

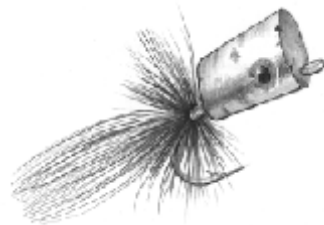
Panfish Poppers or Dry Flies?

by Jack Ellis

Trout fishers have recognized the importance of entomology since the early nineteenth century, but warmwater fly fishers have been, until very recently, utterly oblivious to the diet of their prey. Attractorists all, we tied and fished outlandish, garish flies that bore little resemblance to any living organism. And we caught fish-as did our Puritan forebears with the gaudy attractors of colonial New England. But they moved forward with ever increasing sophistication, while warmwater anglers continued to languish in nescience.

While the warm-water pond and the trout stream may be geographically distant, they are more alike than different as far as strategy is concerned. The bluegill eats the same foods and falls for the same tactics as stillwater trout. In fact, I advise beginners to use Dave Hughes' *Strategies For Stillwater* as a basic textbook, substituting the word "bluegill" for "trout."

Most of the so-called "panfish" flies of the past were simply miniaturizations of bass bugs, or very poor imitations of terrestrial insects, based more on fantasy than reality. Although bluegill commonly take colorful beetles and other bulky organisms from the water's surface, such lures do not effectively represent what they actually eat from day to day, and should be used only with discretion and specific purpose. The natural opportunism of the Centrarchids is an evolutionary adaptation to a wider range of available food, and should not be misinterpreted to mean that a big bream is not discriminating about what it puts in it's mouth.



Traditional panfish poppers, rubber-legged spiders and miniature bass bugs work fine for spawners and juveniles, but are often too crude and unrealistic to fool mature, non-spawning bluegill. We are dealing with a very crafty fellow who will test all of our trout stream skills and tax our patience beyond its limit. His

stillwater home provides the luxury of close examination, and finely-honed survival instincts preclude his taking anything unnatural in appearance or movement.

Several years ago I began to question the conventional wisdom-that mature bluegill will not rise to a dry fly except during the spawn-because I frequently saw big bream feeding on the surface. I spent lazy August days hiding in the shade of pond-side hardwoods, tossing all sorts of creepy crawlers into the water. But what I saw was that no living insect on the water would survive. As long as it was alive and moving it would always disappear in a swirl, although a matter of minutes might first have elapsed.

Bluegill always subject floating food forms to a close examination, but the duration and intensity of that inspection depends upon four factors. In order of angling importance, they are: (1) the size of the natural, (2) the movement of the drowning insect, (3) the familiarity of the organism, and (4) the amount of competition for available food. No artificial will pass a lengthy inspection, no matter how well tied, and top-water success demands that we find ways to moderate this reality.



Size is certainly the most crucial of the four factors. Bluegill really check out a red/black milkweed beetle, but pause for only an instant beneath a tiny marsh fly. After a great deal of observation, there is no question that these fish subject small insects to much less scrutiny. I regret that I didn't time such examinations with a stop watch and construct charts demonstrating the correlation between duration and size that I know to exist. Maybe I'll get around to it next season . . .

Movement is only slightly less important than size. Inspection is longer and more intense if the insect is either completely dead or extremely active. Motionless naturals commonly drift unmolested for several minutes, and are then consumed mainly by juveniles or, sometimes, are never taken at all. Big bluegill show great interest in a violently thrashing insect, but will rarely mouth it until the struggling subsides. They will mill around a moth, for example, that is beating it's wings, apparently waiting for it to settle down. The most attractive are organisms are those which appear nearly drown-ed-writhing and twitching in the throes of imminent death. Subtle, accurate animation is, therefore, the name of this game.

Suspicion is further aroused if the natural is unusual. Marsh flies occur on the water daily, but a large, terrestrial beetle is uncommon. Off-the-wall terrestrials are commonly torn apart by small juveniles, while larger 'gills lurk warily nearby. Success with large terrestrial patterns demands not only an excellent tie, but also natural animation. This is no small order in view of the fact that most terrestrials, except hoppers, make no lateral movement on the water. They don't swim-they just struggle in place.

Obviously, a panfish popper fails on all counts-it is not only comparatively large and represents highly unusual foods, it necessarily fishes noisily and unnaturally-characteristics that may appeal to bass but not to mature bluegill. The popper works well for spawners, and maybe in a highly competitive situation where food is scarce, but the serious fisher of bream soon graduates to more appropriate offerings. Casting a yellow popper to spawning bluegill is fun, in a childlike way, but it is an intellectually empty exercise.

Standard dry flies, and patterns specially tied to represent locally occurring terrestrials, will not only take more and larger bluegill, but deeply enrich those intellectual and spiritual components that are such an important part of the fly fishing experience. Walton and Cotton, Halford and Skues, Gordon and Hewitt are part of our traditions too. Better stated, we aspire to be in their tradition.

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