

# A day with spring olives

*Rob Smith celebrates the start of the trout season, and puts some new flies to the test*

FLY PHOTOGRAPHY: ROB DENSON



Warm spring sunshine can bring on a hatch of spring olives that transforms a hitherto lifeless pool.

BILL HUNTER

**F**OR MANY TROUT fishermen, the emergence of the large dark olive - traditionally known as the "spring olive" - signals the arrival of a new season. Though sparse hatches of duns do emerge throughout the winter, it is the significant ones in March and April that bring up the trout.

Indeed, so important is the large dark olive to my early fishing that I start to dress my imitations over Christmas, coincidentally the same time as the nymphs start to put on a growth spurt ready for their peak emergence. During January and February, as my stockpile of patterns grows, so does the gradual emergence of naturals from the Dales rivers increase. And by March 15 I'm beside my favourite river, hoping for at least a few shafts of afternoon sun to bring on the first hatch of the season.

I reach the river just before lunch, and, sipping a cup of tea, survey my likely starting point from the warmth of the car. Thankfully the raw north-easterly that usually accompanies opening day has disappeared. The river looks cold and drab; the morning frost that covered the surrounding pastures has now given way to a dreary dampness, the silhouettes of leafless trees adding to the starkness of the scene. And yet this is not a scene of decay but of renewed hope, for I know there is a rich bounty contained within, and that the first hatches of spring olives will reveal it to me.

Like many other Yorkshire anglers I would usually



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put up the obligatory three-fly cast of Spiders, but to fish them today would be pointless, as the trout have yet to look up towards the surface of the river. For now, my cast of Spiders will be kept firmly wrapped around an old beer mat and tucked into a pocket. It is a team of two nymphs that I shall begin with. I have for the past few seasons been playing with their design, trying to keep a slim body profile while also adding the required weight. At first I played with, and tweaked, my fellow Yorkshireman Oliver Edwards's Baetis nymph pattern but still didn't acquire the right balance of profile and weight. Finally I decided to abandon Ollie's foundation and design my own.

For the runs and streamy pocket-water I use a simple nymph pattern dressed with soft goose herl. It is unweighted, relying only on the heavy hook to sink it. My second nymph is a more robust creation formed with an underbody of tungsten thread, thus allowing me to maintain a slim body profile while obtaining the necessary weight. I like this weighted pattern as a dropper, allowing the unweighted nymph a kind of checked drift, which gives me greater control over the flies.

My first few casts are often rusty, but nevertheless they are placed a short distance upstream of my position as I methodically fish my way up through the first run. Each cast is studiously followed for any sign of a gentle take. The welded loop and last six inches of my fly-line have been indelibly marked with the brightest red marker I could find, to give any indication of a take. And yet cast after cast is nothing more than a barren drift. Finally, after an hour's toil, ▶



## Baetis Nymph 1

**Hook** Size 14-18 **Thread** Spiderweb coloured with a suitable marker pen **Body** Soft olive goose herl **Rib** Fine gold wire **Tail** Three Coq de Leon fibres **Wing-case** Olive flexi-body darkened on the underside with a black marker pen **Thorax** Dark olive-brown seal's fur with fibres picked out to resemble legs

## Baetis Nymph 2

**Hook** Size 14-18 **Thread** Spiderweb coloured with a marker pen **Underbody** Tungsten thread (from Flytying Boutique, tel: 01535 630 113) sometimes doubled and trebled under the thorax **Body** Hends body quill **Tail** Olive micro fibbets **Wing-case** Olive flexi-body darkened on the underside with a black marker pen **Thorax** Dark olive-brown seal's fur with fibres picked out to resemble legs

the point of my fly-line jabs underwater. As I raise my rod-tip, I tighten into the first trout of the season.

Within half an hour I have progressed steadily up the first run. One further trout has been netted among a series of plucks and pulls that signal my rustiness in detecting the subtle takes. The warming sun signifies the approach of the first substantial spring olive hatch of the season. Slowly but surely trout begin to reveal their presence just below the fast, broken water. Perfect Spider water! I always roll my eyes somewhat when the merits of the upstream Spider are discussed. Though some anglers slavishly adopt this method of fishing Spiders, my experience is that upstream Spider fishing is only really an advantage when the trout are looking up and actively feeding on emergers and adult duns. Now as a steady emergence of spring olives tumbles down the broken water of the pool's tail I snip off the two nymphs and change to my Spider cast. I leave my small unweighted Baetis nymph on the point and put two old stalwarts - Waterhen Bloa and Greenwell's Glory - on the droppers. My Greenwell's are always tied with upright wings of starling slips, as in fast, broken water, where trout have to make up their minds quickly, the upright wings of the Greenwell add the necessary impetus. I favour the Greenwell on the top dropper, but in reality its position is interchangeable with that of the Waterhen Bloa.

