

MAYFLY PATTERNS SIMPLIFIED, II¹

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Fly fishing need not become overly technical in many of its aspects. A fly fisher need not be able to identify each mayfly to its Latin name to have a pattern that will work much of the time. While it is true that some trout seem to have advanced degrees in fly identification and are very difficult to catch on heavily pounded streams, most of the trout the average fisher sees are not THAT sophisticated! Trout are not using Latin either...only taking the prey items that are commonly available at that spot at that time without wasting energy.

If one had to have a dry fly for each of the 30-50 common mayfly species, each in two or more sizes and in emergers, duns, and spinners, then he would have to carry a very large box of labeled flies, especially on trips where the unexpected is to be expected. The fisher would still be worried about identification errors and the pattern selected not a match (confidence in a fly is very important!): Cahills or pale sulphurs might not work as Pale Morning Duns, etc. For the traveling angler, the identification of unfamiliar mayflies may pose a serious problem.

Using several sources (see below) and my own experiences over the past 15+ years, I have compiled a simplified list of patterns in various sizes to have at all times. Also, several simplified styles of tying mayfly imitations are described that are very durable and effective. All are very realistic and designed to land upright every time, not twist the tippet and survive lots of fish. These patterns should cover 80-90% of the hatches the average fisherman should encounter in the U.S.; the large drakes and tiny Tricos and Caenis are excluded from the table (last page) since special patterns are more often needed for these. The important thing is that IDENTIFICATION of the mayfly is NOT REQUIRED. However, the capture of a few specimens will greatly help in fly selection. In "matching," one uses only the stage (emerger or stillborn, dun, spinner), the length of the body, color of UNDERSIDE (trout have a hard time seeing the top of a floating insect) OR overall color for emerging nymph, and color of wings (sometimes legs and tails). The table uses those features to categorize most of the mayflies we find on our streams. As examples, the Light Cahill and Pale Morning and Evening duns fall in the second row and the various Blue-winged Olives fall in rows 4-9 of the table. If a particular hatch is regularly fished, these patterns might be modified, but these should work just as well. If there is a problem with a particular trout, it is more likely that presentation, stage, or size are in need of alteration.

Space does not allow for descriptions of the various life stages and the techniques used to present these various patterns. Basic references should be consulted. The patterns in the table are grouped by coloration (left column) and size (remaining columns); the latter has both hook size number and actual body length (millimeters). The most useful patterns are indicated by ' + '; the less frequent but possible in many areas are o. I would suggest about 3-5 flies of each size/pattern combination--depending upon how well you keep them on your tippets! Please note that many species of mayflies are represented in the table only in the one stage when they are most often available to the trout (e.g., March Browns are mostly taken as spinners). One point needs repeating when fishing the hatch, particularly in the evening: there may be more than one species and stage present. What looks to be the dominant species and stage in one section of the stream may mask a smaller species or different stage that is more abundant or vulnerable to the trout. The head of the pool may offer a quite different selection than the middle or tail sections. Fish may be selecting different prey only a few meters apart. Try one fly on several trout with one good (within inches and timed well) drift...if no interest (and fish continues to feed), change flies or trout...do not waste time! Carry a small insect net to scoop material from the surface.

For each pattern of the table, the components remain the same. The wing and body colors are the most important along with size. There are only 5-6 basic wing colors needed: white, pale gray, medium gray, dark gray, cream, and pale sulphur. The other components are similarly simplified. Many dubbing shades can be easily found in some premixed shade or blended as needed. For wings, I prefer either straight calf tail or fine, Texas deer body hair that has been dyed the proper shade using Rite or similar dyes in the home. High quality hackle really helps the pattern, too. Micro-fibbets, good hackle, or durable guard hair (mink, fox, woodchuck, etc.) make great tails. Tied properly, these will land upright 99% of all casts and should not twist the tippet: important considerations.

