



The Winter Trifecta

Story and Photos
by
Matt Green

When ice begins to freeze in the guides of fly rods, most anglers head to the house, start up a pot of hot coffee, warm their feet by the fire, and begin to tie flies for the spring. To serious anglers, winter is a chance to tie flies for that next great fishing trip to paradise—wherever that may be. However, a few anglers, although they may be a rare breed, secretly grin in confidence knowing that the ice is only something that they must walk across or step over to find trout willing to take the fly. In Virginia's trout streams, stocked winter trout and wild and native fish eagerly await the emergence of winter aquatic insects that most anglers fail to recognize. Certainly this could be a matter of the angler just not being there, but more often the information is simply absent in much of the angling literature.

There are many winter aquatic insects that fly fishermen should consider important, but there are few that are truly significant in terms of their abundance. Three winter insects meet this abundance requirement and include the tiny winter black stoneflies (Capniidae), the winter caddisflies (*Dolophilodes distinctus*) and the true midges

(Capniidae), the winter caddisflies (*Dolophilodes distinctus*) and the true midges (Chironomidae). Fly fishing during these significant emergences (i.e. fishing the wintertrifecta) should provide you with successful angling during the winter months and give you some freedom on the stream that is rarely experienced during the spring heyday.

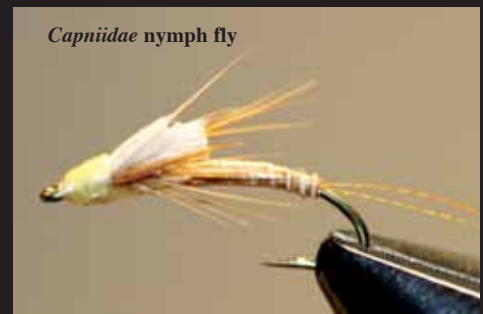
Capniidae (Tiny Winter Black Stoneflies)

The capniidae are a family of stoneflies that are perhaps the most underrated of all aquatic insects in regards to imitating them with the fly. Early developmental capniid stoneflies live in an area of the stream where an active exchange of groundwater and upstream river water occurs underneath rocks and sandy substrata. Early capniids feed on detritus and dead organic material and undergo an accelerated development as water temperatures begin to cool in late September and early October. Prior to emerging, capniids migrate and congregate in leaf packs close to the stream's edge.

In my experience, the first capniids to emerge usually grace streamside vegetation and boulders as early as the first weekend in November and can last well into January. As capniids emerge from their exoskeleton near midday, they crawl onto rocks or woody debris on dry land to seek refuge before trying to find a mate. It is important then to fish late instar nymphal imitations of capniidae along the sides of rocks and exposed substrata while raising the rod tip in the air and dragging the fly along the edges of streamside boulders. Eagerly feeding trout will wait in these



Capniidae nymph



Capniidae nymph fly

locations for capniid stoneflies that are ready to emerge.

Capniids are noted for their ability to survive very low air temperatures as adults and therefore can be found walking on snow or ice next to streams. Described by some Southern anglers as “ice crawlers,” capniid adults are brown or black in coloration and are generally smaller than nymphs measuring 0.2-0.4 inches. Females often have wings that cover the entire abdomen as compared to males whose wings are shorter. After finding a mate, female capniids return to the water to lay their eggs. I have noticed that this event usually occurs after 4 p.m. Capniids have a very brief life span as an adult. Although I have been able to keep adults alive for up to nine days in captivity, I have seen female adults returning to the water in as little as 36 hours. This female egg-laying event should be the only time in which dry flies are used to fish this emergence. Emergers may work well for emerging nymphs, but true dry flies should be used for egg-laying female capniids.

***Dolophilodes distinctus* (Finger-net Caddisflies)**

Dolophilodes distinctus, or the winter caddis, is perhaps the most biologically complex winter insect. It has a summer and



Dolophilodes distinctus male

a strong winter emergence. The adult males have tan wings with minute black spots and are about 0.5 inches long. The adult females lack wings. Adult males are often found gliding across the surface of rivers and streams after ascending to the surface as pupae and emerging



Dolophilodes distinctus male fly

into adults. On the other hand, pupal females simply migrate to rocks or exposed substrate and emerge on dry land while barely attracting the attention of trout. Therefore adult male imitations will induce many more top-water strikes. In most Virginia trout streams, the *Dolophilodes distinctus* emergence begins in mid-December and can last until the last weekend in February. Around midday, I usually begin to see the males gliding across the water’s surface. Fishing a pupa pattern or winter caddis wetfly pattern and twitching the rod tip while raising the fly into the surface film should induce a strike.

