

Fishing – Paul Buchanan discusses the art of fly selection



Part of Paul's extensive fly box collection.
Pic by Nigel Duncan Media

International angler and coach, Paul Buchanan, from Livingston says: "As a fly fisherman, it is understandable that you need to place a certain level of importance on the subject of flies but, as you well know, we sometimes we get carried away.

"This is a great time of year to be looking at all the flies you currently have and identifying any gaps that need to be restocked by buying or tying.

"It is also a good idea to organise your flies better so that identical patterns are kept together and are easier to locate (and identify low stock).

"Common questions I get asked are "How many flies do you really need?" and "What fly do I need for?" Sadly, there are no easy answers to either question.

"An interesting observation coming up though. If you take an average river competition and assess the flies used by the anglers that did best there is usually not a lot in common between the flies they used.

"They all used completely different patterns to devastating effect. That would lead you to believe that there is not always a 'magic fly' required and you would be perfectly correct.

"In general, fish are quite relaxed about what they eat, getting hold of what they can, when they can.

“However, the insect world works in such a way that a particular species has a short/specific season of emergence and when a single species hatches it usually does so in very large numbers.

“Fish key into this phenomenon and begin to look for just the most plentiful species. As anglers, we think the fish are amazingly educated or choosy as they ignore our fly while greedily chomping down others.

“It is not as complex as that though, in the way that when you sort out your piggy bank and look to separate out all the one pound and 50p coins into groups; yes there are lots of other coins there but you don't notice them when you are only looking for 50p pieces.

“Other situations such as heavy fishing pressure mean that the fish can get quite good at spotting a fake fly that is either tied or fished badly.

“However, in my experience, if a fly is fished well you can generally catch on it well throughout the year. If an angler chooses a fly based on how confident it makes them feel then that is worth a lot.

“Barbless: How many fish do you kill from the Almond every year compared to how many you catch? If, like many anglers, you like to return most fish you really should be fishing barbless.

“A barbed hook is designed to make sure any fish you catch is held securely until you kill it. The damage done to its mouth when removing the hook is not a factor when it is about to get whacked on the head.

“If you return the bulk of your fish, barbless is the only way to behave and modern barbless hooks I reckon are better at holding fish than ever before. They are also very quickly and easily removed from clothing, nets, trees, people and dogs.

“Tie or buy? Fly tying is another significant subject in its own right but don’t feel it is something you can’t learn quickly. It needn’t cost a fortune to get started and it is easy to make all your own patterns for the River Almond.

“If you don’t tie your own, you must have a good, reliable source of flies that can provide everything you’ll need. This can be expensive and also means you’ll never be able to restock a box the night before a trip.

“Venues v fly collection: For each venue you fish there will be flies that are almost mandatory for that venue. People who have large fly collections generally have only built this up because they fish a good range of venues, of differing size and characteristics.

“Species make a difference as grayling anglers have a range of dry flies and nymphs in their boxes. I’m only going to cover what I like to fish on the Upper River Almond and it is a surprisingly small list of flies, 11 different patterns in total.

“The key to a effective fly collection is not to have a massive variety of different patterns. The best thing to do is have a smaller range of patterns but have each pattern tied in a larger range of sizes and have lots of spares of each size.

“For wet flies and dry flies it is quite common to have three or four of each fly in around three sizes. For nymphs it can be a bit more complex as you may have three or four size 14s with a 2.5mm bead, more 14s with a 3mm bead and even 3.5mm beads.

“You also lose more nymphs than you do dries or wets so lots of spares of these are needed. Once you have lost your sixth Red Tag of the day you will realise it is better to tie them than buy.

“Entomology: Newcomers to the sport of fly fishing can be

bamboozled by experts talking entomology – the study of insects. Although I have built up a bit of knowledge in this area, it has been purely by accident.

“It is not mandatory to have a good knowledge of entomology before you can enjoy good fly fishing sport.

“You may not know that the insects the fish are eating are from the Simuliidae family (Reed Smuts) but you may know they are Sz 18 and a dark colour.

“Similarly, if the large spring olives are hatching and the fish are guzzling them, it could be Large Dark Olives (Baetis Rhodani) or Olive Uprights (Rithrogena Semicolorata), but the fish don't know the latin names and the same size 12 or 14 dry fly will usually fool most of the rising fish in these circumstances.

