

Imitating Callibaetis

By Beth Jappay

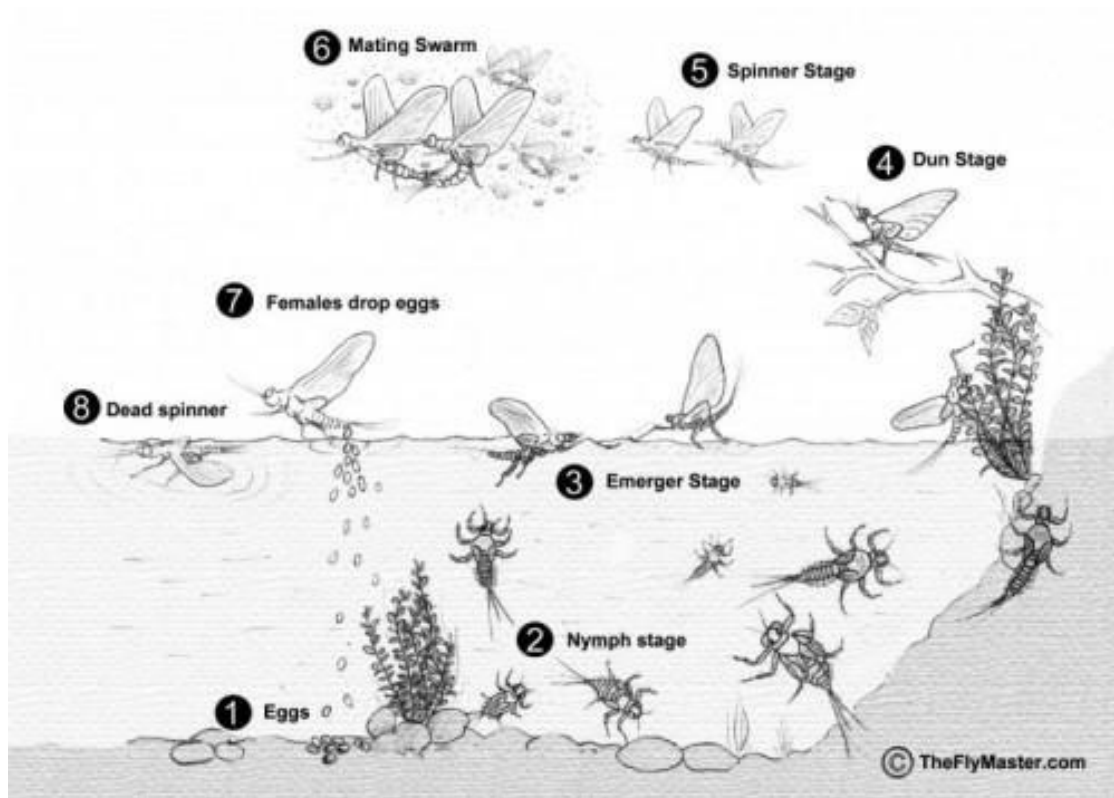


Well, it's April and the Callibaetis hatch is in full swing locally. I have been fishing at Blue Den Ranch every day the past 2 weeks, including hosting non-OFC (Oregon Fishing Club) members twice (one of our Santiam Flycasters April outings). Besides observing the hatch I have also been observing my fellow fishermen; some have been catching 10+ fish in a day, and others 1-2 fish/day, often on the same flies. What is the difference between the fishermen with high success and the fishermen with low success? It all comes down to presentation. So I thought this month I would discuss which flies to use, and (more importantly) how to present those patterns. Selecting the appropriate fly is the first step, but understanding an aquatic insect's life cycle and normal movement allows us to more closely imitate the natural insect and fool the fish. This concept can be similarly applied to fishing with other aquatic and terrestrial patterns, though the details will differ. When putting together this article, I relied heavily on the online entomology course given by Rick Hafele and Philip Rowley that I took a year ago.

