

Fly Fisherman

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*A master of gamesmanship meets his match.
Until he learns the rules—and
then makes a few himself*

Game of Nods

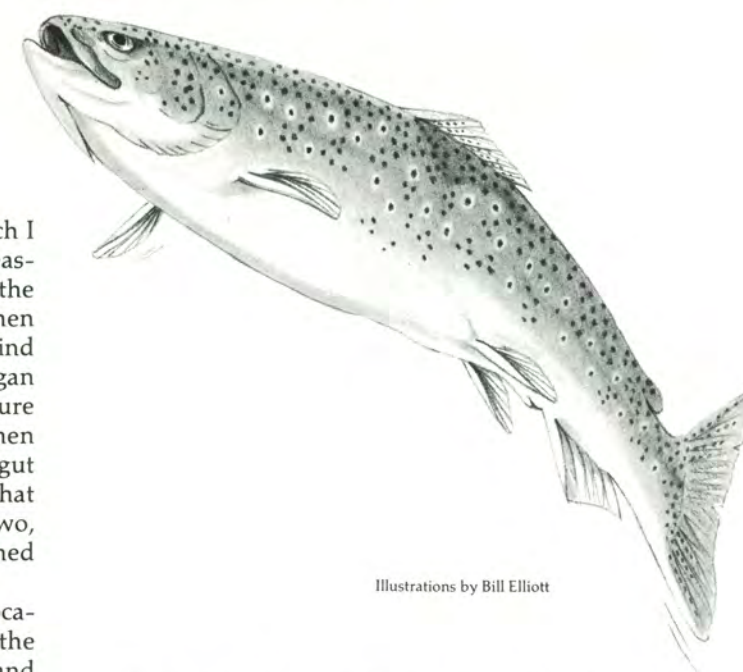
VINCE MARINARO

THERE IS AN OLDER GENERATION OF FISHERMEN, to which I belong, that has memories of a special kind of pleasure not evident today. Those memories belong to the days of pure silk lines and silkworm gut leaders, when preparations for a day's fishing involved a special kind of ritual, religiously observed. The day always began with the stretching, cleaning, and greasing of the pure silk lines that would not float well undressed. Then came the sorting and examining of the silkworm gut leaders to choose one suitable for the conditions of that day, and perhaps the addition of a new tippet or two, after which the leader needed to be soaked and softened for a considerable length of time to make it pliant.

All this required some time and a satisfactory location. There was such a place, on the bank, beside the Letort—a lovely, grassy sun-drenched spot, lush and soft to sit upon—and there I went at the beginning of each fishing day to prepare my tackle in the many little ways now cherished only in memory.

Close to the bank where I sat, and just a little off the main current, there was a little eddy that caught much of the flotsam coming downriver and held it interminably while it spun around very slowly. That was an interesting eddy, because in it lived an interesting trout.

I became aware of him one fine summer morning while I was in the midst of preparing my tackle and, as always, with one eye on the river. There was that tiny little bulge in the surface film, a faint dividing of the current and a little circular ripple expiring with the flow of the quiet water. I saw it out of the corner of an eye, my fringe vision if you please, which no fly fisherman should neglect to cultivate assiduously.



Illustrations by Bill Elliott

The next time he rose I was prepared for him so that I was able to see and locate his home and his rise form. I did not know it at the time but this trout had a name. In fact, I myself christened him and called him "the untouchable." But that happened a long time afterward, when I had made many hundreds of casts and had suffered as many refusals.

At first it was a very friendly contest. Even so, his refusals astonished me a little. I rationalized my failures with the thought that I was not really trying to catch him. Anyway, he was a likable fellow. I did not want to discourage his presence in the eddy and I wanted him to be a part of my little ceremony of preparation on the soft grassy, sun-drenched bank near his home. I continued to make my futile casts to him; then, upon being refused, I tipped the long bill of my fishing cap in a silent tribute to his shrewdness and went my way to seek a more gullible breed of trout.

Eventually the contest began to take on a grimmer aspect and with it, finally, came the somber realization that this trout could not be taken, not by me. On the

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morning of that realization the well-prepared tackle was laid aside, and I made no more casts, for now I had to watch his every move and discover, perhaps, why he defeated me and why I had failed. He had humbled me, this trout of the eddy. His refusals were as eloquent as the spoken word. So began my long vigil while the trout of the eddy continued to flirt his tail and make his darting upward rises, entirely unconcerned with my resentment and my watchful waiting.