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Tying Instructions

The tails and bodies are all tied in the same general style. The stillborn emerger has a tiny ball of dubbing as the “wing” and some dubbing streaming out the rear as the nymphal skin; this is the PARAmurger, which can be very effective on cold days or early in the hatch period. The duns are tied in either of two styles: COMPARAdun or PARAdun; the former uses no hackle (except tailing). The latter and paramerger are hackled parachute style. I think both are nearly equal in durability and effectiveness. Most of my own duns are paraduns. Spinners are the easiest to construct and often the most effective.

HOOK: Mustad #94833 (3XF) in sizes 18-12, #94831 (2XL, 2XF) in sizes 14-8. For #20 or smaller, I suggest a ring-eyed hook like #94859. If larger fish are expected, use the #94840 (1XF), but check shanks--these may be slightly shorter than the #94833. The latter is good so long as you don't horse the larger fish and take care to hold the hook by the bend and not the point when in the vise. To substitute a shorter hook for the 94833 in the table, the former slips to the left and BETWEEN the corresponding sizes indicated. The #94831 is a great spinner or drake hook: light, with little wire in the bend to be supported by the tail, etc.

THREAD: same color tone as body (e.g., gray, cream, olive), 6/0.

WINGS: about 1/3 to 1/4 back from the eye, tie in the thread (except 1/2 for spinner; all dries in these styles start here).

Paramergers--(imitates the stillborn emerging mayfly; tied in parachute style) Twist a tiny amount of dubbing that matches the dun's wing color into a short, thick mass around the thread. Take one full turn to lock the near end of the dubbing against the hook shank and then tightly twist the dubbing around the thread to the point where it is smooth and tight. Hold dubbing between left thumb and forefinger (assuming right-handed in all these instructions); pull the thread down on back side of shank and hold dubbing above shank, tightening until an oval mass of dubbing has formed between thumb and forefinger (DO NOT RELEASE grip to view this process). Lock with several turns of thread; an oval loop (or donut with no visible hole) in the same plane as the hook and rising above it should result (you may look now), Tie in hackle, dull side down and tip pointed away from you in plane of shank, immediately in front of wing ball; size should be about 1 X length of body (not hook gap).

Paraduns--(imitates dun; tied in parachute style) wing material: small bunch of elk or fine deer body hair or calf tail just to give the impression of the wing silhouette. Even tips and trim butts before tying in. Tips of wing material should extend to just about even with the bend of the hook; that is, wing length = 1.0 X total body length; butts should occupy only half of the space up to the eye. Use only a SMALL amount of hair. Do not let go of the wing until the butts are firmly lashed down on top of the hook. Raise wing and figure-8 wind between base and the butts to hold in vertical, upright position to act as a post for the hackle. Attach hackle as in paramerger; size should be 1 X body/shank length; avoid hackle with webbing at base (this pattern uses larger hackles than the standard Catskill dry flies).

Comparadun--(imitates dun, but wing acts as both legs and wing; no hackle) same as paradun wing, except this needs about 3 X as much fine deer hair as the paradun. It is best tied with butts to rear, but not absolutely required. Do not lash the hair with figure-8 winds, but all the hair must flare to a near vertical at or above the plane of the hook shank. NO HACKLE is used (except for tail). This is a very simple tie and very durable, realistic, and effective! Calf tail does not work in this style.

NOTE: all wings should now be in as near a vertical position as possible. The body hair from local whitetails is too heavy and coarse for these flies; fine deer hair from central-west Texas is my favorite, particularly the white that can be dyed various shades for wings. Dyed calf tail that is fairly straight also works very well for the paradun.

Spinners--Tie hackle about 1/3 to 1/2 or more back on the shank from eye, dull side forward and pointing away from you at right angle to the hook shank.

