

# Just Before Dark

TOM ROSENBAUER

VENUS WAS ALREADY SHINING brightly in the West. I had come from below the bridge, through a field that already had a good start on tomorrow morning's dew. The fisherman was a gray blur against the bank. His tiny flashlight blinked occasionally.

"Get him tonight?"

"Nope. Another week or so and the Sulphurs'll be hatching. Then I'll have a shot at my friend."

We had haunted that stretch of river for the last two weeks of May. My friend had torn off a large fish three days earlier and had been sitting on the bank each evening since, watching for the trout and for the abundant evening hatches that begin in June.

The evening hatch season begins with the tapering off of spring rains and runoff, when water temperatures climb into the low sixties. Trout jockey for the best positions in the stream, leaving the security of the deeper pools where they found refuge from spring floods, to take up more advantageous feeding stations in shallower runs. After this early-spring reshuffling, a trout settles in for the summer and may not move more than ten feet until the spawning urge beckons in October.

While the seasonal cause of the evening hatch is rising water temperature, the daily cue is sunlight. The evening hatch isn't caused by a sudden drop in

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water temperature when the sun goes down. In fact, evening water temperatures are often at a high for the day since water loses heat slower than air. A mayfly's main life-threatening worry is loss of body fluids through evaporation. To insure survival, mayflies emerge when the strong evaporative rays of the summer sun have withdrawn for the day. Many good hatches occur just when fishermen leave the stream for dinner. Occasionally—during overcast days—an "evening" hatch will last all day.

I remember such a hatch on a limestone stream. It was a Memorial Day about ten years ago, a dark, drizzly day with no wind. I cursed my luck at choosing this day to drive thirty miles to fish, but my disappointment faded as I stepped into the river. The water was alive with fluttering wings and confident, slurping riseforms—March Browns, Gray Foxes, caddis and even Sulphurs—at nine o'clock in the morning! In this stream, these flies are normally evening emergers. I had the rare opportunity to fish a steady hatch for eleven hours.

I managed that day to release more than forty brown trout over thirteen inches—and then all hell broke loose. Just before dark spinners of about four mayfly species came back to lay their eggs and the big fish began to feed. So, although the water temperature stayed around sixty-three degrees all day, there was still a peak in insect activity in the evening when the sun had gone down.

The evening hatch is particularly associated with brown trout, perhaps because browns are more efficient feeders, seldom surface-feeding until there are many insects on the water. This behavior lets browns hover inches below the surface, rather than rising from the bottom every time a tidbit floats by. Brookies, rainbow and cutthroats seem to be more eager, less efficient feeders, often picking at surface food throughout the day, moving great distances for less food.

If you've spotted what you believe to be a large brown trout, the best time to catch him on a dry fly is just before dark. The hatch may be compressed into such a short length of time, however, that you'll need a strategy to get as many floats as possible over him. Don't forget, you're competing with Mother Nature, who not only ties better flies, but presents them in overwhelming numbers—and she always gets a drag-free float.

## Presentation

A short, accurate, drag-free float is the essence of evening fishing. Smitty taught me the value of quick false casts with high line speed, three casts at most: a short drift right over the fish, a delicate rollcast pickup and another presentation. I used to sneak around in the bushes watching him. Smitty was the local trout-fishing sage, with all the qualifications: old, cranky, secretive and a superb caster with his classic bamboo rod. He caught me watching



TOM ROSENBAUER PHOTOS

him once, though. An old log I was leaning on broke with a sharp crack and he nearly jumped out of his waders.

"Just what in hell are you doing sneaking around the bank like that?" He squinted in the twilight, trying to see who it was.

"Trying to learn a little," I said, in my squeaky adolescent voice. "You're the best, and I just wanted to pick up a few tips."

He snorted and returned his gaze to the fish he was working on, and I thought he had forgotten me.

"See that little pimple-rise, and the big slow waves that spread out?"

"Yeah . . ."

"Well that's a big slob of a brown," he said. "You don't need to get fancy. That soft rise gives him away. He's only several inches below the surface. He won't even see my fly until it's right above his nose."

"What fly are you using?" I asked.

"Never mind that. Hey kid, why don't you go fish a damn bucktail in fast water?" He tossed his cigar and returned to his fish.

## The Fly

A hackled dry fly the same size and shade as the natural is all that's needed. The Tup's Indispensable is the first fly I'll tie on during the evening. It has the creamy color of many mayfly duns, the reddish

tinge and egg sac of spinners, the translucency of an emerging mayfly or a caddis resting on the surface film. And it's easy to see.

