

> DAVE & EMILY WHITLOCK

Top To Bottom

An expert's precise strategy for fishing wet flies at all depths

Illustration | Dave Whitlock



Nothing excites trout more than the sight of emerging insects rising toward the surface.

Dave Whitlock's emerger system combines Old World soft-hackle techniques with contemporary nymphing tactics.



Photo | Emily Whitlock

MOST OF US remember times when a stream appeared totally devoid of fish, then a “hatch” began and the river boiled with rising trout. When trout see these aquatic insects emerging from the stream bottom and swimming up toward the surface they have an instinctual and aggressive feeding response.

Over the last several years, since I was shown the techniques for traditional wet-fly fishing by my Welsh friend Davy Wotton, I've experienced a steady increase in success taking larger trout and especially browns by taking advantage of this feeding trigger. Because traditional wet-fly fishing does not use weighted flies, I merged some of Wotton's techniques with my understanding of emergers to create a system that is the best of both worlds because it works at all depths. My “emerger system” works like a charm for me by triggering that urgent feeding response in trout, and I'd like to share it with you.

Emergent Philosophy

This method positions emerger aquatic insect imitations in the water column so that one, two, or three flies can be animated to imitate actively emerging immature caddis or mayflies. To work properly, the end fly must sink rapidly to or near the stream bottom before it reaches the across-and-downstream area that is likely to hold the trout I wish to trigger into snatching the escaping insects.

The sight of two or three emergers is seldom ignored by trout, and I often find that when using this multiple-fly system, the strikes are frequent and violent, even from mature, reticent browns. My results with this emerger system of multiple, moving flies are significantly more effective than my best dead-drift nymphing techniques.

For best results I use a combination of a mid-flex, 9- or 10-foot, 4- or 5-weight fly rod, a floating line in a somber color, and a 7½ foot, 3X, knotless tapered trout leader. I add two fluorocarbon-tippet dropper sections so I can tie on two or three flies. The dropper sections are 8 to 10 inches long and spaced 24 to 30 inches apart.



Photo | Dave & Emily Whitlock

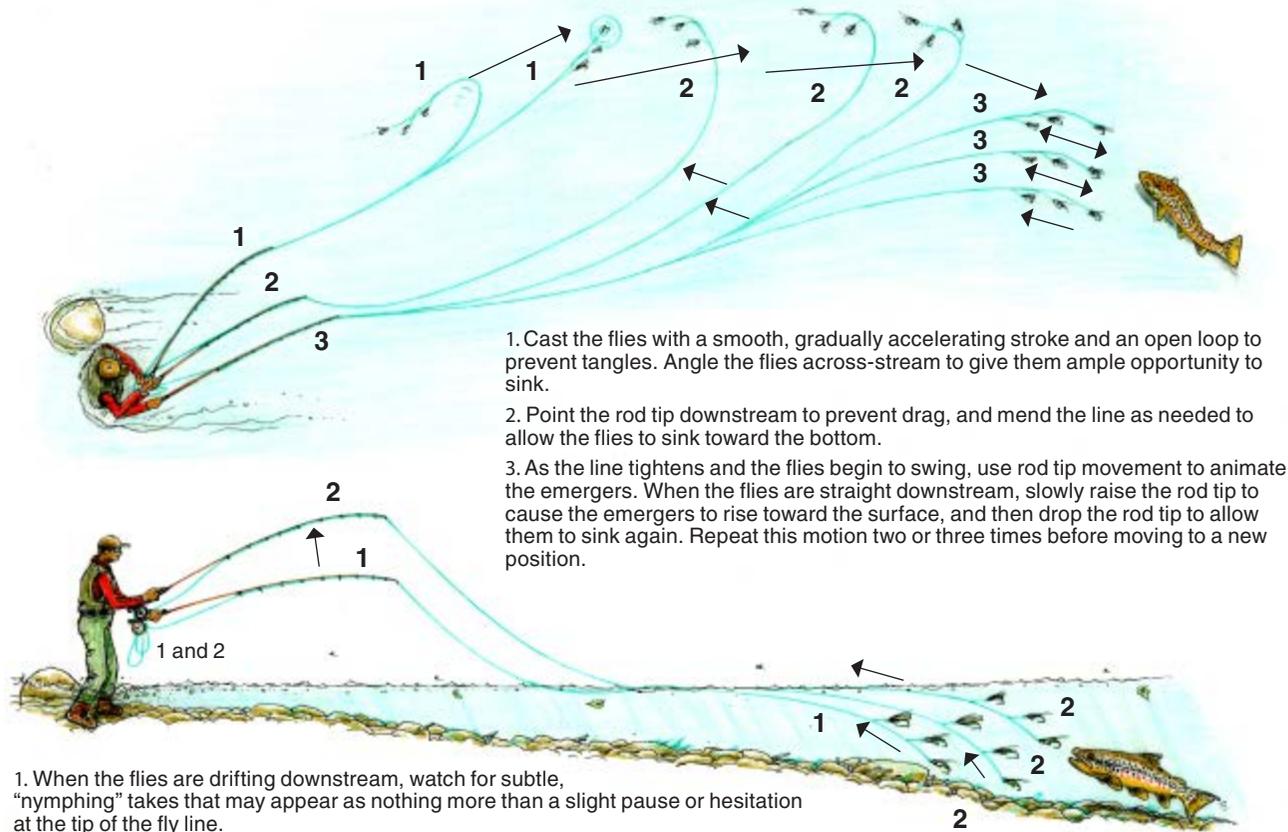
A double surgeon's knot is used to tie each tippet section to the one above, creating the dropper by leaving a long tag end on the upper section. [See "Connecting Eye to Arbor" on page 48 of this issue for illustrations and instructions for the double surgeon's dropper. THE EDITOR.]