Mayfly Life Cycle

Callibaetis and Blue Wing Olives (Baetis) are the two mayflies that are important to stillwater fly fishermen. Both are important food sources for trout, especially in the late spring through early fall. Mayflies undergo incomplete metamorphosis—in other words they only have the nymph as the aquatic form (as opposed to the larval and pupa aquatic forms of the order Diptera). They usually live for a year as a nymph, accessible to trout both when immature and foraging in weed beds and when ascending to the surface of the water as emergers. Mayflies are unique in that they have two adult forms—the dun and the spinner. The dun is the sexually-immature stage of the insect that has just emerged from its shuck, dried its wings while sitting on the surface of the water, and flown away. It will land on vegetation and within 24 hours will molt one last time. In the next 2-4 days they will mate, lay their eggs on the water, then die. The methods of fishing for Callibaetis and B.W.O. can be grouped into 4 categories—nymphs, emergers, duns, and

spinners. Each has distinctly different appearances and movements, and therefore different presentations. I will address each separately.



The Nymph



Callibaetis and Baetis nymphs are in the “swimmer” category of mayfly nymphs. They live in the algae of the edges of a lake, typically at a depth of 2' to 10'. They typically have a one year life cycle, and are therefore available to trout year-round. They take on the color of the weeds (algae) that they feed on, and will typically walk along the bottom of the lake or along the weeds, swimming short distances only, usually in a horizontal orientation. Note the long, thin abdomen and proportionally short thorax in this picture.

The most effective patterns to imitate the nymph are tied with a thin abdomen and proportionally short thorax. Common patterns include the:

Pheasant Tail Nymph



Gold-ribbed Hare's Ear



Bird's Nest Nymph



The retrieve for a nymph

The best imitation of the movement of a non-emerging nymph is to place a lightly-weighted pattern close to the bottom of the edge of the lake, and retrieve using a slow hand-twist retrieve or slow, short strips. I have previously written about the technique of naked nymphing; [here](#) is a link to that article. A lot of fly fishermen try to troll with nymph patterns on an intermediate line, but absent a hatch, the speed of the troll must be extremely slow in order to be effective. Use a non-slip loop knot to attach the fly for the most natural movement of the pattern.



Alternatively, this stage of the insect's life cycle can be imitated by one of the newer "balanced" nymph patterns, fished under an indicator, preferably right off the bottom of the lake, near a weed bed.

The Emerger

A nymph that is ready to hatch has to make its way from the weed beds to the surface of the lake, then break through a very resistant surface film in order to hatch into an adult. This makes the nymph highly vulnerable to predation by trout, and a great opportunity for the fly fisherman. There are multiple steps and profiles during this process and trout will often key on one, so I will address each separately.

The rising, mature nymph



A nymph that is mature enough to hatch can be identified by its dark wingbuds. Note how much fuller the thorax is at this stage compared to the picture on the previous page.

About 1-2 hours prior to arriving on the surface to hatch, the mayfly nymph's biology will filter oxygen from its circulatory system into the space under its exoskeleton, creating a buoyancy that will force the nymph to float to the surface to hatch. Sometimes this is a smoothly rising movement, but often the hatching insect will resist this by attempting to swim back down, resulting in quick and darting up and down movements of the nymph which often attracts a trout's interest. [Here is a video](#) that demonstrates this latter kind of an emerging nymph's movements. I either switch over to imitating an emerger about 2 hours before I expect the hatch, or if a previously successful method of fishing stops working.

The set up

The same fly patterns as above can be used (pheasant tail, hare's ear, bird's nest, etc) but should emphasize a dark wing case, which trout often key in on. This is a good time to use a lightly weighted variation: for example, 3 wraps of .020 lead wire, or (my favorite) a 2.8 mm brass bead (I prefer brown). I like to fish this stage with my midge tip fly line, but a floating line,

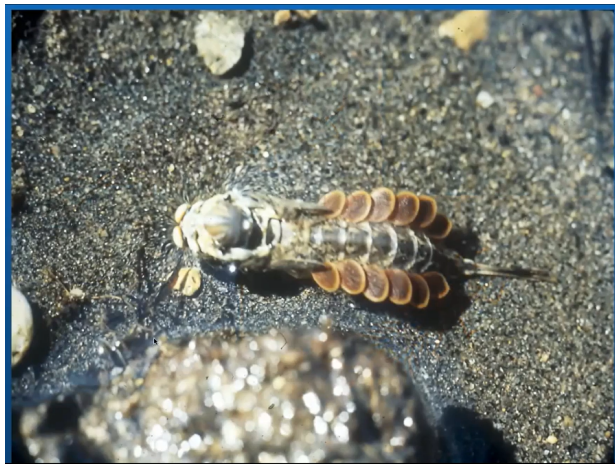
Hover line, or intermediate line are also appropriate options. I fish with two nymphs, which is a little more difficult to cast. My point fly is a bead-head pattern; the other is an unweighted nymph or soft hackle on a dropper 2-4' above it. A surgeon's knot is a good way to form a dropper, though I prefer to use the Orvis tippet knot. I strongly encourage the use of a non-slip loop knot to attach both flies.