Then, bit by bit, his way of life was revealed to me. There was no blinding flash of revelation. There were only bits and scraps of information to be sorted and related and evaluated. There was, however, one outstanding fact to be considered more than anything else. He turned out to be an individualist, a kind of gourmet among trout, because this trout ate only one kind of insect, which he invariably chose among the many displayed for his pleasure on the traveling dinner table near his eddy. What was this one insect? Was it one of the breed of aristocratic mayflies to which all trout are extraordinarily addicted? Or was it one of the bourgeois family of terrestrials born and bred in the rich meadows bordering the Letort? No, it was none of these. It was, of all things, the common housefly!

He ate them in enormous quantities, all day long, day after day. Their presence on the water in large numbers was a bit of a mystery until I traced the fly-bearing current upstream to the most obvious housefly source in all the world—namely, the dung heaps of a barnyard on the bank adjacent to the water. There was a convenient watering place, too, where cattle were accustomed to linger, switching contentedly at houseflies during the hot summer days. A housefly is not to be scorned because of these associations. After all, he must and should rank with mushrooms and other delectable gourmet foods with a similar lowly origin.

It was plain then that I must cause the downfall of the trout in the eddy with an imitation of the housefly. Nothing else would do! So, I tied houseflies and houseflies. I made many casts with those flies and continued to get nothing but refusals. My most artful imitations were of no avail and even a few secret incantations, supplementing my casts and practiced only in dire emergencies, amounted to nothing but idle gestures.

Again the well-prepared tackle was laid aside and again I watched this fellow more intently than ever before, but now I saw something new to consider. The trout in the eddy did not eat all the houseflies that paraded before him. Many were taken, it is true, but many were rejected, even after the most careful inspection in that manner peculiar to a trout—his nose barely touching the insect, undulating backward with the current, frowning-frowning, finally accepting or rejecting the offering as it pleased him.

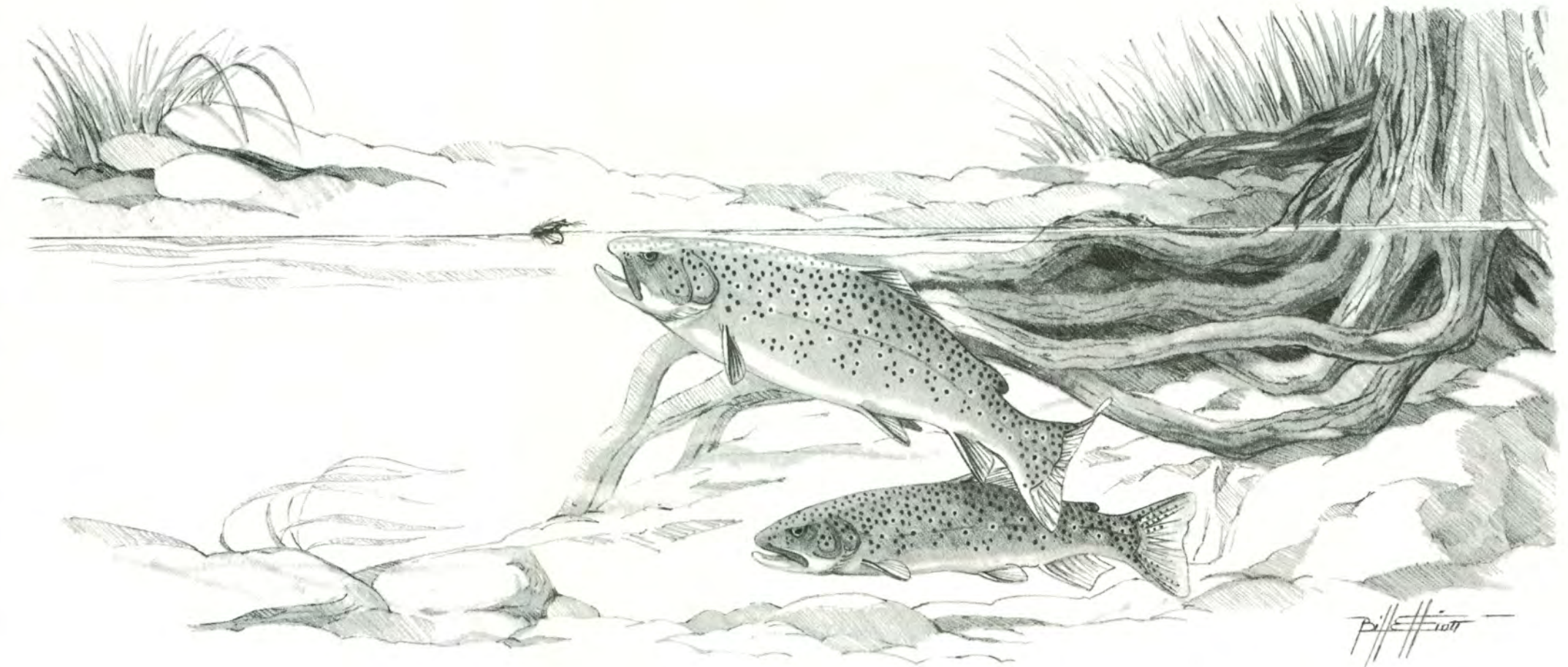
Now I knew that the trout in the eddy must be ignored; instead, the housefly must be watched to discover why it was often rejected by the trout. A housefly is a very interesting creature. He has some unusual gifts and habits. Aerodynamically, he is some kind of an oddity—a biological freak. He isn't supposed to be able to do the things that he can do. The laws of inertia were certainly not made for him. From a standing start with-

