches, crawfish, and other swimming creatures. Streamers are generally bigger and flashier than other types of flies.
- ◇ *Design:* Streamers are often bulkier or weighted, as well as more articulate and flowy, to suggest the size and motion of baitfish. They sometimes have flashier materials.
- ◇ *When to Use:* When targeting predatory fish like large trout, bass, or pike. Particularly effective in deep pools, undercut banks, or areas where fish are likely to ambush prey.
- ◇ *Fishing Method:* Active retrieve (cast and strip in) with various speeds, typically with some erratic motion.



Attractors

- ◇ *Imitates:* In contrast with “imitators,” attractors are not always strictly imitative. Brightly colored and flashier in design, they are primarily meant to evoke a fish's curiosity or aggression.
- ◇ *Design:* Often feature vivid colors (like chartreuse, pink, or neon green), flashy tinsel, and unusual movement to draw the attention of fish. Because these are often made from cheaper, synthetic materials with less natural colors, they are sometimes referred to as **“junk flies”** or “trash flies.”
- ◇ *When to Use:* When there's no clear hatch happening or when fish are not actively feeding, or in conditions where visibility is poor, as in murky or fast water.
- ◇ *Fishing Method:* These flies can be fished in a variety of ways, including swinging, drifting, or stripping. While some purists might look down on “junk flies” because they don't focus as much on imitation or use natural materials, they are extremely effective tools, especially in challenging conditions.



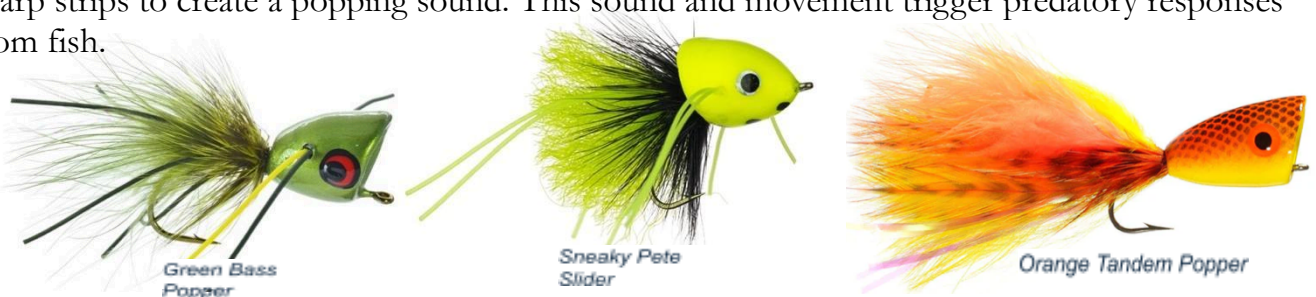
Terrestrials

- ◇ *Imitates:* Land-dwelling insects like grasshoppers, beetles, ants, crickets, and spiders that occasionally fall into the water.
- ◇ *Design:* Terrestrials are usually tied with buoyant materials, usually foam, to float and mimic the bulky segmented bodies of land insects, often include rubber legs.
- ◇ *When to Use:* Most effective during warmer months when terrestrial insects are active and likely to end up in the water. They are particularly useful when fishing along banks or in shallow water where fish expect to find these bugs.
- ◇ *Fishing Method:* Fished on the surface like dry flies, terrestrials are often cast close to riverbanks, under tree canopies, or near vegetation.



Poppers

- ◇ *Imitates:* Larger surface prey such as frogs or distressed baitfish which cause commotion on the water's surface.
- ◇ *Design:* Designed to generate noise and splash, poppers typically have a cupped or concave face that causes the fly to "pop" or create a splash as it's retrieved. They are made from buoyant materials like foam or cork, and often combined with rubber legs for added movement.
- ◇ *When to Use:* Best for targeting predatory species like bass or large trout, especially in warm water environments or shallow areas with surface activity. Effective when fish are looking for larger, noisy prey on the surface.
- ◇ *Fishing Method:* Cast near structure (like weeds, logs, or banks) and retrieved in short, sharp strips to create a popping sound. This sound and movement trigger predatory responses from fish.



Some Notes on Identifying the Hatch

Caddisflies

One of the favorite foods of trout. Given a choice between eating caddis and other types of insects, trout will most often choose caddis. Should you find yourself in a hatch of multiple kinds of flies, caddis included, start out by fishing a caddis pattern. Caddis emergences can be notoriously difficult to recognize, because the adults do not linger on the water like mayfly duns. The two strongest clues to a caddis emergence are small fish leaping from the water, and fish rising with no apparent insects on the water.



Mayflies

There are a great number of mayfly species and they can be extremely abundant in any given water. Taken together, the various species have long seasonal emergence spans; in most parts of the country, you can find mayflies hatching from early spring through late fall. Mayfly duns typically ride the water for a period of time after emerging, providing great feeding opportunities for the trout. Mayflies generally emerge at the most pleasant time of the day for the season. Think early to mid-afternoon on a chilly April day, early morning and late evening on a hot July day. The most prolific mayfly emergences take place in overcast, cool, moist weather. Light rain and snow are perfect conditions for big hatches.



Midges

Midges resemble mosquitos and are extremely abundant in almost all trout streams and lakes. Small species are more common than large. Male midges often gather into large, cloud-like swarms that dance in the air. These swarms are most common in the early evening. Trout like eating small insects like midges. Never be afraid of fishing tiny imitations.

