



Green Drake Memories



©John Field 2014 | First published by Sexyloops, Tuesday, 15 September 2015

When I was a kid, I dreamt about experiencing the elusive Eastern Green Drake hatch on a Catskill river. I knew their hatch didn't last very long it's often late in the evening and some anglers never get to see them! As a youth, I didn't even know the fall of their spinners stimulated the most feeding and enticed the biggest fish. The spinner stage of the insect is still called the Coffin Fly, after the fly designed by Walt Dete and Ted Townsend in 1930, the day Ted attended a funeral. The more modern version designed by Walt's daughter Mary Dette has a slightly different appearance. These Coffin flies are not to be confused with the one that feeds on decaying flesh etc.

The image of having the biggest trout in the river reveal themselves to feed on these big mayflies haunted me until my adulthood when I finally got serious about stalking them. In the Catskills, the Green Drakes usually emerge during Bug Week, the first week of June. During this timeframe, which can vary with the weather, the presence of the American March Brown, Blue-winged Olives, Blue Quills, Caddis and other bugs, can overlap. Going into one Bug Week, an acquaintance of mine told me of an un-crowded spot where he saw a nice hatch of Green Drakes with Coffins on the previous day and that's where I started.

I also wanted to experiment with tying their imitations. As a teenager, I memorized patterns from Art Flick's Streamside Guide, which every US

“baby boomer” grew-up on. These flies are made with palmered hackle, dubbed fur bodies, moose mane or peccary hair tails and duck flank wings. Modern imitations are tied parachute style and the spinner is also imitated as a spent wing. In addition, many of today’s imitations use synthetic materials like antron, instead of natural ones.

On the way to fish, I stopped at Dette Flies in Roscoe, NY to talk to 87 year old Mary Dette and her grandson Joe Fox, about the specific materials in their traditional Catskill Green Drake and Coffin fly. Her Grandson Joe Fox now operates Dette Trout Flies. I asked about where one gets the huge size 8 or 6 hackles with stiff barbs so the flies will float. Joe said if you look through strung Indian and Chinese rooster neck hackle, you might find some. The trick in selecting the Golden Badger for the Coffin though, is looking for feathers with black tips, because the tips of the legs on the real flies are black. In tying the dun where the black tips are absent, you use the regular golden badger. In addition, Mary cautioned not to make the stiff peccary tails too long, or they would prevent good hooking. The Dettes never incorporate anything in their flies without good reason.

After my talk with Mary and Joe, I arrived on the water at 4:00pm knowing that the spinner fall wasn’t until dusk around 8:30pm but I wanted to experience all stages of the hatch. When I arrived, the duns emerged at a rate of about one every fifteen minutes! I learned that over the course of several days, that adds up to an appreciable spinner fall, since it occurs within a matter of about half an hour.

The duns are huge and clumsy but are hard to catch in hand. The healthy ones that shed their shucks, lift off and aim for the highest trees. The background color of their wings is a pale yellow with a slight green cast. The wings have a dark venation with an almost black shade of brown mottling over the background. Their thorax is cream colored. Their underbody and legs are cream colored and the top is grey brown. They have three black tails. Their body length averages 32mm and their tails are about as long as their abdomen. (see photo)

Once in a while, in the harsh sunlight, a small trout would eat the duns coming off, but the big trout waited later for greater numbers. This pool is large and an angler or two would appear for about a half hour and not seeing any activity, leave to find greener pastures. I watched the shadow line on the water extend outward from the bank and more and more small trout felt

protected enough to feed. As dusk fell, I started seeing an increasing stream of white and black Coffin flies flying upstream to mate and then for the females, lay eggs on the water. During the several day transformation, the spinners' bodies and tails gain some length compared to the duns and they are thinner.

Standing in the slower water, I saw big splashes above in the fast water at the head of the pool. I moved in for a closer look. I was using a parachute coffin tied on a long shank hook to imitate the long abdomen. I caught two good fish in the last light of dusk and landed the last one in pitch darkness. I learned I couldn't see or hear any strikes in the fast water and so I waded back to my truck with a smile.

Some years, the drakes come off and just when you anticipate the spinners, a violent thunderstorm comes and destroys them. Then you might have to wait till next year for them, or have to drive to another county or state, to another river populated with Green Drakes. The hatch timing is often different on different rivers, so you have to resynchronize your arrival.

One season, there was a local thunderstorm in town and it scared off all the anglers and I had this spot to myself without a raindrop. The hotels were empty! I caught some great fish where I've seen as many as fifteen anglers fishing. The next day, I picked up my dear eighty five year old friend Ted to take him to hopefully encounter some more Coffins. In his sixty years angling, he had not gotten to see this hatch and spinner fall in all its glory. Ted and I arrived early and sat in my Suburban talking about the politics of funding conservation projects when the rain began. We sat there for almost two hours talking but it didn't let-up. We left for dinner and had to wait for the next season. If it had stopped, as I've encountered on numerous occasions, we could have still gotten some bugs to cooperate and had good fishing.

That happened one year when I took another friend to a favorite spot for the Coffin fall. We were the only ones there and we could hear distant thunder. After my friend prospected with nymphs for a while, spent Coffins started pouring into the pool and the fish ate them. After tying on the right flies, we both hooked up on nice fish. I warned my guest not to use less than 5X tippet or horse these fish since they tended to be bigger than the fish the river gave up in the daytime. He broke-off a 20 incher, the only one he hooked due to all the time-outs for rain. Every time it would pour rain and thunder, we'd sit on two big rocks on the bank with our hoods on tight and every time it

stopped, we, the bugs and the trout, would call time-in and resume the game. If you hit it right it can be the highlight of your season.