

Pheasant-Tail Nymph

by Carl Haensel
photos by the author

Small flies aren't usually anglers' favorites. I readily admit that they can be difficult to use. However, at the right time they can out-produce just about everything else in the stream. Specifically, for trout that live in limestone spring creeks, small flies should be at the top of the list for just about any angler.

The life of a mayfly is a three-step cycle, and it is one of the simplest. Once the adult lays the egg, there is one intermediary step, the nymph. As you may guess, the nymph does not hatch from the egg at full size. It begins its life extremely small, and as it grows, it sheds its exoskeleton as it goes through phases called "instars." Fish love nymphs, and even though countless numbers hatch, very few survive the sometimes year-long wait to hatch into an adult. Thus, many nymphs get eaten at much smaller sizes than those that would hatch directly into the adult.

This is where small flies come in. While a trout may see large nymphs of a particular species right before they hatch, it sees small nymphs of many different species year-round.

The Pheasant-Tail Nymph mimics many of these nymphs very well when tied in small sizes. Try seining your favorite trout stream for macroinvertebrates. If it is a moderate-gradient stream with occasional patches



of submerged aquatic vegetation, there are probably some small "swimmer" mayfly nymphs around. Many anglers believe that the Pheasant-Tail nymphs represent swimming nymphs of the *baetis* genus. I advocate that in small sizes, such as sizes 18 and 20, a Pheasant-

Tail can pass for most of the small swimming nymphs you will encounter.

These flies are tied simply because you should plan to lose a few. This fly consists of two materials, pheasant tail and peacock herl. There is usually no need for a wire wrap on the fly. I use different colors of died pheasant tail depending on the mayfly life of the stream that I am fishing. Natural and black seem to be some of the best choices.

Dead-drifting small nymphs is a good way to catch fish that aren't in the strongest feeding moods. Small nymphs regularly drift with the current. Some biologists believe that this is a method of population dispersal. Regardless of the reason, there are many times when occasional nymphs will drift by a trout. If the fish aren't actively feeding, don't expect them to move far to take a fly. Sometimes they won't move more than an inch or two from their holding lie. This usually means that if you're nymphing, some lead or tin shot needs to be used to get the fly down. A good rule of thumb is that if you're not losing these flies, then you're not likely getting them deep enough to catch fish.

Pay close attention to your drift so that it's totally drag-free. Letting your line swing in the current at the end of your cast may attract additional active fish. ☐



This fat hold-over brown trout from Donegal Creek, Lancaster County, took a tiny Pheasant-Tail Nymph as it bounced along the bottom of a riffle. Even large trout can be hard to see when they are in broken water. Try casting to shallow water before walking up and spooking any fish in it.