“My advice to fly fisherman is to have a basic knowledge of what hatches (and when) on your venue and always have a few patterns ready to take advantage of it when it happens.

“I still rue the day when I first started out and I spent a painfully frustrating and fishless day on a stretch of The Almond watching every fish in the river smashing into a thick hatch of Hawthorn Flies.

“I only had two black flies in my box and I was snapped instantly on both (my knots were poorly tied by trembling hands). The fish ignored every other fly I threw at them because they were either the wrong size or were not black.

“If you want to learn more about this fascinating subject, I would recommend buying an entomology book aimed at anglers and one of the best being Waterside Guide by John Goddard. <http://www.anglebooks.com/john-goddard-s-waterside-guide-an-angler-s-pocket-reference-to-the-insects-of-rivers-and-lakes-19958.html>

“Methods you fish: Another important point is that you only need the types of fly for the methods you fish. If you don’t fish deep nymph or don’t fish dry fly, then don’t feel you need to own a large range of these specialist fly styles.

“Decide on the methods you fish and then build a fly collection only to suit these methods.

“Organisation of fly collection: One of the best favours you will ever do your catch return is to organise your flies well. If you can go directly to where a fly is in your box then it will save you an immeasurable amount of time in a season usually when the stakes are high (the fish are feeding/rising well).

“If you group all of your Pale Watery dry flies together it becomes obvious when stocks are depleted and some more need to be tied or bought.

“Although I have separate boxes for my dry flies, wet flies and nymphs, I generally never take the boxes fishing with me anymore.

“This is not as daft as it sounds when you imagine that my boxes contain flies for the entire season but on early season trips – why have boxes crammed with tiny size 18 and 20 emergers when the fish are eating flies that are about $\frac{3}{4}$ ” across?

“Same goes for July. I’m not going to be expecting Large Dark Olives or Brook Duns to be hatching so why drag them around with me?

“Instead, I have wee fly pads in my fly fishing vest where I’ll drop in a selection of likely nymphs and dry flies for use on the day.

“Wet flies are generally tied using soft materials such as hen or game bird feathers (partridge, pheasant) and can be winged

or hackled (spiders).

“They are generally quite realistic in colour and size and can be fished by swinging across the current or even by casting upstream and allowed to dead drift over a rising fish. There are some amazingly effective spider patterns such as the Partridge & Orange that represent the spent stage of the upwinged olive once it has returned to the water to lay its eggs.

“Also, a range of simple Black Spiders from Size 18 to size 12 will cover you for every Black Gnat, Hawthorn Fly, House Fly and Beetle that you care to come across. I would not be without any of these two patterns ever.

“My favourite four wet patterns for the Almond are:

Priest: A simple to tie and very effective pattern for all early season trips and for the rest of the year when the river is higher and tinged with colour. Always wind gold or silver wire over the silver tinsel body to protect it from teeth. Best in sizes 10 to 14.

“Partridge & Orange Spider: Every single female upwinged dun returns to the water to lay its eggs, then the majority of them die in the water. The bulk of them are orange bodied, various shades of orange, but the fish don't care. This very simple pattern is best when tied with one or two turns of partridge neck hackle to keep it looking as delicate as the real thing. I'd never be without them from opening day until the end of May in sizes 12 to 16.

“Partridge & Yellow Spider: This is the Summer version of the above fly. It is the wet fly version of the Pale Watery dry fly and the Summer Nymph and qualified me for my first ever Scotland team. It is amazingly simple to tie and from the beginning of June until the end of the season. It will be your best wet fly on the Almond.

“Black Spider – Spoon any river fish once the dense hatches of

upwinged duns end and the chances are that the fish will be full of a range of dark flies. There are lots of dark midges that hatch from the Almond and there are countless more small, medium and large dark or black flies that fall into the Almond.

“Be it the UK’s most common insect, the beetle or the numerous house fly. In late spring it could be the Hawthorn fly or from then onwards it could be the very plentiful Black Gnat. Either way, a black fly in your collection is a MUST and the easily tied Black Spider beats them all. I use it in sizes 12 to size 18.

“Dry Flies: When fish are rising, the use of a dry fly can be the best fun you will have as a fly fisherman.

“Not all dry flies are the same though in that some represent the adult sitting ON the water and others represent the emerging fly as it struggles to break through the surface film.

“The patterns that sit ON the water are usually dressed with floatant to stay waterproof and those that are ‘damp’, i.e. some in and some out, these usually use Cul de Canard (CdC) feathers to keep part of the fly afloat.

