

BUGGING BREAM

A bug hatch can produce frenzied action

BY JOHN N. FELSHER

One hot afternoon, we struggled to find fish — until we noticed a sight any fly fisherman longs to see. Millions of mayflies covered bushes growing along a stretch of shoreline about 10 yards long. Beneath the branches, water boiled with fish annihilating anything that touched the water.

My fishing partner and I immediately whipped out our fly rods and dropped cork poppers into the ruckus. Unfortunately, a roaring wind made stopping to thoroughly fish the honey hole impossible without an anchor or trolling motor, neither of which we had. In addition, the ancient 12-foot aluminum boat leaked so badly that we had to bail it with a gallon milk jug about every 30 minutes just to stay afloat.

Fortunately, the wind blew parallel to the bank where we wanted to fish. We formulated a plan. I cranked up the also ancient 6-horsepower outboard and headed upwind while my buddy bailed the boat. We stopped far enough upwind so that we could get our gear ready for a quick drift — and I mean a QUICK drift!

The brutal wind hurtled us past the bushes nearly as fast as the old motor could push us. As we shot past the strike zone, we each quickly made a cast or two, hoping we didn't snag on anything. If the bug hit the honey hole, a big bluegill or other fish instantly blasted it. If the bug missed the sweet spot, nothing happened. After the wind pushed us beyond casting range, we bailed the boat again and ran upwind for another drift. We kept repeating that process until we grew tired of catching panfish — and bailing.

Also called willow flies, mayflies spend most of their lives underwater as nymphs before emerging as winged adults. After "hatching," mayflies somewhat resembling giant mosquitoes cling to branches to dry their new wings before mating and dying. Willow flies belong to the insect order Ephemeroptera, which means "lasting only a day."

From spring through early fall, anglers fishing the Mobile-Tensaw Delta,



Photo by John N. Felsher

Amy Gable shows off a bluegill she caught on a beetle spinner while fishing a river backwater. When anglers discover fish in a feeding frenzy because of a fly hatch, they might hit just about anything presented to them.

the Alabama River, Tombigbee River, Millers Ferry Reservoir and elsewhere periodically spot fly hatches. During a hatch, millions of swarming flies might completely cover some low bushes with writhing life. Inevitably, some insects fall into the water, kicking off a fish feeding frenzy.

Lucky anglers who stumble upon a bug hatch could enjoy incredible action. When flies hit the water, everything comes quickly to grab its share of the bounty. Bluegills and other bream feed upon the insects floating on the surface. Bass and catfish also eat the bugs, but larger bass would more likely grab an overstuffed bluegill distracted by the swarming insects.

Near a good hatch, anglers can catch fish after fish with anything they throw into the water. How-

ever, for the most fun, use a fly rod. During a feeding frenzy, lure color doesn't matter as much as placement. If the lure lands in the right spot, something will probably nail it. If the lure lands outside the small strike zone, nothing will bite. If the frenzy dies down, shake the bushes to make more flies fall into the water and reignite the activity.

Almost any bream bait might work, but I prefer floating cork poppers. Some foam or plastic temptations resembling crickets, grasshoppers or other creatures also work. Toss a popper as close to the fly-laden bushes as possible without snagging. If nothing strikes immediately, let the popper sit a moment and then give it a little twitch or pop. Pause several seconds and then twitch it again. Keep repeating.

During a bug hatch, bluegills turn very aggressive and might smash anything floating on the surface before their cousins can grab it. This produces intensely exciting strikes. Pound for pound, or more appropriately ounce for ounce, nothing in the water can outfight an enraged bull bluegill.

One never knows exactly when or where a hatch might erupt. Most frequently, bug hatches occur in backwater areas with little current and tall reeds, bushes or small trees with branches extending low over the water.

Anglers might find a fly hatch on almost any freshwater lake or stream in Alabama. No matter how or where you catch them, a panful of golden fried bluegills makes a delicious meal for any fish lover.