out any visible windup he can take off with blinding speed without the need for gradual acceleration. It is a mystery why houseflies do not leave their wings behind, torn from their bodies, by the terrific counterforces generated by that amazing takeoff. Moreover, he lands the same way. It is very difficult to follow him in flight; only when he is hovering or buzzing in tight little circles can we see him well. He also has another odd characteristic: He can remain absolutely immobile and lifeless in appearance like a "painted fly on a painted river," to paraphrase a famous quote.

to the right or left of the trout, he may nod sideways, briefly toward the fly indicating his interest. Or, if his interest is really aroused, the nod may become a leisurely movement that puts him under the fly to drift with it and inspect it very carefully. Each fly is cast as long as it receives a nod from the trout. When it no longer excites any nods it is discarded for a new variation, each of them being rated for the number of nods. At the end of the game all the highest-rated variations are combined into one desirable and perhaps successful pattern.

will prepare him for calm appraisal and judicious thought.

So, I came out of my own reverie, picked up the successful fly, and looked at it very carefully. It had a thin body of unstripped peacock quill and a wing made by tying pale-bluish hackle fibers flat over the body and clipped at the rear to make a flat, glassy wing such as the housefly has when at rest. There was something else. At the head of the fly there were three long, glinting alert-looking hackle fibers and as I stared at these the light of understanding began to glimmer and glow,



FINALLY, IN DESPERATION, as the last measure of my resources, I began to play a game of nods. It is something that I invented many years ago. In those days when all the logical steps had been taken, when my reasoning, inductive or deductive, failed to achieve a successful dry-fly imitation, the game of nods was the last resort. The game is played by tying a reasonable facsimile of the insect being taken by the trout. Then many variations of the basic pattern are tied with only slight differences in each of them. These are in turn cast to a visible feeding trout, and his reaction noted very carefully. A trout has different ways of showing his interest in a fly. He may, when the fly is seen, suddenly begin to accelerate his fins, lifting his head for a brief instant, then suddenly drop to his original position. Or, if the fly is cast

It was in this fashion that I played the game of nods with the trout of the eddy, and finally, one late summer day, my efforts were rewarded. He slid under one of my housefly patterns, put his nose under it and drifted backward with it, frowning-frowning while I trembled a little from the realization that free float was about to end and drag begin. Suddenly he made up his mind, lifted and sucked the fly. Exultant, I lifted the rod tip, felt the resistance for a moment, then it was gone and the fly popped out of the water to draft aimlessly along the ground. I had a brief glimpse of the trout streaking away for cover. At times like this it is best just to sit quietly for a while, to just stare at things—the sky, the water, trees, flowers—and have no serious thoughts of any kind. The hiatus, occupied by the angler's reverie,

faintly at first, then with increasing brilliance. I knew now why some houseflies were taken and some were rejected. I lifted the fly toward my lips and blew gently on the fibers—blew from the sides, blew rear and front. I blew from above and below. Then I put the fly in the palm of my hand and rocked it gently and with every puff of wind, every little rock, the three glassy, alert fibers trembled and nodded and quivered to resemble the only movement I had forgotten in the housefly's catalog of characteristics, namely, his ancient habit, no matter how still or lifeless he may appear to be, of lifting and rubbing together his two forefeet! This was the sign that the trout of the eddy looked for. From that day forward all my houseflies wore antennae, never fewer than two, never more than three.

