

Flies and Fly Fishing on the Wharfe at Ilkley

The River Wharfe is one of the best known Trout and Grayling rivers, not only in Yorkshire but the whole of the UK. Historically it is linked to the development of the North Country style of fishing using sparse spider patterns such as Waterhen Bloa, Snipe and Purple, Hare's Lug & Plover and Partridge and Orange. The Ilkley stretch is mentioned in many old angling books and has been fished by several famous authors through the years. Our fishing extends a distance of approximately 1.5 miles of double bank fishing from the old Packhorse Bridge downstream to the Stepping Stones, the river flowing roughly in an Easterly direction. Whilst at times, the stretch within the park from the Packhorse Bridge down to the Road Bridge can be busy with the public, at other times it can be relatively deserted. From the Road Bridge to the Suspension Bridge although this too is within the park, the fishing and water is less accessible to being 'watched over' by walkers. Below the Suspension Bridge is the most private stretch of our water. The fishing is a good mixture of pool, glide and riffle. The wading whilst easy in some places with good gravel, can be challenging in other stretches with the river bed covered with many different sized rocks.

In recent years we have had a policy of no stocking (apart from one very small stocking) to try and encourage anglers to enjoy fishing for wild trout and this standpoint has received positive feedback from both members and visitors. There are very healthy stocks of both Trout and Grayling. Our wild Trout average 10-12" but fish of 16-17" are also present in good numbers. Each year larger fish are caught: recently a trout of just over 4lbs was weighed in a match that took place out of the Trout season and in 2010 the largest trout on fly was a 2lb 15.5oz fish of 19.25". The Grayling are typical for Yorkshire and a 15" fish is a good one. However there are a number of larger residents and each year fish close to 2lbs are captured.

From a fly fishing point of view our stretch is under fished, but this is probably more due to the public nature of the water rather than its suitability. Hatches are what you would expect in any clean freestone river in Yorkshire. The first upwinged fly of any significance is the Large Dark Olive (*Baetis rhodani*) which can be found in small quantities as early as February, but by the time the season kicks off (March 25th) the hatches are enough to encourage usually very good surface activity, typically around lunchtime (12pm-2:30pm). The Trout, after months of lean pickings are usually not too fussy and have had many months of very little fly fishing pressure too! Any olive pattern in a size 16 or 14 hook (Size 16 probably more appropriate for our stretch) will suffice and the Waterhen Bloa, Hare's Lug & Plover, Parachute and F Fly type olives will all do the business (Trout & Salmon-Paul Procter-April 2010). Building up to the hatch period Edwards' Baetis nymph takes some beating. This fly is a lover of cold weather and windy conditions will not deter them. Indeed some of the best hatches and therefore fishing can be in these conditions!

The next significant hatch will be the Caddis fly called the Grannom (*Brachycentrus subnubilis*) and in the last few years these have reached biblical proportions. These tend to start around the second week in April though a hot Spring will bring this forward whereas a cold one will delay the hatch kick off somewhat. The fly tends to hatch in pulses, often triggered by 'warm' sunlight. A cold wind is a killer of Grannom hatches. A size 14 or 16 Elk Hair Caddis with a dirty olive body or a para/shuttlecock emerger (Louis Noble-Trout & Salmon March 2010 or Dave Collins- Fly Fishing & Fly Tying May 09) work very well. The Grannom hatches will gradually build up in numbers and at their peak can reach mind blowing proportions, before tailing off towards the end of the hatch period, which can last approximately 3 weeks. The Trout in the last few seasons have been noted to being stuffed with Grannom in our stretch during this period!

Around mid May our most spectacularly coloured and bright upwing emerges, The Yellow May Dun (*Heptagenia sulphurea*). This cannot be mistaken for anything else on our stretch and is more of a trickle emerger, especially during the day. The good thing about this is that there are usually one or two about and fish can expect to see them all through the day once they start hatching, so it is a good pattern to 'search' with. If it does hatch in good numbers this tends to be later in the evening and into dark when it can get the fish quite excited. This hatch can coincide with a fall of spinners of the same fly and care should be taken if your YMD imitation is refused...watch that rise form and make sure they are not sipping spinners. This is a fairly big fly of about a size 14 or 12. For the best imitations see Fly Fishing & Fly Tying March 2009 for Oliver Edwards' patterns, especially the Yellow 'F' Fly, the Yellowhammer and the crippled spinner (tip...tie it with a fluo yellow wing post to make it easier to see

in the failing light-the fish don't mind!). Around this time period we also have some quite heavy hatches of *Caenis* and when the fish are on these a size 24-26 Klinkhammer with a white body and black thorax and hackle can do the business.