TAIL: move thread rapidly back to rear of hook shank. For the paramerger, you may like to tie in a wisp of pale or white dubbing or similar material as a nymphal shuck that trails directly behind the body; it should be no longer than the body and not be evenly trimmed. Take the tiniest amount of dubbing and form a very tiny ball around shank at this point. I roll a FEW fibers of dubbing into a small loose ball before twisting around the thread and then make about 2 turns around the hook to form a tiny ball. Tail material must be STIFF and about 1-1.5 X body length. NEVER use deer or elk hair for tails--too fragile! For sizes 12-14, I use 3 fibers per side; 16-18 use 2/side; < 18 only 1/side. Tie onto hook shank just in front of ball and on each side. The angle between opposite sides should be about 75-90°. Cut fibers from SAME spot on hackle and make butts even to ensure tips are also even; do not let any webbing extend beyond thread.

BODY: Starting from tail, apply a tiny amount of dubbing to thread. I lock dubbing to hook with one turn of the thread firmly winding dubbing around thread. Keep abdomen of body (everything behind the wing) as THIN as possible. These are not grasshoppers! Wind dubbing tightly behind the hair wing (paradun & comparadun) to give added support to brace it in the vertical position; make 1.5 figure-8 winds in front and then back of wing passing the dubbing under the shank each time (spinner: continue past hackle to eye) to cover wraps; finish dubbing to eye (still keeping as thin as possible).

HACKLE: For paraduns and emergers, wind hackle in a counter-clockwise direction (view from above) with each turn going UNDERNEATH the PRECEDING turn at the base of the wing. Emergers need about 3-4 turns, paraduns 4-5. Final hackle turn should proceed up and over the dubbed body to the eye and then tied off (be careful not to tie down any fibers of the wing) behind the eye. The comparadun wing is flared to form a fan of nearly 180° above the plane of the body. For this and the paradun, apply a tiny drop of thin flexible or vinyl cement at the wing base to further help hold its shape. Quickly spread the hair tips of the paradun both forward and backward over the shank; from the front, the wing should look thin in cross section; from the side, wide. For spinner, carefully palmer the hackle up through the body dubbing to the eye: probably 7-9 turns. Trim ALL hackle fibers that have TIPS that extend BELOW the plane of the body and about 1/2 to 2/3 of those fibers directly above the body; trim butts of fibers as close as possible.

References:

Arbona, Fred L., Jr. 1980. Mayflies, the angler, and the trout. Winchester Press, Tulsa. 188 pp.

Caucci, Al, and Bob Nastasi. Hatches II. 1986. Lyons and Burford, N.Y. 335 pp.

