



Fly-fishing guide Craig Schuhmann on the sticks with Larry Zeilstra on the Williamson River.

Gary Lewis/Contributed Photo



Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

Looking west across Anthony Lake at the ski runs of Anthony Lake Mountain Resort on May 8, 2022.

Months of the mayfly

Hunting the best mayfly hatches east of the Cascades



GARY LEWIS
ON THE TRAIL

A few of the big yellow mayflies began to show, struggling at the surface of the dark water then, drying their wings, breaking free and flying.

I switched to a graphite rod on which I had tied a 3X leader and a big yellow parachute Hex imitation. My friend Craig Schuhmann handed me a Floating Hex Nymph originated by the late Klamath tyer Dick Winter. I knotted a length of tippet material and fished the two flies in tandem.

Late June and early July mark one of the great bug events on the Williamson River when that largest of the mayflies, the Hexegenia, throw their shadows on the water. If the Hex hatch happens at all, it happens at dusk.

A tributary of Upper Klamath Lake, the Williamson River drains about 3,000 square miles of southeast Oregon. Connected to the food-rich lake, the trout migrate out to feed and then back to cool off in summer.

A 5-mile float offers time for reflection. We watched trains pass, the cars flashing by on the tracks, mirrored in the river. One image in my mind is a four-pound rainbow three feet above the surface, its red-banded body reflected in the water it has just burst out of at the moment the fly came out of its lip.

In the last hour, trout boiled along each bank. We cast to rise rings. In a summer evening punctuated by 21 grabs and a dozen battles and five fish brought to my hand, the hatch was a frantic moment between dusk and full dark when we measured casts, lost track of our flies and struck at sounds and splashes.

Fishing the hex hatch

The hexegenia hatch on the Williamson River might be the most well known, but in June and July, the big bugs can pop on Clear Lake, Harriett Lake, Timothy Lake and Lost Lake on the slopes of Mount Hood. The biggest hex hatch I ever witnessed was on a summer evening on Clear Lake when the rocks were yellow with bugs and the fish plucked dries lazily off the surface.

Carry two rods, one loaded with a floating line and the other with a sinking line and a 3X tippet.



Gary Lewis/Contributed Photo

A 20-inch Williamson River rainbow trout caught on a swung fly ahead of the Hex hatch.

The dry is best matched by a No. 10-12 yellow Hex Paradrake or an Extended Body Hexegenia.

The best fishing can be on substantial nymphs like the Red Fox Squirrel Nymph, Beadhead Wet Hare's Ear Wet or Dick Winter's Floating Hex Nymph. Fish two nymphs in tandem at first, then switch over to a dry with a floating nymph in tandem.

Green drake

Look at the calendar. If it says May at the top, an angler should be ready to match a green drake hatch at any moment. It's a short window of opportunity, but it's the most important thing happening that week in the eyes of Drunella grandis and Oncorhynchus mykiss gairdneri (the redband rainbow).

Coincident with the more well publicized salmonfly hatch on the Deschutes River, green drake mayflies start to appear in May. By June some trout will pass up a bigger stonefly to chase down a green drake. Green drakes may be more prevalent on the Metolius River in May and June and a second hatch happens on the Metolius in September and October.

The green drake is a sporadic hatch on most western streams, but it can be abundant on the Metolius and a few others. It is a good idea to carry dries to match this mayfly when the adults could show up any time.

Best bets include the Loop Wing Green Drake, Electric Green Drake and the CDC Green Drake Emerger.

Callibaetis

The most reliable mayfly hatch

to follow is the Callibaetis which shows up in May on rivers like the Owyhee and the Powder and is important in the mountains from Anthony Lakes to East Lake and Paulina through the end of August.

Once I saw so many callibaetis in Diamond Lake, I thought they would hold me up if I fell out of the boat. The trout as fat as footballs were so sated we had to switch to different flies to get them to eat.

One morning in July at Anthony Lake, I caught 23 trout in two hours on a Callibaetis Nymph in tandem with a Rubber-legged Hare's Ear. Some of my favorite imitations include Dexter's Callibaetis (tied with wood duck and red fox) and Dexter's Pheasant Callibaetis tied with natural pheasant, red Flashabou and rock-chuck fur.