The retrieve for an ascending emerger

Either a floating line or a midge tip line are necessary to duplicate the up-and-down variation of emergence. I anchor-up for this retrieve, which most often is a medium-speed 4-6" strip with frequent pauses. Trout often take the fly on "the drop", which can be during this pause, or shortly after the fly initially hits the water. If you aren't getting a bite, change the count down before you retrieve after casting, and/or change the retrieve to a slow or medium-slow speed hand-twist retrieve. As discussed in my [Naked Fishing article](#), with this technique you must closely watch the leader or fly line and set the hook for either a dip of the tip or a straightening of the memory curves in the line. If you wait to "feel" the take to set the hook you will miss a lot of fish.

Alternatively, this stage of a hatch can be fished with a full-sink Hover or intermediate line. I recommend unweighted flies and a non-slip loop knot with a slow strip or hand-twist retrieve. Trolling from a float tube or pontoon can also work, but the speed should be no more than 1 inch/second.

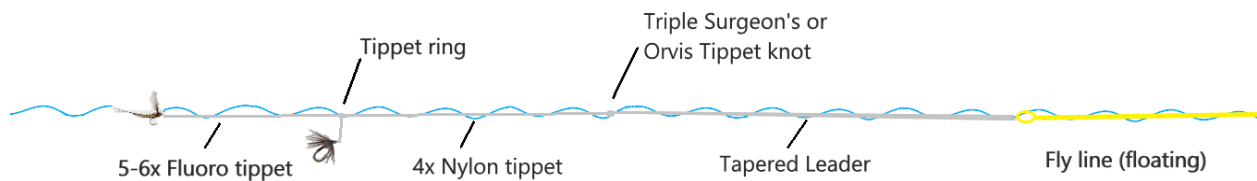
Breaking the surface film



When the nymph arrives at the surface, the dorsal aspect of its thorax will split, and the emerging adult will push its way out of the shuck. The surface tension of water is a considerable barrier to the successful hatch of an aquatic insect—I have heard it compared to a human trying to push through 2 inches of Saran Wrap. Emergers often get hung up here, and trout will key in on this vulnerability. Look for under-the-surface swirls, and porpoising dorsal fins without subsequent bubbles when trout are targeting this stage.



A CDC flymph is a good example of a pattern that imitates a nymph just breaking the surface film. It is, however, poorly visible when fished singly. I apply (Lochsa) floatant to only the portion that is meant to float—CDC in this case. This type of fly sinks easily, but as long as it doesn't sink far it will still catch fish. I therefore will usually fish this pattern with a rig that I discussed in my article [washing line techniques](#).



Note that the above set-up does not work well when there is significant wind, a situation I will address later.

Further along in the emergence, the mayfly will have a different profile:



Below are the patterns that correspond to the picture that is above it:

Quigley Emerger



Comparadun



The above patterns are both more visible and more buoyant than the flymph, and can be fished either singly or with the above two fly set-up. Have a variety of colors in your box, from olive, to tan, to dark brown.

The Dun

The dun is the first adult (though sexually immature) stage of the mayfly. Duns have the characteristic “sailboat” shape to their wings, which will touch together when at rest. Once the mayfly has completely exited its shuck and unfurled its wings, it must remain on the surface of the water until its wings have dried adequately enough to fly. If you closely observe them at this stage you will notice that they mostly remain motionless while waiting, though they will sometimes try to fly too soon, skittering on the water’s surface and stopping after moving a foot or two. If there is a wind, duns will be blown the same direction of the wind, sometimes equal to or sometimes faster than other material floating on the surface of the water. Mayflies have a primitive and inefficient wing design and the dun stage has a distinctive rising flight that I describe as “like a helicopter”.