The Pheasant Tail is my second choice, used if the naturals are dark colored, as are many of the rusty-bodied spinners of May and June. In fading light this darker fly must be fished "blind" when you are using smaller sizes. Hackle-quill-bodied variants such as Art Flick's Cream and Dun Variants are also effective. I also lean toward wingless hackled flies, but prefer a fuzzier look since I'm hoping to imitate as many naturals as possible with one or two patterns. I prefer fur- and feather-bodied flies as more lifelike than synthetics or quills.

Nymphs and wets can also be useful during the evening, especially before the hatch begins.

## Spinner Falls

When the spinner falls occur you *know* the trout are surface feeding, even if you cannot see them. Spinners often dive and dance above the riffles for hours while you wait patiently for them to fall—only to have a late-evening rain drive them back to the safety of streamside foliage. They are worth the wait, for even if a caddis hatch or mayfly duns bring on the evening feeding spree by trout, the *big* trout will appear when the spinners fall in the riffles. Spinners seem to be attracted to the glimmer of riffles, and I've found superior spinner fishing in

*Don't explore new water just before dark. Stick with the stretches you know well and learn new water during morning hours when failing light doesn't hamper observation.*



those pools below meadow areas, where you can see your fly long after it would be invisible in the wooded stretches.

### Sound-Reading Rises

I guess it was on an upstate New York spring creek during an evening rise that I learned how to spot large, rising brown trout. The stream is deceptively small, but once the fish become preoccupied with feeding, you can wade to within a few feet of them. A deep “glump” sound is one clue to fish size. Lesser trout make a “plip” sound while feeding. The good fish seldom push water forward or up when they rise, rising instead in an unhurried stately bulge that radiates waves in a still pool. (Smitty would say “big bubbles—big fish.”)

I cannot say whether Smitty’s rule holds up scientifically, but I *can* assert that the last fish in a pool to begin rising is usually the best. Whether he sends the small fry out to test the waters first, or whether he feels less exposed once it gets dark, or whether he just waits for that large mass of insects to set his table—I do not know.

The largest fish in a pool will occupy the prime spots in the currents, identifiable by the bubbles formed by the ripples at the head of the pool. This

bubble line is more important to a trout than traditional cover such as logs or large rocks. Trout use these refuges when frightened, but they hole up and feed next to them only if currents there offer a steady procession of insects.

Last season, during a heavy evening spinner fall on the Battenkill, I noticed a trout feeding with an unusually quick rhythm. I had seen the large fish rising in daylight, but had been unable to approach within casting range.

One evening the trout was so preoccupied with feeding that I was able to move to within twenty feet of him. The trout took my Pheasant Tail on the first cast and charged downstream. When I finally released him, I glanced upstream and spotted another dimple in the same spot. In the darkness I pushed my way up, hoping the waves would not spook the second trout. In encore performances I hooked and landed three browns—sixteen, seventeen and nineteen inches—in a spot the size of a bathtub.

### Scouting

Evening is no time to prospect. If you have the choice between a great-looking pool you’ve never fished before and a so-so pool you know like the back of your hand, stick to the old friend and avoid

flies in the branches and drag caused by unfamiliar currents, invisible in the fading light. Fish with a favorite fly rod that enables you to place your fly inches from the bank with that delicately honed timing a friendly rod provides.

If you’ve located a large trout (or a group of them) it pays to visit your pool for a daylight reconnaissance. During late morning or early afternoon I practice my drag-free floats with a big Wulff pattern. It gives me a feel for the currents around the big trout’s lie. I’ll have a mental picture of things for late-evening fishing.

I also make ready while the sun is still high. The evening hatch is often so concentrated with insects that trout will take emerging nymphs, then duns, and finally spinners returning from yesterday’s hatch—all in a forty-five-minute period. There is no time to fool with leaders or change flies. In my daylight preparations I check the leader for wind knots, tie on a fresh fly, apply fly dressing and perhaps replace a short tippet.

### Strategy

As the evening light fails and your “flysight” fails, don’t stop fishing. Using a fly fisherman’s intuition, strike when you see any rise near your fly. And when the rises are no longer visible, move to the pool’s center and stand still listening for the sound of feeding trout, the resonant slurps of big browns.

