

“Trout Bum as Auto-Didact”

By David Marriott

I once heard it said that a Yorkshireman can be defined as a Scotsman with all the generosity taken out and it must be admitted that it is not difficult to find this trait in my home county. We're a hardy and self-reliant breed up here in the Pennines and not too proud to be seen scouring the bankside bushes in order to replenish our fly boxes. Not for us the latest Sage or Loomis – there's nowt wrong wi' fibre glass as far as we're concerned.

However, when it comes to the giving of advice and time, you'll find no one more generous and helpful than our own Stuart Crofts - fly fishing genius, fishing guide, environmental campaigner, trout bum, professional Tyke and self-taught entomologist. A day spent with him on the river will transform your entomological knowledge and with it the pleasure derived from your fly fishing. Last year I lured him down to Hampshire for a three day Itchenfest and, such was his boyish enthusiasm, we spent most of our time on our hands and knees searching for caddis in the undergrowth while expensive water flowed past us, unmolested.

Intensely curious when it comes to understanding the natural world and with typical Yorkshire stubbornness, Stuart will not accept what he is told without proving it to his own satisfaction. In recent years he has become obsessed with the caddis, an insect that has been rather neglected from both fly fishing and entomological points of view, particularly when one considers the amount written about its upwinged cousins. Although Halford happily fished the Welshman's Button in the absence of the mayfly on the Test, there is no doubt that the amount of effort he put into the imitation of the adult caddis is negligible in comparison to his heroic efforts with the Ephemeridae. Even to this day, caddis patterns tend to be generic rather than specific. Fishing the adult caddis has been very much a minor tactic, perhaps regarded as rather below the belt, appealing as it does to the trout's aggressive streak when confronted with a dragging fly. Given the importance of the caddis as a food item for trout and grayling, fly fishers have been waiting over long for an entomologist of Stuart's calibre to put in the time and effort to research their behavioural and emergence patterns from an angler's perspective.

Realising that he would need several lifetimes to complete this research (there are nearly 200 species in the UK), Stuart hit upon the idea of harnessing his wide circle of friends to help him in his quest. This has really paid off and he now has upwards of 25 acolytes across the country giving up precious fishing time to collect adult caddis on his behalf. Fortunately for them, collecting has become a sport in itself, for the caddis seems to have a sixth sense when it comes to avoiding capture. Some have an innate ability to stay just out of reach of the net, while others employ the tactic of dropping off the herbage into the undergrowth just as you start to sneak up on them. Now the collectors seldom venture to the river without an essential piece of equipment known as a “pooter” encumbering their already overloaded fishing vests. This is a real help when hunting resting insects, allowing them to be sucked into a collecting jar. This goes into the freezer on returning home, killing the flies humanely. They are then popped into test tubes of alcohol and posted off to Stuart for analysis during the long winter

evenings. Who knows what the postman must think when he delivers yet another card advising Stuart that more packages with the wrong postage await him at the sorting office?

Of course, most flyfishers call it a day when dusk falls and the temperature drops. Fish stop rising and the lure of the pub or a warm bed outweighs the prospect of another fish. Stuart has been telling me for years that I should resist the temptation to pack up at this point. If I stuck it out until it was properly dark, I would witness amazing caddis activity, not to mention hatches of Blue Winged Olives, Midges and Caenis. It is not that I was an unbeliever, but to be honest I've never felt particularly comfortable fishing in the dark ever since I went for an involuntary swim whilst after sea trout. However, nothing Stuart said could have prepared me for the experience of witnessing one of his midnight collecting sessions on the Cressbrook & Litton stretch of the Derbyshire Wye.

It was midsummer's day and we had been enjoying several days of warm weather. The fishing club committee had been in session at the Cock & Pullet and it was clear that the landlady had heard more than enough about fishing for one night and wanted to close. Somebody remembered that Stuart was down at the Locked Bridge so we decided to pay him a visit. In a scene reminiscent of "Close Encounters", bright lights punctuated the darkness along the river. There we found Stuart leaping from rock to rock adorned with midge net, head torch, several cameras and pooter. Directly below the rocks he had set up his in-river collecting net to catch the hatching caddis and spent egg layers. On the footbridge was an illuminated moth trap on a white sheet with several other traps placed at strategic sites along the bank. It was a revelation. The light on the bridge was attracting thousands of caddis, particularly the micro caddis *Agapetus Fuscipes* whose little domed cases encrust every rock in the river like barnacles. In fact there were so many that we started to breathe in the little beggars and then we realized why Stuart was wearing his midge net. There were plenty of larger caddis too, accompanied by hundreds of Blue Winged Olive duns, resting on the white sheet. Down at the river's edge, the lights were revealing another phenomenon. Here the *Rhyacophila* were clustering on the exposed rocks, forcing their way underwater to lay their eggs. The resident bullheads were also out in force too and could be seen in the light of the torch as they picked off the egg-layers one by one. Out in the main current the trout could be heard rising furiously as they joined in the fun.

Stuart was in his element as he shared his knowledge with us. He warned us that this was the Derbyshire Wye and consequently the numbers we were witnessing were exceptional. It was as though we had been let into a secret world, there for anyone who cares to look but seen by few. This nightly ritual has been perpetuated for millions of years but only now, thanks to the efforts of Stuart and his little gang of helpers, are we starting to understand the fascinating world of the caddis.