

## MAYFLIES

A CONSIDERATION OF ANGLERS' AND ENTOMOLOGISTS' CLAIMS TO A  
POPULAR NAME

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**I**F we draw an imaginary line across England, somewhere about the southern boundary of Yorkshire, we shall find that south of this line the word "Mayfly" has but to be whispered to evoke a thrill in the breast of every right-minded man. By every right-minded man I mean, of course, every fisherman. For generations, the Mayfly in these parts has been associated with the cream of the trout fishing, the so-called Duffer's Week, the time of all times when the trout of our dreams is to be taken for the mere asking; at least so it is said, and so many amongst the unknowing think. It is the time when we may even hope to take a trout as big as the one we have so often lost.

North of our line, the mayfly need not even be spelt with a capital letter. It is merely the Stonefly, an insect so lowly that its larva is actually known as the Creeper. Far from being the producer of thrills, it is even considered by the fly fisherman as something in the nature of a nuisance owing to the voracity with which the trout feed upon it, depriving him during the period of its presence of his legitimate fly fishing and bringing out into the open the fraternity which indulges in creeper or bait fishing—and the more power, say some, to their elbows.

The Mayfly is so called, says the wit, because it appears in June. This, however, is not the fault of the insect, which takes no heed either of summertime nor of the alteration of the calendar in 1732, when we lost eleven days, so that the 25th of May was postponed until the 5th or 6th of June, the date when the Mayfly may be expected to appear on most waters which it frequents.

However, I must not be too discursive on the Mayfly itself or on Mayfly fishing. The purpose of these lines is to inquire into the pro-

prietary rights of the fly fisherman to the exclusive use of the name Mayfly for the purpose of representing the insect which provides him with his hectic week. To avoid confusion, I will call this insect by its scientific names, *Ephemera danica* and *Ephemera vulgata* or just *Ephemera*. There is a third species, *E. lineata*, but it is so rarely seen in this country that it does not enter into this inquiry.

Has the trout fisherman really an exclusive right to the name? We say he has, but it is not granted us by the entomologist, who now uses the word "Mayflies" as a popular name for the entire order of the *Ephemeroptera* notwithstanding that many of the species contained therein appear on the water throughout the year, big hatches of Dark Olive Duns, *Baëtis rhodani*, emerging even during the months of January and February.

Here is the position: The earliest of our books on angling is that of Dame Juliana Berners (or Barnes) who, in 1496, wrote her celebrated *Treatyse on Fysshynge wyth an Angle*. In this historic Treatyse, there is no mention of the Mayfly, but it may be that the Dame lived in a part of the country in which the insect does not occur in numbers to attract very much attention.

Some people hold that *Ephemera* is represented in the Treatyse by the Yellow Fly, but as, in her description, she gives the dressing of this fly as "the body of yelow wull; the wyngs of the redde cocks hakyl and of the drake lyttyd yelow", I am of opinion that this fly could scarcely have been intended to represent our *Ephemera* or even the Little Yellow May Dun. In all probability it was simply a fancy pattern.

In 1590, Leonard Mascall published what is practically a reprint of Dame Juliana's Treatyse. In it he writes: "The yellow Fly (in May) is good, the body made of yellow wooll and winges made of the redde cockes hackell or taile, and of the drake litted or coulered yellow".

Here again, all that we can deduce is that a pattern tied in accordance with these directions is good in May.

We have to wait until 1614 to find a definite mention of our *Ephemera* Mayfly, and then, in *The Pleasures of Princes*, Gervase Markham shows quite clearly that the name Mayfly was established in the fisherman's nomenclature as not only representing an *Ephemera* but a Stonefly as well.

This is what he writes:

“ But I must here take leave to dissent from the opinion of such who assign a certain fly to each month, whereas I am certain scarce any sort of fly doth continue its colour and virtue one month; and generally all flies last a much shorter time, except the Stonefly (which some call the Mayfly) which is bred of a water cricket which creepeth out of the river and gets under the stones by the water side and there turneth to a flie and lieth under the stones; the Mayfly and the Caddis Flie with Ashy-gray wings.”

This quotation is taken from Horace Hutchinson's 1928 reprint of the work in which the old spelling has evidently been revised. In this passage, Gervase Markham distinguishes between the Stone Fly “ which some call the May Fly ” and the *Ephemera* Mayfly which he mentions in the final lines quoted.

In 1651 we find the name Mayfly as unmistakably representing *Ephemera* in Thomas Barker's *The Art of Angling*. Here he writes:

“ In May take the May Flye and imitate that. Some make it with a Shammie body and ribbed with a black hair. Another way it is made with sandy hog's hair ribbed with black silk and winged with Mallard's feather according to the fancy of the Angler, if he hath judgement. For first when it comes out of the shell the fly is somewhat whiter—then afterwards grows browner. So there is judgement in that.”

Farther on in the *Art of Angling* we read:

“ I have heard that there is for every moneth in the year a flye; but that is but talk for there is but one monethly flye in the yeare, that is the Mayflye.”