“CdC feathers never need treated with anything. Which type of dry fly should you use? If the fish are splashing – it is the adult fly ON the water. For everything else, go half in half out!!

My favourite four dry patterns for the Almond are:

“CdC Olive: Most upwinged duns, commonly referred to as ‘olives’ are ...well...you know...kinda...olive. One pattern tied to sit flat on the water is the CdC olive and in various sizes covers all the species.

“Using a yellow tying silk waxed with brown cobbler’s wax gives a nice shade of olive, with an inner glow. If you just

use olive tying silk, it is pretty dull and lifeless.

“The CdC wing can be tied sloping over the back, upright or even out the front and each style will adjust the angle that the rest of the fly fishes at.

“A simple touch of rabbit or hare dubbing wound at the base of the wing gives a lovely ‘leggy’ thorax but don’t use too much fur, just a touch. Very easy to tie and my best catcher of quality fish on the Almond.

“When I think back to what we were told was the only thing to use, the split wing dry fly using top quality cock hackles and a tying technique that took years to learn. Now three little CdC feathers and a touch of rabbit is all we need to catch well. I use this fly in sizes 12 (early season) to size 18 when the going gets tough.

“Pale Watery: The only dry to use once Summer comes to town. Little bit harder to tie with an elk hair wing and a blue dun hackle wound through it. Once you have tied it, snip off all the hackle from underneath as you want this fly to sit flat ON the surface. A great fly in the evening too and not just because you can see it. The Almond has a great hatch of Pale Watery (*Baetis Fuscatus*) and a pattern to represent them is needed for sure.

“Plume Tip (Jeremy Lucas): I have no idea what I used to do before I met this pattern two years ago. It is the only fly to use in very flat water with fish dimpling for smaller natural flies stuck in the surface film.

“Black F Fly: Amazingly simple to tie and is the floating version of the Black Spider. Tie it in sizes 18 to 12 and there is not a lot that falls into the water that you can’t represent.

“Nymphs: This is an enormous and fast developing area. Ten years ago a nymph had a wing case (instead of wings) and a

copper wire rib or underbody. It was cast directly upstream, sometimes quite far upstream and then the slack fly line retrieved as it floated downstream, back towards you.

“Nymphs then progressed to having a lead wire underbody and then they started appearing everywhere with gold beads (brass) at the front. These sunk quicker and methods for fishing them began to change too.

“Then, with the drive to go deeper and quicker, and to fish using the Polish or Czech style of ‘deep’ nymph or ‘rolled’ nymph, tungsten beads took over from brass and a range of colours for beads became commonplace.

“Now, heavy nymphs are commonly tied on jig hooks so that they swim upside down and are less susceptible to snagging on the river bed.

“I love using a heavy jig hooked nymph on the point and a more realistic nymph on the dropper not far away. Beware. Unless you are prepared to learn the short line nymphing style that is now the accepted norm, you will not need these very heavy flies on these jig hooks.

“My favourite three nymph patterns for the Almond are:

Red Tag: tied in the style used by former World Champion and Czech legend Martin Droz is my go to nymph on the Almond. I have them in jig style for the point position and on normal wide gape hooks for the dropper. Using hooks from 10 to 18 and beads from 4mm to 2.5 mm covers just about every situation I come across.

“Orange Collar Pheasant Tail: Ultra simple to tie and a stunning Almond pattern. I use it mostly on the dropper so normal hooks are fine in sizes 12 to 16 and with gold, silver and copper beads. I must confess to also using a version with an olive thread body instead of pheasant tail fibres – known as a Davy’s Tweed Olive.

“Summer Nymph: This is the nymph form of one of my favourite Almond dry flies (the Pale Watery) and was devised by Dick Logan of Coldstream, one of the most capped/decorated river anglers in Scotland.

“Always with a copper bead and it gets better if the copper bead is tarnished/dull. I pre-heat the beads on a piece of wire over a cigarette lighter to shorten the tarnishing process from about six months of frequent fishing down to three seconds.

“Any fine/smooth pale olive/yellow body works as does any dark and spikey thorax but dark olive or dark natural hare seems to work best.

“Always a dropper pattern and starts off around size 14 in late May, going to 16 when the water is lower and 18 if it is really bright and low.

“That’s it. In our mini-series we’ve covered skills, tackle and flies. Tight lines.”