



Five of Trumbo’s favorite big bugs for cutthroat include a large elk hair caddis (far right).

Brad Trumbo/Contributed Photo

The caddis revolution

The surprisingly short history of a favorite fishing fly



BRAD TRUMBO
UPLAND PURSUITS

If you’re a fly-fisherman, think back on your first trout on the fly. Can you remember it? Turns out I cannot, but I do recall my teenage years spent trying to crack the code on mountain brook trout in Appalachia. While my casting skill left much to be desired, habitat selection may have had more influence on my struggle to coax a fish to the fly. Thirty years later, mountain trout streams take me back to basics, such that the last time I carried a western-style fly rod and reel into a headwater stream was probably 2016.

These days I seek elevation and skinny water with only a handful of flies of usually one or two patterns, and a tenkara rod. Whether the fishing is actually easy or just second nature to me now remains to be determined, but one thing has remained constant — the elk hair caddis. This classic pattern stands as a staple in the fly box of trout anglers worldwide, mine included.



A gorgeous specimen of Montana’s Blodgett Creek brook trout could not resist the elk hair caddis.

Brad Trumbo/Contributed Photo

Its effectiveness has made this the first, and often the only, fly I use on mountain streams.

So, how did this fly earn its reputation? There are approximately 7,000 known caddis species, which hatch generally April through October in the northern hemisphere. The dry fly (adult) pattern is often effective

through November with peak hatch months typically being June through September. The October caddis hatch is well-known in some areas, including locally, for remarkable densities of colossal flies that may be mistaken for large moths. Fishing a giant October caddis can redefine “epic” as feisty fish feast

to fatten up for winter on the filet mignon of insect forage.

Tied with a black, brown or olive body, ribbed with copper or tensile or not at all, and topped with hair as black as moose or bright as a bull elk’s rump, the pattern is universally effective. The same olive elk hair caddis once duped native

brookies in several Virginia mountain streams only days before it landed me the Bitterroot Slam of rainbow, brook, brown, cutthroat, and cut-bow on my drive back to Washington. That was July 2020, and that fly now hangs on my pickup’s driver-side sun visor as a constant reminder of an exceptional few days on

the headwaters draining our major eastern and western mountain ranges.

Given the fly’s popularity, effectiveness, and commonplace existence as a renowned fly pattern, one of the most curious facts about the fly is that it has been on the scene barely over 60 years. The simplicity of the elk hair caddis pattern led me to assume it has been around since the beginning of modern fly-fishing at the latest.

Seemingly one of the earliest possible fishing methods, one may assume that fly-fishing was common as early as 1653 with the first publishing of Izaak Walton’s Compleat Angler. Surprisingly, one of the first records of fishing flies includes a group of about a dozen salmon streamers tied in Ireland in 1789, possibly older than the first color illustration of flies, according to the American Museum of Fly Fishing. Even more surprising, the first elk hair caddis is credited to Al Troth, tied in 1957, far later than many other classics like the Adams, which

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Colorful confusion: Hiking the Greenhorns, in the Blue Mountains



JAYSON JACOBY
ON THE TRAIL

The Greenhorns are the forgotten range of the Blue Mountains.

And not just because of that color naming conflict. This is not to suggest that the Greenhorns are outright ignored.

The spine of high ground that separates the North and Middle forks of the John Day River has a typical complement of Forest Service roads and trails, and a number of spring-fed streams that

glisten and tumble and froth as a proper mountain creek ought to.

The range attracts plenty of deer and elk hunters every fall.

But compared with some of the other ranges that comprise the Blue Mountains region, the Greenhorns come up a bit short.

Literally short, in one sense.

The apex of the range, Vinegar Hill, near the eastern end of the Greenhorns, tops out at a modest 8,131 feet.

That’s nearly a thousand feet lower than both Rock Creek Butte, the 9,106-foot crest of the Elkhorn

Mountains, and Strawberry Mountain’s 9,042-foot summit.

In the Wallows, Vinegar Hill’s elevation would hardly rate a mention on most maps, being shorter than more than two dozen peaks in that, the tallest range in Northeastern Oregon.

(Geographers generally treat the Wallows as separate from the Blue Mountains, as do Lewis A. McArthur and his son, Lewis L. McArthur, in their inimitable opus, “Oregon Geographic Names.” But being neither a geographer nor an author, I feel no such constraints. Besides which, it strikes

me as a blatant oversight to discuss the mountains in our corner of the state and not mention the Wallows.)

Elevations aside, I think the Greenhorns are comparatively overlooked in large part because they lack the multiple alpine lakes that distinguish the Strawberry, Elkhorn and Wallowa ranges.

There is nothing in the Greenhorns that compares with the sheer magnificence of, to name just three, Glacier Lake in the Wallows, Rock Creek Lake in the Elkhorns or Strawberry Lake in its namesake range.

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Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald

Yellow clover on the Tempest Mine trail on July 11, 2021.