Chironomidae (True Midges)

Chironomids (or midges) are available to trout year round, but are often more abundant during the winter than in warmer months. Midges take advantage of the lack of competition for habitat and food that is forfeited by other aquatic insects whose development is slowed or non-existent during winter. Early developmental larvae can range anywhere from 0.1 to 0.25 inches in length and are usually cream colored. Midge larvae do not take on darker colors like red (origin of the nickname “bloodworms”) or green until much later in their larval development or after reaching the pupa stage. Midge larvae are also fairly translucent and thus should be tied and fished in consideration with the color of their habitat. Trout will feed on midge larvae that get sucked into quicker, mid-depth currents in periods of high flow in addition to finding them on benthic substrates in large abundances.

Once developing into a pupa, the midge will spend just a few extra days in the stream’s sediment before working its way to the surface to emerge into an adult. Most midge pupa patterns that float and have developed wing pads are effective imitations. However, midge soft hackles that resemble adults in light yellow, black, or olive successfully imitate both emerging pupa and adults if fished correctly. In order to capture



Chironomidae larva

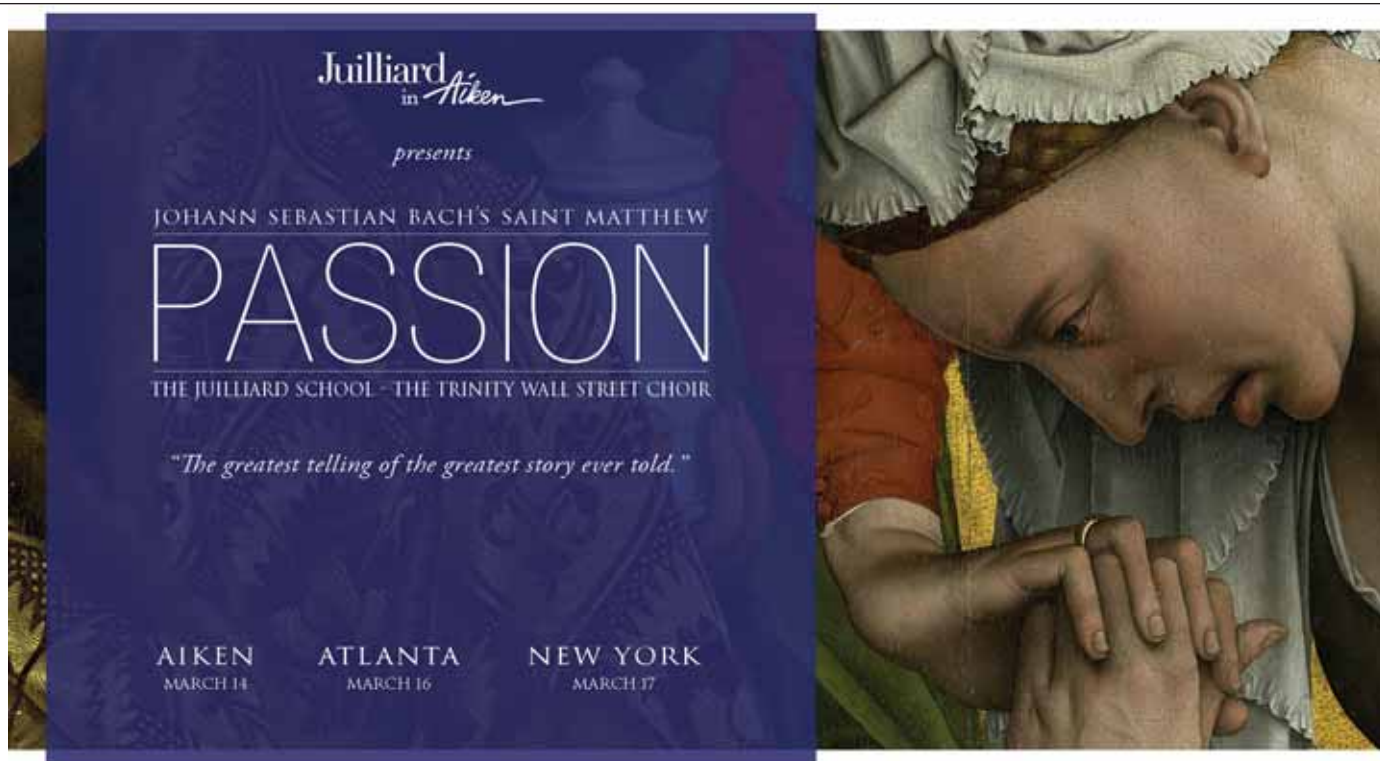
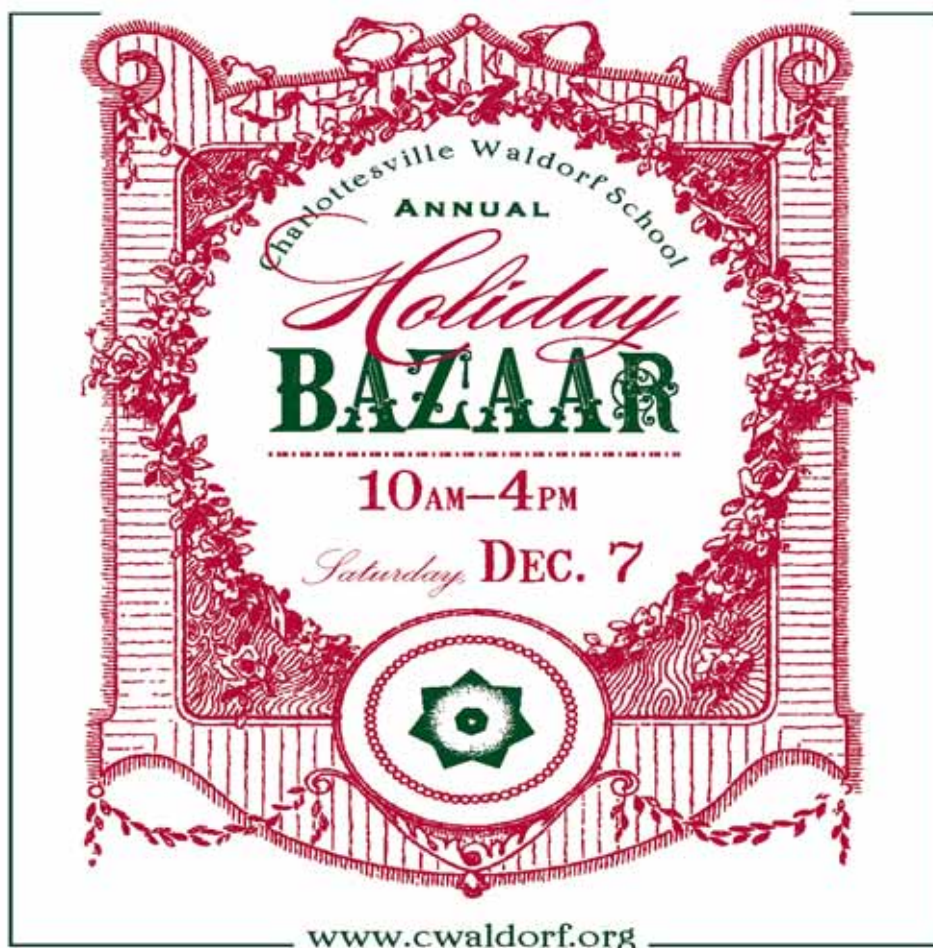


Chironomidae larva fly

the emergence behavior of the emerging midge pupa, the angler must use a downstream tighline drift while raising the fly with the rod tip to the rising fish. I call this technique, "raising the fly into the ring of the rise." This method is extremely effective for fishing to selective trout both in tailwater rivers and small streams where midges are abundant.

Fishing the winter trifecta is certainly fun for the most serious of anglers. From my experience, it is definitely worth putting this winter trio on your fly fishing bucket list.

Matt Green is a graduate of North Carolina State University. His past research with aquatic insects has led him to pursue fly-fishing opportunities across the entire East Coast. Having developed a love affair with mayflies, he has become a connoisseur of great Eastern emergences, particularly on spring creeks and tailwater rivers.



The Juilliard in Aiken Festival - March 8 - 14, 2014
www.juilliardinaiken.com

arts This project is funded in part by the South Carolina Arts Commission which receives support from the National Endowment for the Arts.