The Callibaetis dun has a characteristic speckled brown or brown-gray wing, and short dark gray tail. The color can vary from light gray to dark brown. Like all mayflies, the underside of the abdomen is lighter than the top. Early in the year a size #14 is typical, though sometimes you will see size #12. Later in the season it will be a smaller size #16, or even #18.

Dun fly patterns



Classic Adams—
Though I recommend you have gray/brown
and brown variations of this pattern in your
box



Parachute Adams—Quill body variation



[Turkey Tail Callibaetis](#)



Extended foam body

How to decide on the pattern

When deciding whether to put on a dry fly to imitate a dun, first make sure that the fish are keying in on them. Sometimes there are both chironomids and spinners on the water at the same time and the fish will focus on those, or will focus on the emerging *Callibaetis* instead. Some questions to ask to decide if they are targeting the dun stage include:

- 1) Do you see classic “sailboat” naturals on the water, and are they leaving the water with a classic ascending “helicopter” flight?
- 2) Is there enough surface activity to justify putting on a dry fly? If there isn’t, the fish are probably keying in on emergers.
- 3) Are there splashy takes, or porpoising takes that leave behind bubbles? If not, once again they may be keying in on emergers (or midges).

How to present the pattern

The key to success when fishing this pattern is observing and imitating the naturals on the surface. If there is no wind, anchor up and fish this pattern mostly unmoving, but try a 12” medium-speed strip once in a while and see if it triggers a strike. If there is heavy rain, try letting your dry fly drown and doing a slow hand-twist retrieve.

It is, however, the ability to adjust to the wind that differentiates the novice or intermediate from the advanced fly fisherman. In this situation being able to cast well can make the difference between a 10+ fish day vs a 2-fish day. I anchor up and watch for feeding fish, adjusting my cast to one of three options: casting into the wind, casting sideways to the wind, and casting downwind.