It always amazes me how quickly an early-season trickle of large dark olives can turn a torpid section of



**ABOVE**  
A large dark olive dun.

DR. C.J. BENNETT

river into a frenzy of feeding activity. With the warmth of the spring sunshine on my back, I fan a series of short casts to actively feeding trout. It becomes almost hypnotic, as both the feeding trout and I become fixated on the uniformly drifting Spiders. My 10 ft rod is held high as every short cast is almost led through each drift. The 12 ft leader ensures that trout aren't spooked by a drifting fly-line - indeed there is less than 4 ft of fly-line through the top ring. Today it is the Greenwell that is getting all the plaudits, as trout after trout seem transfixed by its allure. Five trout are brought to the net in quick succession, all to the Greenwell. The nymph that played its part earlier in the day has gone untouched and the Waterhen Bloa is hooking only the odd trout.

As I wade out of the tail, I half wonder whether I should double back on myself and fish through this section again. However, my shoulder aches from the constant high angle of the rod and my continuously outstretched arm.

When fishing Spiders the rod should always be held high so as to keep in touch with the flies, almost to the point where you are leading them through the drag-free drift. And my often-aching right arm and shoulder show the zeal with which I follow this maxim.

I glance at the pool ahead, hoping to see a fish rise. I know that the spring olive hatches are always centred on the fast necks of pools, pocket water and riffles. But experience has taught me that a few stragglers occasionally float down the middle of a pool.

### Waterhen Bloa

**Hook** Size 14 **Body** Yellow silk very sparsely dubbed with mole fur **Hackle** Waterhen under-covert

### Greenwell's Glory

**Hook** Size 14 **Body** Yellow silk waxed to a suitable shade of olive and ribbed with fine gold wire **Wings** Starling wing quill either rolled and split or tied in as two slips **Hackle** Furnace hen



### Olive Jangler

**Hook** Size 14 **Body** Olive silk ribbed with fine gold wire **Tail** Olive micro fibbets **Main hackle** Dark dun cock **Front hackle** Grey neck feather from a partridge, tied sparse



### Howe's Special

**Hook** Size 14 **Body** Yellow silk waxed to an olive shade **Tail** Ginger cock hackle fibres **Thorax** A turn or two of hare's dubbing directly behind the hackle **Main hackle** Ginger cock **Front hackle** A feather from a woodcock's underwing, tied sparse

I can see the odd silhouette of a handsome dun floating on its calm surface. A single Waterhen Bloa fished up a pool is often a very rewarding exercise, as it picks up trout sipping on trapped emergers and drowned duns. Often during the warm evenings of summer when my fishing pals are struggling with the perceived wisdom of the dry-fly, I fish a single Waterhen Bloa to rising trout, often with remarkable success.

But the opening day of a season is for me a chance to experiment with the wild fancies I tied over the winter. An old friend who fishes the upper Clyde sent me a few Olive Janglers; he had been raving about them for years and thought I would like to give them a try. This pattern is, of course, not new: it resembles the Howe's Special, an old pattern used by anglers on the River Eden in the 1920s. First tied by the famous Eden fly-dresser Tommy Howe, it was successfully used on the River Wharfe by the late Norman Roose. Sadly, a rather sporadic winter grayling season had put paid to all the Janglers my friend had sent me, so I dressed a couple of new ones alongside a few Howe's Specials to try out on opening day.

As I watched the pool, a trout rose right in the tail. I knew any cast to him would have to be bang on the nose, and even then the intervening currents would add invisible drag to destroy any reasonable chance I had. Another rising trout in a more favourable position gave me just the "sighter" I needed. After

replacing my three-fly cast with a 12 ft leader tapered to 8x, I put on the Olive Jangler and prepared to cast it up and across to the rising trout. My first cast landed a couple of feet short, but as it drifted down below its intended target an unseen trout took it firmly. So decisive was the take that there was no need to raise the rod. After a couple of tense minutes, I netted my first trout of the season on a dry-fly.

What happened during the next three quarters of an hour was nothing short of astonishing. It seemed as though every cast was met by the rise of a trout - and not gentle, sipping rises, but proper, solid takes. The hectic sport continued until a long period of cloud

cover followed by a marked drop in the temperature put down the fish. I replaced the Olive Jangler with old

Tommy Howe's Special, but the sun was now behind the clouds and the early-season north-easterly was beginning to pick up.

With the prospect of a pint and a meal in the local pub, I made my way back to the car. As I pulled off my waders I thought about the experiences of the day and the range of patterns and techniques I had used. For many anglers in the North, the start of a new season, coupled with the arrival of the first hatches of large dark olives, is the signal to reach for a cast of three Spiders. Yet our sport is often a matter of adaptability, and never more so than at the start of the season. Success comes from anticipating a hatch of fly and being prepared to change from nymph to emerger and then to dun. **T&S**

***"What happened in the next quarter of an hour was astonishing"***