IN THE SUCCEEDING YEARS, the housefly incident acquired an increasingly greater significance in my mind, particularly because it gave me a new approach in appraising the efficacy of fly patterns.

I continued to play the game of nods, and in doing so came to appreciate those occasions when a particular pattern would bring a trout up to make a repeated inspection. When you have done that much you have gone a long way in devising a successful imitation and you are very close to the secret of what imitation really is.

I did not confine myself to my own patterns in playing this game but went further to review and reevaluate the appeal of many famous older patterns. Some of them certainly are justified in their existence and their fame. Among these the old Red Quill dry fly, often described as "the dry-fly man's sheet anchor," is one of the best and deserves its fame. This is the recipe for this fine old pattern:

- BODY:** Stripped peacock herl undyed from the eye feather—with pronounced light and dark banded markings.
- HACKLE:** Bright red cock hackle.
- WINGS:** Pale or medium starling primary feather.
- TAILS:** A few fibers of red cock spade feather.

In the variations that I have used I found that a dark mahogany-red hackle was a poor choice; bright red hackle is best and I found, exactly as A. Courtney Williams states, that it is a very successful pattern for "bulging" or "tailing" fish. It is at its very best in small sizes 18 to 24 and very deadly on the quiet, smooth surfaced water.

Another exceptionally good pattern comes from Fred-eric Halford's first book. It is described as a male black gnat. The wings are palest starling primary. The body is

made from the black quill of a chaffinch tail feather. This is unobtainable but I have used stripped peacock quill from the eye with success. I do not believe that the body matters at all. The hackle is important. It comes from the shoulder and throat of a cock starling—an extremely short, narrow hackle with a blue-black metallic sheen, which is very difficult to describe. Use two of them. Tails are a few black fibers from a rooster neck or spade hackle. By far the best sizes are 20 to 24.

This is one of the deadliest flies in existence. I have had some marvelous days with this pattern, mind-blowing days when one good fish after another was raised and hooked: days when the excitement was so intense that the breathing came hard and the mouth got dry. Those are the days, infrequent to be sure, when a trout fisherman really finds out why he is out on a trout stream.

Note well, in the above patterns, the use of starling feathers. This is a plentiful bird, and a nuisance that is almost impossible to eradicate. It is a pity that Americans are almost completely unfamiliar with this bird as a source of fly-tying material. The British have for hundreds of years prized this bird highly as a source of fine fly-tying material. Skues once exclaimed in admiration that a starling wing feather was so fine and transparent that he could read his newspaper through one of them.

In these days of diminishing sources of natural fly-tying materials, this bird can furnish an unfailing supply of very useful feathers. In the early days of fly-tying history it was called a stare or shepstare, and now a starling. The vast numbers of these birds in America are primarily of Russian stock. The old English starling, according to some opinion, had more vivid coloring, particularly a greater distribution of the bottle-green hackles even to the top of the head and once so highly prized for certain patterns. From this bird came the hackle, a blue-black body feather, for W. C. Stewart's most famous wet fly, the Black Spider. Stewart was a market fisherman. He and his family depended heavily



The placid Letort, where the author learned the "game of nods". Photo by Bill Allen.

on his success as a trout fisherman for their livelihood. He would, therefore, want to use the most killing fly available. The Black Spider was his choice along with two others.

The late James Leisenring, Pennsylvania's famed wet-fly artist, also a market fisherman, liked this fly very much and relied on it a great deal. Inside the wing of the starling are found more of the very desirable feathers used for wet flies. These are soft dun-colored feath-

ers with a gold-colored band all around their edges. This is the best hackle substitute for the once-famed dotterel wet fly. The English dotterel bird was so much sought by English tiers that it became almost extinct. It became a protected bird under law and is no longer available. I never had but a few of these feathers, which were found in an ancient English fly book. These were body feathers used as hackle with that same golden band around the edge as I have described for the star-

Limestone or Freestone?