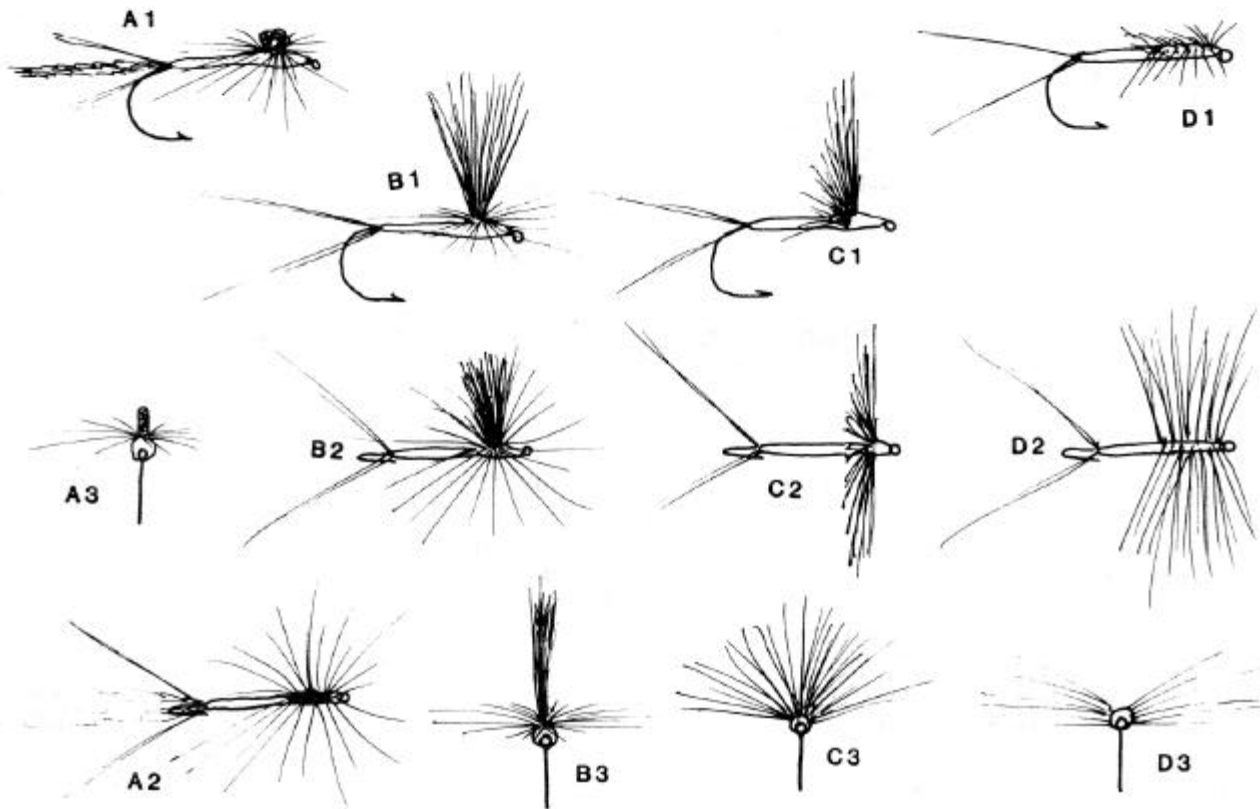
TABLE OF SIMPLIFIED PATTERNS										
P A T T E R N	HOOK SIZES									
	Mustad 94833					Mustad 94831				
	20	18	16	14	12	14	12	10	8	6
DUNS/EMERGERS ¹ (body/wing/tail/hackle)										
Pale cream/white/pale cream/pale cream				o	o	+	+	o	+	+
Cream/gray-cream/lt. ginger/lt ginger		o	+	+	+	+	+	o		
Yellow/cream-yellow/lt. ginger/lt. ginger		o	+	+	+	+	+	o		
Lt. gray/lt. gray/lt. gray/lt. gray	+	+	+	+	+	+	o			
Yel.-olive/lt. gray/lt. gray/med. ginger	o	+	+	+	+	o				
Yel.-olive/lt. gray/lt. gray/brown	o	o	+	o	o					
Yel.-olive/dk. gray/dk. gray/med. ginger	o	+	+	o	o					
Med. olive/dk. gray/med. gray/brown	o	+	+	+	+	o	o	o		
Yel.-gray/med. gray/med. gray/brown ²			o	o	+	+	+	o	o	
Red-brown/dk. gray/dk. gray/brown ²		+	+	o	o	o	+			
SPINNERS (body/wing/tail)										
Cream/pale cream/cream		o	+	+	+	+	+	o		
Med. amber/lt. ginger/lt. ginger	o	o	+	+	+	+	o			
Med. amber/lt. ginger/med. gray		o	+	+	+	+				
Dk. olive/lt. gray/dk. gray		+	+	+	+	o				
Red-brown/lt. gray/med. gray	o	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Number of tail fibers/side	1	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	3 ³	3 ³
Body/shank length in millimeters	5.5	6.0	6.6	8.0	9.2	10.6	12.6	14.6	16.8	19.1

KEY: + (common, used often in many areas) and o (used in more limited situations).

FOOTNOTES: ¹ shade for emerger's body should be darker than dun.

² dark ginger may be substituted for brown.

³ mink or other mammal guard hair (NOT deer or elk!).



ILLUSTRATIONS KEY: First character (letter)--A= PARAMerger, B = PARAdun, C = COMPARAdun, D = spinner; Second character (number)--1= side view, 2= top, 3= front.