

The magic of the mayfly on the Shannon

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One of the trout angler's greatest perennial pleasures is the appearance of the green fly on Lough Derg or Lough Ree in late April or early May. To the majority of anglers, it signifies the start of the trout-angling season. It generates huge enthusiasm amongst anglers and motivates many to get their boats out of winter storage and painted, outboard serviced and a full pre-season check on all tackle.

The mayfly's short life

Whilst the mayfly can be seen on our lakes and rivers from April through to early September, the hatch is usually at its greatest intensity in mid-May, although it varies from year to year and from lake to lake. Lough Derg is usually the first lake to see the mayfly hatch, followed by the more northern lakes both on and off the Shannon system. The shallower lakes tend to produce the hatches earlier than the deeper ones, as the water temperature is usually cooler and the early spring and summer sun does not penetrate down on to the lake bottom from where the larvae are developing.

There are three species of mayfly: *Ephemera Danica*, *Ephemera Vulgata* and *Ephemera Linata*. Their evolution is unusual in that the fly itself only lives for approximately two to three days. In that time it changes colour from green to black, known as a Spinner or Spent Gnat. The fly dies on the water, usually having laid its eggs, which will slowly sink to the bottom before, one year later, reappearing as a fly on the surface of the lake again. It will have developed in that time from eggs to larvae to nymphs to a fly.

The brown trout

The brown trout, which is the native trout in our lakes, will have been fairly inactive over the cold winter months; the hen fish will have spawned on the shallows and up the tributaries around the lake. In the month of May they will be hungry. Most lake trout feed on the bottom of the lake on crustaceans, shrimp and other bottom feed. However, the mayfly, at its greatest intensity of hatching, tends to lure the trout from the bottom of the lake to the surface, where there is now abundant feed. Some anglers believe that some of the bigger fish in the lake only come to the surface to feed on the mayfly and otherwise spend their lives feeding off the bottom. It is for this reason that the angler generates so much enthusiasm about this annual opportunity for the big kill.

The angler

The angler approaches his quarry through a number of methods. The traditional one is **dapping** the fly (usually two) on a single gold or brown hook, which is attached to a blow line, which in turn is made on to some backing line and delivered on the water with a long light rod, possibly 18 or 19 feet long. The anglers sit in their boats with their backs to the wind and drift across favourite shallows or points where they believe they will meet a fish.

Some anglers prefer to wait, pulled in to favourite haunts around the lakeshore in a boat, and use a dry artificial fly to cover their fish throughout the day as they rise to the fly. Other anglers will fish in a similar fashion to that of dapping except they will use wet flies that are designed to be taken by the trout under water. Favourites include nymphs, Invicta, Greenwell's Glory and Wickham's Fancy.

But the most exciting method for some will be the **Spent-Gnat fishing** in the evening and on into dusk. At this stage the trout will take the mayfly, which has now developed in to a Spinner or Spent Gnat; he will be black and yellow in colour and there will be normally an abundance of fly on the water to bring on a rise.

The conditions for this method are not always met. You need a near-flat-calm evening with a warm air, normally following a southwesterly wind (Tropical Maritime). The anglers wait motionless in their favourite haunts for a fish stirring; they will then gently move the boat as quietly as possible so that they can cast a dry artificial fly over the fish. This can be heart-stopping and breath-taking when you get a head and tail rise on a large fish. The exhilaration and adrenaline run are memorable and only really comparable to hooking sea-trout late at night, later in the year, on the fly.

Quiet, please

For the many other boat-users who use the lakes around this time of the year and look in total bemusement at these pilgrims, there are a few golden rules that you should try to adhere to and which will earn you huge respect by these anglers.

If a lake-boat is dapping downwind (with its outboard stopped and only the windward oar in the water), don't make your passage downwind of the boat. Always cross them to their windward side, as this is the water they have just fished.

Always slow down when you are in close proximity to the boat. Give as wide a berth as possible.

When you see anglers in a lake-boat sitting or standing, and watching water, then please do your best to avoid them — and please slow down, as you are likely to disturb the fish that they are waiting for.

Picture courtesy of Brian McManus, Shannon Regional Fisheries Board. Website: <http://www.shannon-fishery-board.ie/introduction.htm>