

Fish Food

Brachycentrus Caddisflies/By Tim Irish



PHOTO BY ARLEN THOMASON

I remember exactly where I was standing the first time I encountered a Mother's Day Caddis hatch. It was more than 30 years ago, when I was still new to fly fishing, and it was my first encounter with a truly epic hatch.

Like an encroaching bank of fog, unfathomable numbers of light-brown caddisflies swarmed over the river, slowly moving upstream. Soon I couldn't see the other side of the river through the clouds of flying insects. I captured one for a closer look. Its abdomen was greenish, its wings tan: it seemed well matched by a size 14 Elk Hair Caddis, and the ubiquitous pattern was well represented in my fly box. I had both olive and tan versions, so I chose the former. My excitement was soon quashed, though, as I noticed that no trout were feeding on the surface. I recall cursing that hatch for several years thereafter. It just didn't seem fair to have so many bugs but no rising trout.

I decided to learn more about *Brachycentrus* caddisflies, and soon I was guiding other anglers during the Mother's Day Caddis hatch, one of those memorable events during which your fly must compete with a dozen or more naturals on every square foot of moving water. Only by matching your flies and presentations to the behaviors of these caddisflies can you cash in on the fantastic fishing.



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The *Brachycentrus* genus (known as Grannoms), is wide-ranging and includes caddisfly species in locations as diverse as Northern California, Alaska, Nova Scotia, the Appalachians, Arkansas, and New Mexico. *Brachycentrus* hatches seem to miss some or all of the Deep South, but they take place on trout streams elsewhere across the continent. The Mother's Day Caddis species, *B. occidentalis*, owes its Latin name to being a Western insect. More familiar, and extending from the West into the Midwest, is *B. americanus* (the American Grannom). Other Grannoms include the Apple Caddis (*B. appalachia*) in the East, the Little Black Grannom (*B. lateralis*) in the Midwest, and *B. numerosus* across the Midwest and East.

Mother's Day Caddis don't necessarily wait for their namesake holiday and may appear in late April or early May. The widespread American Grannom hatches on summer mornings or evenings. Many of the other *Brachycentrus* caddisflies hatch in late spring and early summer. The timing and duration of hatches vary.

Emerging *Brachycentrus* caddisfly pupae often drift at the surface long enough to create good dry-fly fishing. Their egg-laying behavior, meanwhile, creates both surface and subsurface fishing opportunities, well summarized by Ernie Schwiebert in the second volume of *Nymphs* (2007):

Adult females offer another cornucopia of plenty to the hungry trout, bulging with ripe ova before they slip furtively back under the water to deposit their eggs. Once ovipositing is finished, hundreds and hundreds of spent females surrender to the benthic drift, without the riches of their ripening eggs but nonetheless still edible. These spent females are virtually weightless, so many are buoyed back toward the surface film where they can literally become a scum of dead and dying *Brachycentrus* sedges until they carpet the entire surface of the stream.

One of the most interesting characteristics of the Grannoms is their ability to anchor a strand of silk to a rock and then rappel downstream, hanging in the water to feed on drifting algae and other food. They continue releasing silk until they find a purchase in the streambed and then graze on passing prey as they follow their tether back home.

One thing to bear in mind—and something I learned after that first massive Mother's Day Caddis hatch I witnessed—is that when older trout have the opportunity to eat all they desire without venturing to the surface, they tend to do just that, preferring to take up stations where they can devour emergers, diving egg layers, or drowned insects well beneath the surface.

If you find trout feeding on the surface, try a tandem rig with an Elk Hair Caddis or similar adult pat-

tern about 12 inches ahead of an emerger pattern. When you see lots of bugs but little surface activity, try a beadhead emerger dangling 4 to 20 inches below a dry pattern, or fish the emerger deeper by adding weight and replacing the dry fly with a strike indicator. If that doesn't work, try dead-drifting a soft hackle to imitate a drowned or spent female or try swinging a soft hackle to mimic diving females and emerging pupae.

If the trout are completely sated, be patient: they are likely to begin feeding again after a while. Or come back a few days later, when the hatch may be less prolific and the trout more eager to feed. The easiest fishing often occurs at the beginning and tail end of a hatch.

The summertime evening hatches of Grannoms often find big fish emboldened by failing light. They will slip downstream and, just about dark, begin feeding at the surface. This is prime time for a dry/emergent tandem. Make a good presentation and you may attract very large trout that are more willing to rise than at any other time.

In fact, throughout their ranges, *Brachycentrus* caddisflies often present unheralded opportunities to test tip-pets against large trout. Learn to love this hatch. Missing it is a real shame.



Stacked Wing Caddis
Tim Irish



Overey's Headlight Caddis
Montana Fly Company



Kyle's HFH Caddis
Montana Fly Company



Silvey's Primetime Caddis
Idylwilde



Hungarian Caddis Pupa
Idylwilde

Editor's Note: Sadly, Tim Irish passed away unexpectedly in March, but we are thrilled to have the rare opportunity to publish this installment of "Fish Food," which was penned by Tim and which demonstrates the detailed knowledge of and enthusiasm he had for trout foods and their imitations.



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