

Fishing wet dry  
by Jim Brady

I luckily traveled to Helton Creek on November 17<sup>th</sup>, before the frigid weather set in. Jacques Gagnon and Locke Clifford accompanied me on the foggiest journey up 221 ever. We drove through a cloud most of the way. The low ceiling persisted most of the trip until, you guessed it, we arrived at the creek. Fortunately, the blue sky didn't last and clouds and fog returned. I love such conditions because it spreads the fish out into the open in a feeding mode instead of hiding under a rock to get away from the sunlight. The low water presented a challenge I met in an unusual way.

Nearly all of the time I fish Helton with nymphs, a #16 Red Copper John being the best fly. I started off this trip with one on the end of the tippet and a #14 Black Gnat on the dropper. My first cast upstream began drifting downstream and suddenly halted. I reflexively set the hook into a sullen rock. A few more pulls broke off the nymph. The stream was simply too low to fish a weighted fly. What to replace the nymph with?

My previous trip to Helton resulted in about twenty fish caught, twelve on the Copper John and the balance on a #12 Coachman wet fly on the dropper. I noticed that in some water, particularly the run against the road downstream of the campground, the fish seemed to prefer the wet fly over the nymph. I decided to return the favor and tied on a Coachman. On the first drift, the leader moved left just as a fish turned, flashing its flank. I tightened to two fish, both brookies. I worked upstream carefully, taking five more including another double. Things were looking up.

I paused for a moment to try to understand just what had happened. I cast the tandem rig upstream just as if I were fishing a dry fly. No added weight, lead wire or beads, only the weight of the hooks to sink the flies. Some of the takes came as obvious swirls near the surface. Others were just mere halts in the downstream drift of the line point. It seemed that a cast into undisturbed water was met with a take.

I went downstream looking for Locke and my lunch, which was in his car. He left me with a group of disinterested fish. I finally took two. One was a nice brookie that ate the Gnat off the surface just like a dry fly.

We changed locales and fished across from the farmhouse upstream of the confluence with Little Helton Creek. Rock faces descend almost vertically into the stream here with small pools or runs at their base. You could easily drive by not thinking the water worth trying. I walked downstream below the rock faces and clambered into the first pool while getting acquainted with the briars. It seemed I couldn't keep my flies out of them. I turned my body to direct the backcast straight downstream and that helped a bit. I finally took a fish on the Coachman after frightening one off its feeding station. Then a drift on my side of the current tongue stopped. I saw a fish where the fly should have been and struck. A nice brookie tore off to the base of the rock wall. When I got him in, the Coachman was inserted into the middle of the upper lip, just where I like to find a nymph lodged.

I moved upstream into two more pools and seemingly hooked fish wherever I placed the flies. Sometimes they ate the Gnat (the brookies seemed to have a preference for it) but most went after the Coachman. One fish, hiding in brushy snag, brought a smile to my face after a bow and arrow cast resulted in a quick take. I missed him but getting a take less than ten feet away was satisfying. Then I turned ninety degrees to my right and a nice brown did not escape after eating the Coachman. I never saw him until he moved to eat the fly and I restrained his efforts to seek refuge in the deadfall. I broke out of the brush into a large pool that was literally full of fish. I caught two or three but the slow, clear water was not kind to my method, which I realized depended on the fish making a quick decision on the fly. This worked well in fast water but now I faced other conditions. The far side of the current flowed into a cleft in the base of the rock and bounced out creating conflicting currents where the deflection met the main flow. Several casts ahead of the junction were ignored. Suddenly a large swirl found me attached to a big fish. A large brown had stuck the Coachman in the corner of its jaw. The fish took line and I hurriedly reeled in to play the fish off the reel, resulting in some pleasing screeching of the drag. I landed the fish and estimated his length at sixteen or seventeen inches but nearly two ponds, a pig of a fish.

Locke and I drove downstream to catch up with Jacques, who reacted as if we didn't see him while driving by. Locke stopped between the low-water bridges at the park-like area liberally marked "Private Property, No Trespassing" right below the "Delayed Harvest" emblems. I've never caught a fish there but I hope everyone else does.

Anyway, it was beginning to rain so I went downstream to try some new water behind one of the Zydeco Farm plots. I always looked at this water while crossing the lower bridge but never saw anyone there. As usual, I had trouble picking out a crossing point because all the water looked good and I didn't want to disturb any of it. I finally crossed and walked downstream until the stream took a left hand bend into the woods.

I turned upstream and started to fish. A cast straight upstream was met with a rising, open mouth inhaling the Coachman and I brought another nice brookie to hand. I took three more fish. They taught me where the best holding water in the pool was. The rain was more intense now and my mental note taking came to an end. I trudged back to the bridge and mockingly stuck out my thumb as if I were hitchhiking. Locke pulled up and rescued me from the rain.

As I inferred above, this trip was an extension of an earlier visit during which I fished a wet fly on the dropper. The shallow water forced me to rethink my approach and it paid off. I made casts from eight to twenty feet and most times saw the take or some evidence of it like a twitching leader, flashing side of a fish or the wink of an open trout's mouth as he inhaled the fly. I realized after a bit it was just like fishing a dry fly except that the flies didn't float. I covered the water systematically with short, accurate casts. Of course, the low, grey skies and rain helped the fish to spread out and feed.

I also realized I was likely the only person fishing Helton this way. Heck, its difficult to purchase the flies I used; not many fly shops even sell wet flies. To confound matters, I used a 4X tippet contrary to the advice of our November Nat Greene speaker. I think the tippet must have the mechanical strength to turn over the flies and the lack of bright light didn't make the leader stand out against the sky.

Fishing a pair of wet flies upstream just like you would fish a dry fly is very effective. Your efforts can be greatly aided by wearing amber tinted polarized lenses. They will help you spot fish and follow your fly. You will find, as I did, that a white-winged Coachman is not hard to follow. Need some? Give me a call. In the meantime, try fishing a wet fly like a dry. Its fun, gets results and is something the fish aren't used to.