Fishing upwind

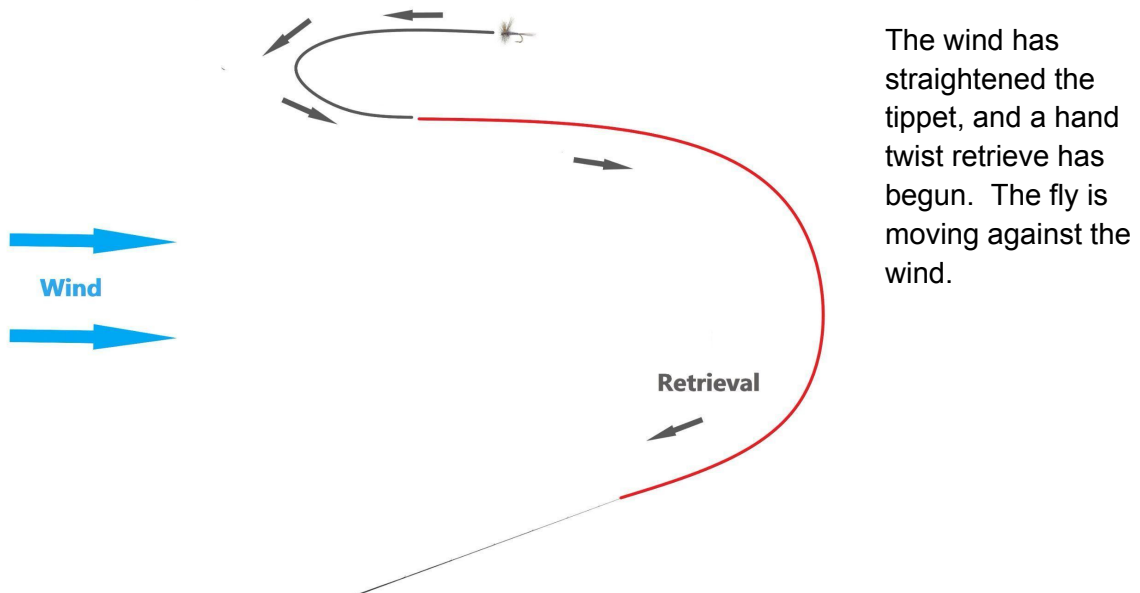
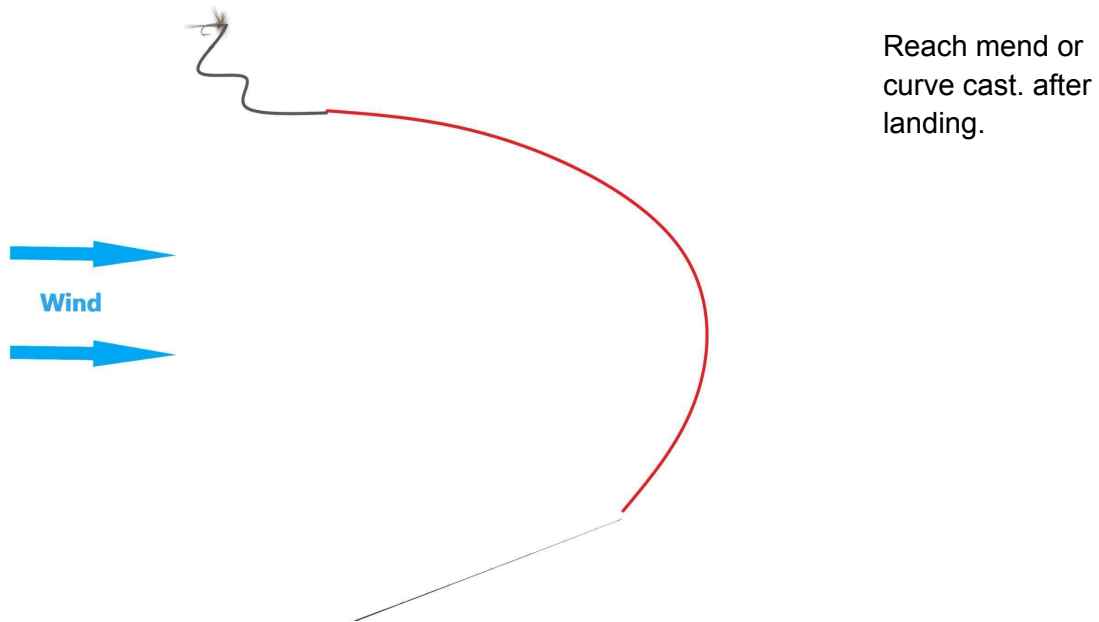
This can be the most challenging casting option, but can also result in the most natural drift, the best contact with the fly, and (in my experience) can result in catching the most fish. The forward loop of the fly line needs to be narrow or tight, and aimed downward so that the fly will land on the water immediately. It helps to use a shorter leader and heavier tippet (4x instead of 5-6x), and to put a tiny haul in the forward cast to increase line speed. Once the fly lands, start a fast hand-twist retrieve so that the fly will move quickly over the surface like a natural being blown by the wind. The most common (and easy to make) mistake when attempting this cast is “popping” the cast, shocking the rod and causing a tailing loop.

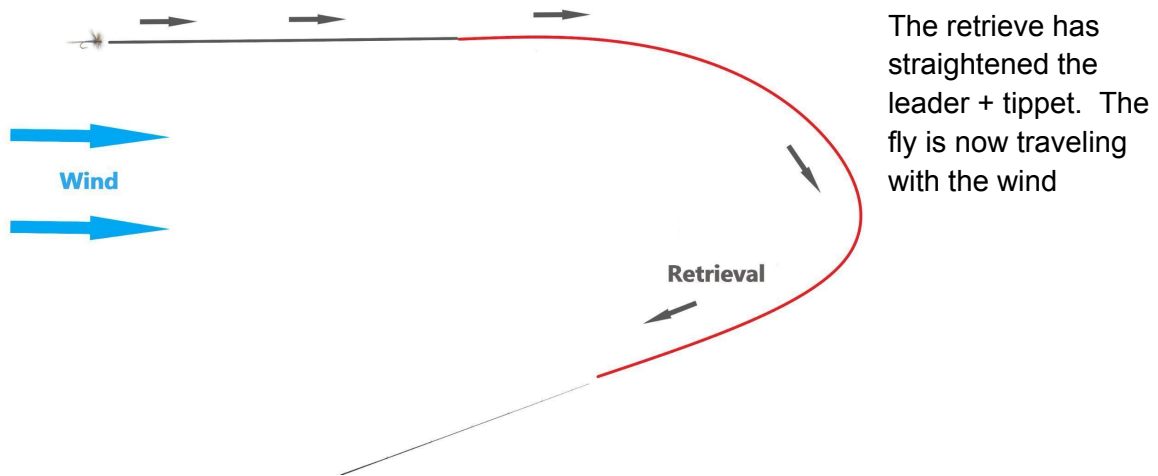
An alternative to casting into the wind could be wind-drifting or trolling a dry line in the same direction as the wind. This has the advantage of not needing to execute a difficult cast, but the disadvantage of needing to move back upwind again.

