

April 2009



Driftless Days . . .

One of the more interesting aspects of fly fishing, of which there are many, includes the fishermen one meets along the streams. Year in and year out, there seems to be no end to the unique individuals and expert fly fishermen one runs across on our midwestern waters. And then there are the fishermen who might only get out a time or two a year, average folks out for a nice outing and a good time on the stream, who have very unique points of view and fascinating things to say as well. On some streams, there may even be a lot of young kids and dogs involved, and that sometimes has its place, too.

A few seasons ago I ran into a fellow I didn't know who was obviously in high spirits and having a grand time. It was one of those first truly beautiful spring days, the type of afternoon that brings about the best in nearly everyone who has been through yet another long and cold Iowa winter. He carried with him both a fly rod and a spinning rod, alternating between the two rods and types of fishing as his mood dictated. Often fishermen that carry both spinning rods and fly rods are not quite comfortable with the fly rod yet, and carry the spinning rod, with which they are most familiar, as a backup in case things get slow.

The only way a fisherman is going to become a fly fisherman is to park the spinning gear and fish the fly rod alone for a couple of seasons, but that's another story. And some fishermen simply don't care to do that.

I visited with the fellow for awhile, and he said that he and his buddies had caught a lot of trout over the last couple of days. He mentioned they'd been on a good stream nearby the day before and had really done well with their fly rods. I asked him what had happened on the neighboring stream, and he said there was a big hatch of *little blue flies* and that they'd really hammered the daylight out of 'em. When I asked him what fly he had been using, he looked at me incredulously and replied "Well, what do you think? A *little blue fly!*"

At first I was a bit confused by his response, but later on I thought *that's perfect*. The guy didn't know he was fishing a Blue Wing Olive hatch, and didn't care. He saw a fly on the water, found something in his fly box that looked close enough to try, and ended up having a great time landing a lot of trout in a way he wasn't accustomed to.

Sometimes fellows like this come out to the trout streams early in the season to warm up for

fishing on midwestern lakes and the Mississippi River when the *real* fishing season begins. That would be for walleyes, bass and other normal fair requiring a *boat*, for cryin' out loud. Fair enough. There's a lot of water around here.

And the guy did not have any live bait with him.

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Some years ago, as I was making my way back to my vehicle after an afternoon's fishing, I saw a large camper parked right in the middle of what generally passes for a streamside parking lot. Occasionally I've seen tent campers on the fringes of this particular parking lot, and I guess it's not against the law to camp there. Apparently some people don't mind a few dozen vehicles moving in and out frequently as they camp, as long as the clotheslines aren't knocked down or the firepits driven through. There are ample primitive camping areas within a short distance of the parking area, so I do sometimes wonder what people are doing there overnight, particularly when they decide to have a "woody" while they're at it, although I guess that actually rather answers the question.

The camper was a bit on the dilapidated side. It had been on quite a few trips in its day, but it still looked serviceable in a rather homely sort of way. A big firepit had been built right in the center of the parking lot, and up against the camper leaned no less than six spinning rods, each rigged up with a Rooster Tail or some other spinner bait. I could see the hardware glistening in the sun as I approached. I was younger then and still had a good store of pretentious thinking stashed away upstairs, though even then I usually managed to be polite if possible, sometimes to a fault.



An older gentleman came out from behind the camper as I began taking down my rod, and he greeted me heartily with "Hi Sonny! How'd you do out there today?" Well, I told him by God I'd had a fine afternoon and had caught quite a few, which was the truth. He congratulated me on that, and asked what I'd managed to catch them on. Being polite at the time to a fault, as I've mentioned, I told him as a matter of fact I'd caught them all on a Griffith Gnat, knowing full well he wouldn't know the difference between a Griffith Gnat and a nightcrawler.

"A *Griffith Gnat*, a *Griffith Gnat*" he chanted slowly and thoughtfully. "Why, that reminds me of the old *Bivisible*. That was always the fly I went to when nothing else would work. Boy, I caught a lot of trout in my day with that old *Bivisible*!"

Needless to say, *that* got my attention. I told him I thought the *Bivisible* was a wonderful old pattern, which it truly is, but I was too lazy to tie it and used the simpler Griffith Gnat instead. He thought that was quite funny and agreed completely. The Griffith Gnat had not been

invented when he was fishing the Bivisible.

We had a long conversation about the stream we were on. My new acquaintance remembered fishing it at least ten years before I was born, in the 1940's. In those days he remembered the stream as carrying more water, and he said that in his younger days he very seldom ran into other fly fishermen. There were no convenient fence cross-overs or parking lots, either. You just pulled up to a bridge, hopped any fences you had to cross and went fishing. All of his rods in those days were split-cane, and he mentioned he still had a few of them. And of course when the trout were picky, he always dug out the old Bivisible!

As it turned out, the old gentlemen had switched to spinning gear a few years back because he could no longer see well enough to work with tippet material and tie on his flies. He took great pains in telling me he could see well enough to *drive*, however, but I wondered about that. He said that his wife tied on the swivel snaps and lures for him before he went fishing, and he always carried two rods with him on the stream so he could occasionally switch lures. His main problem, as he explained, was putting down one of the rods while fishing and not being able to find it again. If he broke off a lure for some reason, that rod was done for, and that was the reason for bringing along six rods. Once he lost all six lures, I took it that his fishing trip was over. He told me he fished only the open meadow stretches where the fishing was easier and he had less chance of getting in trouble.



I wondered why he might not occasionally ask a passerby to help him with his tackle, but I didn't ask. I think his sense of pride might have prohibited that.

Two years later I was out fishing with a friend on that same stream, but in a different location. We ran into the same old gentlemen and I let my friend do most of the talking, as the old fellow didn't recognize me and I didn't want to

let on that we'd spoken before. My old acquaintance could no longer see well enough to drive, but he said his wife took him out to fish whenever he liked. He said she liked to read, and she said she could read just as well waiting in the truck on a trout stream as she could at home, so things worked out just fine for both of them. Toward the end of our visit, his wife was leaning against the bridge upstream, reading her paperback. Our friend told us that when she was ready to go home, that was her signal, although he said he could still fish as long as he wanted to. It was more like she was ready to go home if *he* was, so departing the stream was a mutual agreement and not a point of contention.



Like the old song says, everybody has wings, but some people don't know why.

When my fishing companion and I headed upstream and crossed over the bridge, she just smiled as we passed by and kept on reading.



Be Vigilant!



*“Red” Canoe
Trout Unlimited
Iowa Driftless Chapter*

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