Coating the knots with an adhesive such as Zap-A-Gap or UV Knot Sense makes each knot stronger. I then tie on two or (preferably) three of my system emergers with Duncan-loop knots that I open to about the size of the eye of the fly. This knot is strong, and the open loop allows maximum fly movement and provides a bit of shock absorption for those lunging takes.

It is crucial to have the correct weight in the flies you choose for your emerger system. On the end position I use a tungsten-bead emerger version of a caddis or mayfly emerger, the next fly up should have eight to ten turns of lead wire, and the third (top) fly should be an unweighted emerger. I realize that, on some rivers, using multiple flies is not legal. If you are only allowed to use one fly, tie on the heaviest

Trout often hook themselves in the corner of the jaw when they chase rising emergers.

MASTERING THE MOVEMENT



1. Cast the flies with a smooth, gradually accelerating stroke and an open loop to prevent tangles. Angle the flies across-stream to give them ample opportunity to sink.

2. Point the rod tip downstream to prevent drag, and mend the line as needed to allow the flies to sink toward the bottom.

3. As the line tightens and the flies begin to swing, use rod tip movement to animate the emergers. When the flies are straight downstream, slowly raise the rod tip to cause the emergers to rise toward the surface, and then drop the rod tip to allow them to sink again. Repeat this motion two or three times before moving to a new position.

1. When the flies are drifting downstream, watch for subtle, "nymphing" takes that may appear as nothing more than a slight pause or hesitation at the tip of the fly line.

2. When the line begins to tighten toward the downstream position, animate the flies with up-and-down rod tip movement. Prepare for vicious strikes as the flies are moving upward.

THE WHITLOCK CADDIS EMERGER



BOTTOM EMERGER

HOOK: #10-14 Tiemco 3761 SP-BL.

THREAD: Tan or olive 70-denier Ultra Thread.

CEMENTS: Dave's Flexament and Zap-A-Gap (green label).

ABDOMEN: Tan or olive Wapsi Antron Sparkle dubbing.

THORAX: Dark olive or brown Wapsi Antron Sparkle dubbing.

WING: White or tan poly yarn

LEGS: Olive partridge or hen hackle, and six strands of Wapsi Midge Flash (root beer or pearl).

ANTENNA: Two strands of Wapsi Midge Flash (root beer or pearl).

HEAD: Dark olive or brown Wapsi Antron Sparkle dubbing.

MIDDLE EMERGER

HOOK: #10-14 Tiemco 3761 SP-BL.

UNDERBODY: Eight to ten turns of .020" lead wire.

THREAD: Tan or olive 70-denier Ultra Thread.

CEMENTS: Dave's Flexament and Zap-A-Gap (green label).

ABDOMEN: Wapsi Antron Sparkle dubbing (olive or tan)

THORAX: Dark olive or brown Wapsi Antron Sparkle dubbing.

WINGS: Gray Swiss straw.

LEGS: Olive partridge or hen hackle, and six strands of Wapsi Midge Flash (root beer or pearl).

ANTENNA: Two strands of Wapsi Midge Flash (root beer or pearl).

HEAD: Dark olive or brown Wapsi Antron Sparkle dubbing.

TOP EMERGER

HOOK: #10-14 Tiemco 3761 SP-BL.

BEAD: Black tungsten bead.

THREAD: Tan or olive 70-denier Ultra Thread.

CEMENTS: Dave's Flexament and Zap-A-Gap (green label).

ABDOMEN: Wapsi Antron Sparkle dubbing (olive or tan)

THORAX: Dark olive or brown Wapsi Antron Sparkle dubbing.

WINGS: Gray Swiss straw.

LEGS: Olive partridge or hen hackle, and six strands of Wapsi Midge Flash (root beer or pearl).

ANTENNA: Two strands of Wapsi Midge Flash (root beer or pearl).