In 1653 we have Izaak Walton's masterpiece, *The Compleat Angler*, in which there are references too numerous to mention of Mayflies which appear in May. We follow, naturally, on to Charles Cotton in 1676, who writes:

“ . . . but first I am to tell you that we have four several flies which contend for the title of Mayfly, namely,

The Green Drake  
The Stone Fly  
The Black Fly  
and the Little Yellow May Fly

and all these have their champions and advocates to dispute and plead their priority: though I do not understand why the last two named should, the first two having so manifestly the advantage both in their beauty and the wonderful execution they do in their season."

Here is another indication that the application of the name Mayfly to *Ephemera* was none too firmly established amongst fishermen and we find two more names added to the already established pair, *Ephemera* and the Stonefly. Evidently, in Cotton's opinion, these two had equal claims while the Black fly and the Little Yellow May fly he regarded as mere usurpers.

I will give no more quotations from our angling literature. It seems clear that, even though the fisherman may not have been quite certain as to what the Mayfly represented, yet the name formed part of his vocabulary of popular names at least as far back as 1614. No doubt it was in use very much earlier as Markham seems to have found it firmly established at that date.

Let us now consider the entomological literature and the entomologist's claim to the name as representing the entire order of the *Ephemeroptera*.

What is said to be the earliest work on entomology to be printed in England is, compared to our angling literature, comparatively recent, dating back only to 1634. In this year was published *Insectorum sive Minimorum Animalium Theatrum* by Thomas Moufet.

The work is written in Latin but, fortunately, Moufet recorded the English popular names that were extant in his time.

Thus we find mention in English of "Cados Worme", "Dragon Flies", "Water Butterflies" (perhaps Caddis flies), the "Horse Fly", the "Breeze Fly", our old enemy, the "Clegg" and a mysterious insect "Adders Boultes" whatever this may be. But there is no mention of the Mayfly so that we must assume that this popular name was unknown to science in 1634.

Almost it would appear that the whole order was unknown in

England at this date as the only trace of these flies appears under the group of flies termed by Moufet "bipiles" all of which he characterises as having two tails. There is a rather poor figure, which might perhaps represent an Ephemeron, in the margin opposite this name.

Next, in 1675, there is a treatise written by a Dutch entomologist, Jo. Swammerdam, entitled *Ephemera Vita*; or, *The Natural History and Anatomy of the Ephemeron*.

This is perhaps the first intelligible account of an Ephemeron in entomological literature and it was translated into the English language by a Dr. Edward Tyson, M.D., in 1681. Dr. Tyson writes in a preface: "I doubt not but upon a strict inquiry we may meet with Ephemerons here in England. . . . Our Mayfly may well deserve to be examined."

Swammerdam's Ephemeron has been identified as an insect occurring in many parts of the Continent in large rivers, namely *Palingenia longicauda*. It does not occur in the British Isles. Nevertheless it resembles our *Ephemera* sufficiently closely as to leave no reasonable doubt that both insects belong to the same Order. If, therefore, Dr. Tyson considered it necessary that our Mayfly should require an examination before the association could be unquestionably established, then it must be fairly certain that the *Ephemeroptera* as such were unknown to entomologists in England at that date.

Therefore at that date, the name Mayfly must have been the exclusive property of the angler.

I think that Dr. Tyson was a fisherman as well as an entomologist. I like the words "Our Mayfly". They have a friendly sound and suggest a common property which could only have been a common property of the great brotherhood of anglers. No man who was merely an entomologist could write "Our Mayfly". If Dr. Tyson had been an entomologist rather than a fisherman, then surely he would have used the cold, impersonal phrase, "*The Mayfly*". I think we may safely claim him as a fisherman with leanings towards Entomology.

We must now pass on to the year 1744 for our next reference. In this year there lived a very learned gentleman, a Mr. Peter Collinson. So learned was he that he became a Fellow of the Royal Society. He was evidently an entomologist and he was in the habit of attending the Royal

Society's meetings and enlivening the gatherings with more or less accurate entomological information.

Thus in the year mentioned, he received from a correspondent in Pennsylvania, a Mr. Bartram, an account of an insect which he terms "The Mayfly, a species of Libella", and he proceeds to read to his Society a perfectly intelligible account of the emergence of a perfectly good Dragon Fly from its nymphal skin.

Therefore, at this date, the Mayfly was considered by entomologists to be a Dragon Fly.

A few years later, in 1750, we find him again reading a paper before his Society, this time entitled "A further account of the Libella or Mayflies of England". There follows this time, a perfectly intelligible account of a perfectly good Ephemeron in which we read:

"The second day after their leaving their aquatic abode, they cast another skin after which their tails are longer and the wings drier and more transparent".

So this time the Libella or Mayfly is actually an Ephemeron.

He reads yet another paper before the Society in 1750, "Observations on a sort of Libella or Ephemeron". This paper is the best of the lot and we read:

"Walking by the riverside at Winchester (could he have been an ancestor of Seaforth and Soforth?) I was told now was the time of the year that the Mayfly, a species of Libella, came up out of the water and was seen for a few days and then disappeared".