One of my new favorite dries is Mason's Mighty Morsel Mayfly (from Rainy's Flies) which takes a traditional design and adds a foam saddle for buoyancy, a poly wing and a short sub tail imitative of a nymphal shuck. The fly comes in six different variations: Adams, blue-winged olive, pale morning dun, purple, March brown and Callibaetis.

May, June, July and August, these are the months of the mayfly. If we are honest, this is why we fly fish, for the moments when the trout crash through the surface tension to eat the fly. And the reflection in between.

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A wintry walk to start spring

By JAYSON JACOBY
Baker City Herald

The Toyota shuddered as a patch of slush grabbed the rear tires and I noticed, with my peripheral vision, that my wife had grasped the passenger door handle.

I gave the steering wheel a slight tug and the rig straightened.

I also eased up a bit on the gas pedal.

It was Mother's Day, after all.

I didn't want to exacerbate Lisa's instinctive trepidation about driving through snow on a steep mountain road which has a conspicuous absence of guardrails.

And a conspicuous surplus of slopes down which a vehicle, freed from the constraints of asphalt, would careen in a series of great leaps and bounds that demonstrate the terrible beauty of gravity.

We were driving up to Anthony Lakes, planning to strap on our snowshoes for what might be the last time until the first big autumn storm.

May, of course, is supposed to distill the qualities that make spring a glorious season.

The snow squall is not one of those qualities.

Nonetheless it was snow, rather than sunshine and balmy temperatures and fragrant blossoms, that defined the first third of this May.

And that was in the valleys.

In the mountains, spring has yet to put in even a desultory appearance.

I was reminded, as I steered our FJ Cruiser around the curves climbing into the Elkhorns — and in one case around a pair of multi-ton granitic boulders that had tumbled off the cutbank and landed in the road — of how dramatically different the alpine realm is from the lowlands where most of us live.

This is no revelation, to be sure.

I can see the triangular tip of Elkhorn Peak, the second-tallest summit in the range at 8,931 feet, from my living room. That pyramid of sedimentary stone bears at least a trace of snow, visible from my sofa more than a dozen miles away, for about nine months of most years.

This is not the case with my backyard.

Or any other place in Baker City or La Grande or Enterprise.

Yet even though this alpine world, where the ground is beneath snow far more often than it's exposed, is no great dis-

ance away, it struck me during our Mother's Day drive that most Americans can't claim similar circumstances.

Only those relatively few of us, whose homes lie so near to great mountains that rise precipitously from adjacent valleys, actually can make such a journey, from the temperate and the arable to something closer to a polar zone, in less than an hour.

The transition tends to be especially distinct during the spring and fall.

In the latter season, early storms that bring only rain to the lowlands can pile feet of snow on the peaks.

During spring, as the snow line retreats, a similar pattern emerges.

In the span of less than two miles on our drive to Anthony Lakes, between the Baker Valley Overlook pullout and Antone Creek, the landscape changed from scattered snow patches in sheltered shady spots to a solid cover better than three feet deep.

It was deeper still — five feet, according to the snow-measuring stake in a meadow across from the Elkhorn Crest trailhead parking lot — at 7,100 feet.

Conditions were very nearly ideal for spring snowshoeing.

The old snowpack, as it were, was nicely firm. But it was also covered with about six inches of fresh snow that, uncommon for the season, did not cling to snowshoes.

Slushy spring snow — the sort that yanked at our Cruiser's tires on the drive up — can stick to a snowshoe with the tenacity of a psychotic barnacle, adding a pound or two of ballast to each clumsy step. This is frustrating as only a tussle with an inanimate object can be, and exhausting besides.

But at the higher elevation around Anthony Lake, with temperatures more typical of February than May — it was 24 degrees when Lisa and I, accompanied by our son, Max, who's 11, started walking — the new snow made a soft and powdery cushion atop the icy, grainy snow below.

We traced the east shore of Anthony Lake amid a snow shower that drifted off to reveal patches of blue sky. There was scarcely a breeze, and despite the sub-freezing temperature we all soon shed a layer.

Lisa and I chuckled at the curious confluence of conditions — we actually sought the meager shade of a copse of subalpine firs,