JIM BASHLINE

IN A RECENT ARTICLE appearing in *Outdoor Life*, one of the greatest of the limestone luminaries, Vincent Marinaro, made some sweeping observations. The trout that draw sustenance from the alkaline waters of central Pennsylvania are a superior lot in quality and quantity, declares the drafter of *A Modern Dry Fly Code*. There are a few other lime-rich waters in the United States and the world, he allows, and here, too, the trout grow faster and offer the fly angler more for his money and time spent. He cites pounds of food per acre as being an important factor in comparing limestone with freestone streams, the limestone streams being richer, of course.

While waxing eloquent about the catching of a "jewel" of a little brook trout during a sojourn to a small stream in New Brunswick one day when the salmon were not cooperating, Vince rather flatly stated that heavily acid waters don't produce big trout.

Let me assure you, I'm not about to attack or even mildly rebuke Vince Marinaro. His observations are generally correct. On the whole, limestone trout *do* grow faster and acid water *does not ordinarily* produce large trout. But there are exceptions.

All freestone streams do not fit into the storybook concept of sterile water rushing picturesquely over polished boulders. There are dozens of highly productive trout streams in Pennsylvania, New York, Michigan and most of the New England states that do not fit this description. In fact, these muddy or silt-bottomed streams are usually better fish growers than the storybook streams angling artists are prone to paint.

The silt (and Vince did touch on this in his article) has a lot to do with the insect life. The large burrowing nymphs, from which sprout the giants of the mayfly world (Green Drakes and the *Hexagenia*), do not exist in great numbers in the limestone streams.

Nor do the other reasonably large mayflies. I have never seen any of the important *Stenonema* in quantity on a pure limestone stream, nor do I ever expect to. (Mayflies don't seem to transplant well in spite of heroic efforts to bring this about.)

The purpose of this rambling is to put some freestone angling hearts at rest and reassure them that their fishing days on streams other than the alkaline elite will not be misspent. In spite of the willingness of some large trout to suck a bit of microscopia from the surface film of a food-rich limestone, the resounding gulp of a big brown inhaling a flopping Green Drake or a *Stenonema vicarium* is a thrill of major proportions, too.

While the tools of the trade are basically the same, the successful fly fisherman on limestone streams cannot employ all the tactics that serve him well on other waters. On most days, the flies must be smaller, the leaders finer, and the casting more precise. In short, limestone fishing requires a more delicate hand on the throttle. Of course, these are

generalizations, for as most anglers with any mileage at all on their waders know, there will be many days when small flies will work on freestone streams and roughshod slashing with large flies will work wonders on limey waters.

On the matter of highly acid water not producing large trout (and it usually doesn't), the existence of giant brook trout in the peat-colored rivers and ponds of Labrador and Quebec are spectacular exceptions. There are dozens of streams in this conifer-rich forest that produce trout of football diameter. It has been well documented that these trout live longer than their southern cousins, and that is certainly one reason for their size. But they do grow and something nourishes them—even if it's other trout. The innermost secrets of the genes may yet be revealed, but in the meantime we can only guess why the food-rich waters of the best of the limestones have never given up a six-pound brookie, while the sterile Minipi, Broadback and Eagle river flowages produce them regularly. 🐟

Game of Nods. . .

ling inside-wing feather. The remainder of this dotterel feather is colored a soft creamy tan, once described by G. E. M. Skues as "cream-in-the-coffee" color. The starling feather has the same mobile quality of the dotterel that ensures "good play" in the water.

It is generally recommended that starlings be collected in early winter when the birds are full-feathered and when fiber cohesion is at its best for wing purposes, but I have found that birds collected in late summer are satisfactory, especially because light-colored wing feathers are obtainable at this time before they have darkened to their fall and winter hue. The older cock starling is, of course, the most desirable. He will have the best developed hackle.

This is not an easy bird to collect. He is wary and knows how to avoid traps. He is also one of the worst pillagers I have ever seen. I have had to watch, helpless with rage, when they stormed into my cherry trees, in big flocks, growling and snapping and defying me. I tried in many ways to discourage them but could not prevent them from completely denuding the trees of all fruit. Eventually, I obtained a short-range pellet gun with which I mollified my outraged feelings by collecting a good supply of very useful feathers.