Fishing sideways to the wind

Mends can help achieve a natural drift, similar to fishing from the bank of a stream. In this situation I recommend a *downwind* [reach mend](#) or an overpowered [curve cast](#) with the

downwind arm. The fly will have a short natural drift until the slack in the leader/tippet is gone. At this point allow the fly line to be blown by the wind and start a hand-twist retrieve. The fly will initially move unnaturally against the wind, but once you have pulled the leader and tippet straight it will again move in a downwind direction, often with a satisfyingly-long drift. The downside of this technique is having to set the hook with a big belly in your fly line (hint—lift in the downwind direction).





Fishing downwind

I prefer to use a bounce cast to create enough slack for a drag free drift when casting downwind. This technique works best when preceded by a good narrow-loop backcast. Since the natural drift is short, I reserve this option for when I am targeting a specific fish or rise.

The ovipositing spinner



After the dun flies away it will head to a bush or tree, where it will molt one last time. The emerging, sexually-mature adult will have clear wings (except for a band of brown/gray spots along the front edge) and a much longer and lighter tail. It also emerges from this final molt with its wings attached to its thorax at a slightly different angle. As a result, an ovipositing spinner that stops on the water often forms a "v" with its wings and its flight will no longer be

helicopter-like, but rather will bounce up and down. The spinners will mate in the air, and later drop down to the water to lay their eggs—often referred to as a “spinner fall”.

Ovipositing spinners will either fly above and then repeatedly dip onto the surface of the water, or will skitter along the surface of the water, often triggering splashy takes. Though easy to confuse, it is important to differentiate a spinner fall from a hatching of duns, as emerger patterns won't work for a spinner fall, but fishing a dry fly with a lot of movement will. Adam's and Catskill-type flies are great choices for imitating an ovipositing spinner. Fish them with a fast hand-twist retrieve, or with long medium-fast strips with frequent pauses. This is also one of the few situations where trolling a dry fly can be effective.

The spent spinner



When the spinner is done laying its eggs, it will lay on the surface of the water with its wings flat. Trout will expend minimal energy “sipping” this easy prey, resulting in soft rise rings and subtle swirls.

Cast spinner patterns to rising fish with no movement on the pattern. Good patterns to imitate spinners include:



AK's Callibaetis spinner

UMPQUA



Wally Wing spinner



Parachute patterns

Flat-winged patterns can be difficult to see. Consider fishing with a second, more-visible dry fly (like my flymph rig above) or a tiny indicator.

Differentiating the Callibaetis adult stage

I have created a table for reference:

	<u>Dun</u>	<u>Spinner</u>
Wings	Speckled brown/gray	Clear except for front edge
Tail	Shorter, darker	Longer, lighter
Resting wing angle	Always upright, touching	Sometimes a "V" when not flying, flat as spent spinner
Description of flight	Steady, helicopter-like	Bounces up and down
Direction of flight	Always ascending (when dry)	Flies down to surface
Trout rise	Porpoising to splashy	Sipping to splashy

The successful stillwater fly fisherman first strives to discern what food source the trout are keying in on, and then selects a pattern that matches first shape, then size, then color. After this is accomplished, the next, more difficult task is to present the fly with the most natural movement, and at the appropriate depth (when applicable). Understanding the entomology of the aquatic insect is key, as is close observation of visible insects and trout rise forms. Since it is predictable and often prolific, the Callibaetis hatch is the perfect place to practice these skills.