He goes on to say that on May 26th, 1744, he first learnt of the name Mayfly "on account of its annual appearance in that month". An editorial footnote states that the insect was *Ephemera vulgata*. It was more probably *Ephemera danica*.

It would appear from these papers that there was some uncertainty amongst entomologists as to the position of the Ephemeroptera in 1750.

Passing on to 1769, we find a British entomological work written by John Birkenhout under the title *Outlines of the Natural History of Gt.*

*Britain and Ireland*. In this there is a reference to an Ephemeron with quite a passable figure. There is no suggestion, however, that the insect was known as a Mayfly.

In 1773, a curious work appeared by J. Hill. He gave it for a title *A Decade of Curious Insects*. Amongst these are two which he called Ephemerons, one of which is a Stone Fly and the other a Caddis Fly, but neither is called a Mayfly.

In 1782 there is a quaint old book, *An Exposition of English Insects*, by Moses Harris. In this is quite a good figure of an Ephemeron, a *Cænis*, and *Cænis harrisella* was named after this author.

But a few years later, in 1795, is published *Natural History of British Insects*, by E. Donovan, and here at last we have a presentable figure and description of an *Ephemera*.

The insect selected by Donovan and excellently figured in colour is described as *Ephemera vulgata*. The figure shows it to be actually *E. danica*, but this is immaterial. Donovan states: "We have several species of this genus in England. The *Ephemera vulgata* is the largest of them."

But still no suggestion that the flies were known as Mayflies.

And so at last we come to the first of the great standard works on Entomology, a work as valuable to-day as in 1816 when it was first published. I refer to Kirby and Spence's *An Introduction to Entomology*. It has passed through innumerable editions and stands in a class by itself in the information which it contains and the style in which it is set out.

Yet here, in the standard work of its time, we find nothing but confusion when the entomologist attempts to concern himself with our popular trout-fly names.

Here is what is written about the Ephemeroptera, etc.:

"Our rivers abound with fish of various kinds. . . . These chiefly prey upon various kinds of *Phryganeæ*, in their larval state called case- or caddis-worms; and in the imago Mayflies (though this last denomination properly belongs to the *Sialis lutaria* which generally appears in this month), and *Ephemera*."

Now, whatever the confusion as to what our fisherman's Mayfly really was, this passage must clearly prove that in the opinion of the

leading British entomologist of the time, namely 1816, the Mayfly was *not* the popular name for an Ephemeron, for Kirby very definitely separates our Mayfly from the Ephemeroptera altogether.

He was, of course, wrong in this and equally wrong in associating the Mayfly with either the Caddis flies or *Sialis lutaria*, which every trout fisherman by now knows, or should know, is the Alder.

In 1834, that great British entomologist, John Curtis, published in the London and Edinburgh Philosophical Magazine, his *Description of some Nondescript British Species of Mayflies of Anglers*. The word "nondescript" is, of course, to be translated literally, and the species with which Curtis here deals were all nondescript or undescribed and new to science.

Some of the insects are Ephemeroptera and some Trichoptera or Caddis flies. Curtis in this work made the first substantial contribution to our knowledge of the British Ephemeroptera and Trichoptera. But, be it noted, the name "Mayflies" is not restricted to the Ephemeroptera, and while it appears to have been borrowed from the angler, as stated in the title, its application had evidently not been understood in the angler's sense.

From Curtis, we pass on to Eaton's *Monograph on the Ephemeridæ* which appeared in the Transactions of the Entomological Society of London in 1870. Nowhere in this monograph is the popular name "Mayfly" mentioned as representing the whole order. On the other hand, Eaton states against his description of *Ephemera danica*, "This is the Mayfly of anglers".

But later, in 1883, Eaton published his monumental work on the order, *A Revisional Monograph of Recent Ephemeridæ or Mayflies*, and here the name Mayfly has been definitely adopted as a popular name for the whole order.

Cassell's *Natural History*, published in 1884, almost on the heels of Eaton's great work, heads the chapter with which we are concerned, "The Ephemeridæ or Dayflies" and the accepted popular name in Germany follows the same idea in representing these insects as "*Eintagsfliegen*".

To sum up, we find a certain amount of confusion amongst anglers as to whether the Mayfly is really *Ephemera* or the Stonefly, this confusion



dating from before the time of Gervase Markham, 1614, but it is clear that the name was actually in use amongst anglers before this date.

As to the entomologist, there seems to be definite evidence that as late as 1816 (Kirby and Spence), this popular name was not accepted by him as referring to the Ephemeroptera at all.

The first record that I have been able to trace of the name Mayfly having been applied by the entomologist to the whole order of the Ephemeroptera is, in fact, in Eaton's *Monograph* of 1883.

We anglers would therefore seem to have a legitimate grievance. The name of our crowning glory has been basely filched from us. It remains for us to ask the entomologist as politely as need be to leave us our Mayfly all undisturbed. The name is one of our most cherished possessions even though we may not be all agreed as to what it really represents.

If he requires a popular name, then let him find one for himself and let it be more suitable for insects that appear during every period of the year than a name which is associated with one particular month and which, moreover, in his own particular jargon is "preoccupied".