Another excellent pattern, and this time one that is strictly an American invention, is the Adams. It had its origin in Michigan, allegedly to imitate the numerous caddis hatches, or sedge flies as the British call them. This one is outstanding in its appeal to the trout in all sizes. I have used it exclusively in small sizes for my limestone fishing. It has the squatty profile appearance that works so well during the terrestrial fishing season when most insects are low-riding in the surface film of the water. This too works well in all sizes but I prefer the small sizes, 20 to 24.

The next pattern in review is one of my own; I have relied heavily upon it for years. It was never tied by me to represent any specific insect but it serves admirably well as a general imitation of the numerous small terrestrials in midsummer. I would never be without this one in my box.

The principal ingredient in the recipe for this pattern comes from the blue-black topsey feather of the American wood duck. Two or three of these slender, delicate feathers are twisted together to form a short piece of yarn, which is then used to form the body. The hackle is composed of a few turns of light blue dun and a few of the same fibers for tails. There is no conventional wing. It is best only in small sizes, #20 to 24. It sounds simple, doesn't it? But that is often the way with the best and deadliest of patterns. It should be tied sparsely in order to present it in the surface film.

I have often pondered about the reason for this fly's effectiveness and I feel sure now that when the fly is cast into the film, those extremely fine ends of the scarfed topsey feathers become playful in the water and create the illusion of life, so becoming more enticing to the trout.

In recent years, all fly tiers and fly fishermen have become more and more restricted in the choice of natural materials for fly tying. The current ban on importation and use of jungle cock is an example of this. This is one

of the great feathers of all time. It is hard for me to imagine jassids and beetles without it, not to mention the distress of salmon fly tiers who can no longer tie the traditional patterns to include this beautiful feather. Many of us are now casting about looking for substitutes with which we can make and use the same patterns and, hopefully, with the same success.

The substitute that I shall now describe turned out so well that I must include it as a regular pattern in my fly box. The principal feather comes from the golden pheasant neck feathers. The small tippet feathers near the top of the neck are useful for our purpose. Even better are the short broad feathers at the base of the neck below the orange cape tippets. These are usually a metallic green and in some birds there are often red and buff-colored ones. All are short, broad, stiff feathers requiring no lacquer to hold and keep their shapes. Two of these feathers, even of different colors, can be laid one on top of another, to form the back of a fine beetle pattern. Golden pheasant is, of course, a commercially raised breed and will always be available.

There is another method, perhaps the most versatile of all that I have seen and like very much, for beetle and jassid ties. Once when I had a meeting with the late Joe Brooks after his return from Tasmania, he handed me several very intriguing patterns tied and sent to me by an Australian friend of his, David Scholes. The backs of his beetles and jassids were formed by using small whole feathers, first stripping them to the required size, then tying them in at the neck of the fly by the soft end of the feather, not the hard quill end. It is absolutely ingenious and suggests unlimited possibilities.

Perhaps the most remarkable fly of recent invention is the cricket, which had its origin in the Pennsylvania limestone country. It is regarded by many as the most killing fly of modern times.

As a general-purpose fly it is unexcelled, for it will raise trout that are in position to feed with amazing regularity even though there are no insects on the water. It is presumably an imitation of a terrestrial but its enormous appeal to the trout is a mystery for the simple reason that the cricket, even though it flourishes in abundance in the meadows, is rarely found on the water. It is especially attractive to very large trout, with a history of many taken on it up to ten pounds. It is probably the most popular fly in the limestone country today. I am continually astonished by the fact that the most killing flies in fly-fishing history are of very simple composition. That is true of this one. There are some variations but the usual tie is nothing more than a rather plump body of dark spun fur (brown or mink-colored is favored) and a wing of black-dyed deer body-hair—nothing else. It is fished strictly as a dry fly, usually in sizes 14 and 16. 🐟

The publication of a second book by Vince Marinaro will end the 26-year drought we've all endured since A Modern Dry Fly Code was first published in 1950. Based on our preliminary reading of the publisher's proofs, In the Ring of the Rise seems destined to become an angling classic almost immediately on publication this July. THE EDITORS.