By the time June is with us, given good weather, the Blue Winged Olive (*Seratella ignita*) can usually give us the most consistent sport offered by upwings for the rest of the Trout season. A size 16 imitation is right for our flies (Paul Procter-Trout & Salmon-June 2010). In mid-Summer on a hot night the real action does not start until shortly after 10pm and then grows in intensity as large numbers of BWO hatch, simultaneously there may be spinners present which are busy egg laying. At these times the river can seem alive with rising fish and it is now that you can see how well the river is stocked! Also occurring at the same time can be very good caddis hatches and fish on these usually take them with gusto indicating to the watchful angler which type of pattern to use. As it gets too dark to see, position yourself so that you are looking up into 'silver paper' smooth water and you can see the disturbance your fly makes as it alights. You will not be able to see your fly but strike if you see any rise forms in the vicinity. At this stage it can be less hassle to fish with barbless hooks as unhooking Grayling in particular in near darkness with their small mouths and habit of twisting in your hand can take time!

The Small Dark Olive (*Baetis scambus*) can be hatching at the same time but probably starts a bit more towards July and this can be represented by exactly the same tying as for the BWO except on a size 18 or 20.

Into September and the weather is usually not as hot, so the hatches tend to be more day rather than evening based; the two main fly types to watch out for are the thin Needle and Willow Flies (*Leuctra* sp.) which will hatch through the day and give fantastic sport (Stuart Crofts 'F' Fly is mustard and tying is FF & FT Sep 2002). If you cannot locate this, then any 'F' fly with a blackish brown body sized 16 (tied slim) will suffice. These may be present early September, but certainly by later September will be making their presence known in greater numbers and probably reach their peak in October, bringing superb surface activity for those of you who fancy targeting solely Grayling at this time with Trout being out of season.

The other fly that tends to be around in good numbers, though hatches have been disappointing for the last few seasons around these parts, is the Pale Watery (*Baetis fuscatus*), one of our smallest upwings and best represented by a size 18, 20 or even a 22. Any dry fly should aim to have a slim pale straw body and wings/hackle of a pale cream or white is about right. Paul Procter's Sept 2010 article in Trout & Salmon covers both the Pale Watery and the Stoneflies.

These are in the main the species that live in the river and bring the best sport for river bred flies. However from the first day to the last day of the season it always pays to have terrestrial patterns at your disposal. Indeed you could argue that the single most successful fly pattern throughout the season would be a size 16 Black Klinkhammer, which is a very good generic representation of many land bred flies, but in particular the Black Gnat who the trout are extremely fond of when they end up on the water (which they have a good habit of doing!). These are worth having in sizes 24-14 and represent everything from midge to much larger insects. Tie them with a fluo pink, white or black wing to make them easy to see in different light conditions. As an alternative, look to the Spring Black or perhaps Baillies Black Spider fished just under or in the surface. Beetles always find their way onto the water and it pays to have these tied in sizes from 12 to 18. An ethafoam pattern with peacock herl underbody and pink sighter wing can give great sport or the 'Halo' Beetle (Trout & Salmon-Paul Procter-July 2011) which is an outstanding pattern, particularly on hard fished waters (which ours is not) towards the end of the season when Trout have seen many conventional offerings. Griffiths Gnats in a variety of sizes can be great medicine in midge hatches and you should never be without a few Aphid patterns (size 22-28) during leaf out early in the season and especially leaf fall in September and October, when Grayling can gorge on them (tip...get as close as possible and use a long fine leader of at least 7x tippet to get plenty of slack for good drag free drifts).

By the way although I have quoted editions of magazines where copies may be hard to come by, many of the tyings can be found on Google.

Tackle

An 8.5-10' rod rated for a 3-4 weight line will ensure plenty of line control and will not overpower our fish. Thigh waders will allow access in many sections but for complete river coverage, chest waders are better. Felt soles will give the best grip but if you fish other rivers then one of the new generation rubber sticky soles (with added tungsten studs) are the right way to go and will minimise the spread of any invasive species (The Wharfe has a population of the extremely invasive American Signal Crayfish). If fishing other rivers please at the least rinse all wader wear after a session in the Wharfe or better still, disinfect completely.

Tuition and Guiding

Two recommended local guides are Stuart Minnikin of Yorkshire Dales Flyfishing <http://www.yorkshire-dales-flyfishing.com/> and Malcolm Hunter of Fly Fish Yorkshire <http://www.fly-fish-yorkshire.co.uk/> who both know the Wharfe very well. Both are also qualified to teach casting and hence presentation, which is the key to successful river fishing.

Flies

If you do not tie your own flies there is a good quality selection for our rivers available at <http://www.yorkshire-dales-flyfishing.com/flies.htm>, Wharfedale Angling Supplies (Otley) and Orvis (Harrogate)

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