

# So Where Are The Fish?

by Richard Rohrbaugh

Living right on the Madison offers the opportunity to observe both fish and anglers on a regular basis. It also affords a wonderful opportunity to note the timing, density and frequency of hatches. In fact close and frequent river-watching is an activity that can benefit the angling skills of even the most experienced among us. One thing you can learn very quickly while river-watching is how many anglers fail to notice the way fish move around the river in response to different types of insect activity. Most anglers are familiar with various types of fishable water. There are "resting" lies, often in deep water, behind rocks or otherwise out of the heavy current. There are also "feeding" lies into which fish move when a hatch is occurring. And in some places you can find what are often called "prime" lies, where fish can feed and rest at the same time. All of that is genuinely useful information, but the reality of fish location is a bit more complicated.

One frequently sees anglers who fish the same type of water no matter what time of day or what time of year. They know from experience that fish occupy that water (everyone knows fish lie behind rocks) and thus they work it over thoroughly every time they hit the river. Yet the truth is that fish move around a river a great deal in the course of a day, occupying a given type of water, even good feeding water, only some of the time. That is because what constitutes a feeding lie changes markedly depending on what is hatching and where you are in a hatching cycle. Fish move around the Madison far more than most anglers realize. For example, caddis flies emerge immediately below riffles; thus it is possible on a July evening to actually watch fish moving into the water just below riffles at about the time caddis nymphs begin to emerge. Because caddis flies hatch so quickly, the head of a pool is usually where the biggest fish will be. Often they are right up in the riffle itself. Aggressive, slashing rises tip you off. But the darker it gets (the time when hydropsycha caddis emergences are heaviest on the Madison) the shallower the water in which the big fish will feed. Shallower water requires less effort for feeders since the water column is shorter. In fact the big fish are often still in that shallow water at first light in the morning and will not move into the heavy and deep water until the sunlight is bright and direct. Yet it is amazing how many anglers walk right into the shallows to fish the deeper water. In fact walking on the fish is probably the most common mistake one can see on the Madison River.

Mayfly emergences can work very differently. During a baetis hatch it is the small fish that are at the head of a pool just below the riffle. The bigger fish are back a bit. That is because the slower-hatching baetis ride the pool for a distance drying their wings. Many don't make it. Thus the bigger fish are often feeding on cripples near the end of a pool rather than chasing nymphs at the head. So anglers who move aggressively into the bottom of a pool during a baetis hatch usually miss the best action. The same is true during pale morning dun hatches: the bigger fish are often back from the riffles or in softer water such as eddies or along the bank. One mayfly hatch, however, is an exception to the above. Epeorus, which have become increasingly important insects on the Madison in the last four or five years, hatch very quickly and do not cripple as often as baetis or pale morning duns. Their hatches produce aggressive, splashy rises that often confuse anglers who think caddis are hatching. But Epeorus hatch a little earlier in the evening than caddis and usually hatch across a broader expanse of a pool. Fish are rarely in the shallows during an Epeorus hatch so a bit of wading does not mess things up the way it does during the caddis hatch that comes later.

During summertime midge hatches the prime feeding water changes again. Since Madison midge hatches often occur near dark, it is again the shallows that matter. But this time it is the slower water where softer rises will begin to appear. With the right light and angle of vision it is again possible to see fish moving into the quiet shallows. They are in water they would never frequent earlier in the evening.

So fish move. The key is thus to know what type of water the insects will be in at each point in their hatch cycle because the fish will be there too - unless that happens to be right where you are wading when things start to get interesting!