How long should you stay in a pool fishing? On a moonlit night trout will sometimes rise well into darkness, and by positioning yourself properly in a pool you can spot rise reflections in the surface and perhaps even see your fly. On dark nights I linger until I hear no rises. I will stand for ten or fifteen minutes with ears cocked, listening for that last slurp of a hungry trout. Then I depart as the stream changes and the fishing enters the mysterious world of night fishing. 



TOM ROSENBAUER

### Pheasant Tail Dry

HOOK: #12-#24 (#14, #16, #18 best).

THREAD: Orange silk.

BODY: Rusty fibers from center tail of cock ring-necked pheasant ribbed with fine gold wire.

HACKLE AND TAIL: Dark, medium or light blue dun.

### Tup’s Indispensable Dry

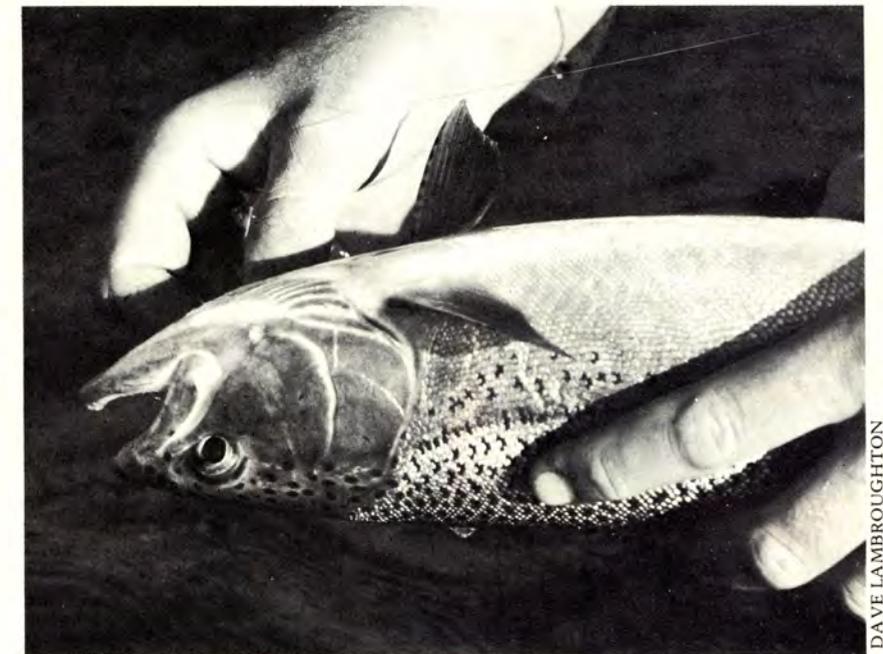
HOOK: #10-#20 (#14, #16, #18 most commonly used).

THREAD: Yellow silk.

BODY: 1/3 red seal’s fur or substitute, 1/3 hare’s ear fur, 1/3 cream seal or substitute.

HACKLE AND TAIL: Honey dun or light ginger and light blue dun mixed.

## Upside-Down Release



DAVE LAMBROUGHTON

ON MOST TROUT STREAMS, winter and early spring tell the real story about the water’s fish-carrying ability. Cold temperatures and lack of food combine to eliminate the old and the weak. This natural process, which biologists call winter mortality, is a necessary ingredient for a healthy, balanced fishery. Unfortunately though, biologists are finding increasing use for a new term: *summer mortality*.

It’s becoming commonplace to see dead or dying trout tumbling down along the bottoms of popular rivers. In many cases we are unwittingly, and with loving hands, catching and releasing fish to death. I know.

As a guide, I’ve seen many examples of improper fish handling, from headlocks to bearhugs, not to mention the traditional “driftboat drop.”

Now, certainly some fish do have to be lifted out of the water or temporarily detained while unhooked, but what surprises me is that I so rarely see one of the oldest tricks in the book: the upside-down hold. I’ve found that by gently holding a trout upside down while unhooking, its struggling is nearly eliminated. The upside-down position seems to hold trout in a hypnotic state and works well on trout of any size and in all environments. I’ve found that it also

works with steelhead and salmon, and that when the fish are turned right side up, their first reaction is the right one—they’re off.

Another plus to the upside-down release is that the fish’s weight is better supported by its muscular back than by its soft, organ-filled body cavity or by its gill area. And, since most fish are hooked in the upper lip, you’ll have the added advantage of looking down on the fly.

Give the upside-down release a try. It works.

DAVE LAMBROUGHTON

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