HEAD: Dark olive or brown Wapsi Antron Sparkle dubbing.

Emergent Flies

Whitlock's weighting system can be used for any type of aquatic emergers including midges, caddis, and all types of mayflies. The top fly is unweighted, the middle fly has six to ten wraps of lead wire, and the heaviest bottom fly has a tungsten bead and a lead wire underbody.

Most of the specifically weighted flies I use with this system are imitations of Caddis Pupa Emergers (see illustration). However, if there is a particular mayfly emergence occurring, I imitate it with mayfly emerger patterns that are similarly weighted. I've tied and used emergers for this system that imitate Green, Brown, and Gray Drakes as well as Pale Morning Duns (in the West) and Sulphurs (in the East).

Midge pupa patterns can also easily be adapted using a tungsten bead on the bottom fly, six to ten turns of lead wire on the middle fly, and no weight on the top fly.

Even generic attractor flies such as Gold-ribbed Hare's Ears, March Brown wet flies, Wickham's Fancy wet fly, and most soft-hackles such as the Partridge and Olive can be tied to simulate emergers. There are a huge number of emerger patterns available today and I believe most would work with this system if they are weighted and positioned on the leader as I've recommended. However, if you are interested in my favorite three caddis emergers, here are the materials and what the finished flies look like. I tie most on size 12 hooks but sizes 10 and 14 are also useful. These bigger sizes seem to trigger the fish better than smaller sizes, even when the naturals are smaller.



Photo | Dave & Emily Whitlock

EMERGER LEADER SETUP



To prevent break-offs, hold coils of slack line in your hand, and after the initial strike let the line slip through your fingers as the trout lunges downstream.



Photo | Dave & Emily Whitlock

emerger. If only two flies are legal, use the two weighted versions.

I believe the magical number for my system is three flies because the three emergers are in three different depth positions (see diagram), but two flies can be almost as effective. When the water is higher than normal, as in tailwater areas or spring runoff, I use a clear intermediate fly line to better position the flies nearer the bottom where the emergent insects begin their triggering attraction to trout.

Animated Emergers

Riffles are insect factories, and when trout are feeding, a good place for heart-stopping strikes. I often start at the lower portion of a riffle, and gradually fish downstream until my last presentations reach the top of the pool below the riffle so I cover all the prime feeding territory.

Start with short casts and progressively make longer casts in order to cover all the water and then move about a leader length downstream, and repeat the series of presentations (outlined below). While fishing downstream, constantly read the water for the most probable trout feeding positions and focus extra casts in these areas.

To position the flies I usually cast them across and slightly upstream to allow them to drift and sink, mending when necessary to avoid drag, as they move naturally with the current direction and speed.

As they move downstream, the flies drift like nymphs, and I often get subtle nymphing takes, therefore I watch my line tip or leader butt for any indication of a soft strike. This usually comes in the form of a subtle pause in the downstream drift speed of the line tip, and requires a quick appropriate strike on your end to get a hook-up.

As the flies reach a position across and down from you, the line will

begin to tighten and you'll establish a connection with them by very subtly animating the flies with short and slow rod-tip twitches. When the flies reach the farthest length downstream and are about to swing across the current, develop a mindset that something special is imminent as you begin to slowly raise the rod tip while still using subtle twitches to imitate the swimming/rising action of an emerging insect.

When the flies are directly downstream, and your rod raised, quickly lower the rod to let the emergers sink and fall toward the bottom. Repeat this twice and then cast again.

When the emergers are in the downstream position and rising, trout often dash in and seize a fly with a tippet-popping take. There's no subtlety here or any need to set the hook. Even a 14-inch fish can break off one or all the flies on the strike if you're not prepared. To avoid break-offs do these three things:

1. Hold your excess fly line loosely in your free hand and not under the finger of your rod hand.
2. Do not attempt to strike hard when the trout takes, keep your rod up and let them hook themselves.
3. Let the excess line slip out of your hands as the trout lunges downstream. Try to create as little friction as possible with this first run.

Once the trout is hooked and running, handle it as you'd normally fight a fish. It's just those first seconds that can be a little more jolting than a regular strike. Earlier, I specifically suggested using 3X leader and tippet sections, which may surprise many trout fly fishers used to fishing 4X and lighter tippets. Heavier tippet is mandatory to cope with the vicious shock of the trout strikes when they are racing after the emergers. Using 4X or 5X does not result in more takes with this system, but I can promise it will guarantee the loss of more fish and flies.

In my lifetime of trout fly fishing I've never seen a more consistent and proactive method for taking large trout. This system is my absolute favorite way to fly fish for all trout, and I'm convinced it can be for you too. It's truly magical. 🐟

Contributing editors Dave and Emily Whitlock live near Tahlequah, Oklahoma, where they operate the website davewhitlock.com and offer private fly-fishing instruction.