

Tying & Fishing Terrestrials

By Scott Branyan

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Fly-fishing terrestrials usually means fishing dry flies. Some of the patterns can be quite large, which makes for fun action on the surface. This pattern imitates the 13-year cicada hatch we see in the Ozarks.

Fly-fishing with terrestrial patterns is great fun, and the creation of these patterns shows how imaginative and innovative tiers can be. If you have not fished terrestrials before, try them. I am sure they will become a standard in your fly box, if they are not already.

What Is a Terrestrial?

A “terrestrial” is a bug that lives, develops, and matures on land instead of in water. Many terrestrials can fly. The fact that they often end up in water is mostly accidental, but a happy circumstance for trout and other fish.

Most fishermen start out their lives as terrestrial fishermen. What’s the first bait kids learn to put on a hook? That’s right, an earth worm or perhaps a cricket.

It’s a testimony to the diversity of the trout’s diet that it will eat everything from a worm to ephemeral mayflies to junk food like powerbait, cheese flavored plastics and corn.

Why Are They Important?

When terrestrials become available to fish in enough numbers and they fall in the water, a trout seems irresistibly drawn to devouring the bugs. Fish will become focused on the opportunities to eat terrestrials, and at times they seem to abandon caution and risk exposure to predators for the chance to devour them.

When Do They Occur?

In his addendum to Walton's, *The Compleat Angler*, Charles Cotton describes a few typical summer terrestrial patterns. The timing of terrestrial activity is always late spring, summer and fall until frosts come. Most of Cotton's observations on timing are applicable to our terrestrial fishing. His pattern descriptions are out-dated to us but instructive on the use of available natural materials to fool wary trout with an artificial fly.

Of ants in June, Cotton says "There is also the Flying-Ant, or Ant-Fly; the dubbing of brown and red camlet mixed, with a light gray wing."

Camlet was a medieval fabric of camel's hair or Angora wool sometimes mixed with silk. It was fine and lustrous. Orvis used to sell a selection of angora goat hair. It has wonderful colors but is difficult to dub. You need to use a good wax or twist it in a dubbing loop.

Cotton also talks about grasshoppers. He says, "As also a Green Grasshopper; the dubbing of green and yellow wool mixed, ribbed over with green silk, and a red capon's feather over all."

A capon is a male chicken that has been rendered sterile. Capon feathers are much like hen hackle. They tend to be webby and are useful for making wet flies. "Over all" means palmered the length of the body, as you would a woolly bugger or crackleback.

In July, Cotton recommended a Wasp-Fly, "Made either of a dark brown dubbing, or else the fur of a black cat's tail, ribbed about with yellow silk, and the wing of the gray feather of a mallard." Cats beware!

For August flies, he mentions the Hairy-Long-Legs, "The body made of bear's dun and blue wool mixed, and a brown hackle-feather over all."

When Cotton mentions the "Hairy-Long-Legs," I'm not sure whether he is talking about what we call a daddy longlegs, or a harvestman¹, although I believe it must be the same. The American term "daddy" meaning the biggest example of, as in "that's the daddy of all long-legged spiders."

"Then another Ant-Fly; the dubbing of the black-brown hair of a cow, some red warped in for the tag of his tail, and a dark wing. A killing fly."

¹ Technically, a daddy longlegs is an arachnid (having eight legs) but not a spider. A harvestman (Opiliones), it only has one body segment whereas spiders have two. Crane flies are true flies (Diptera) and sometimes are also called daddy longlegs in the UK.

How Does One Fish Them?

When terrestrials are mature and numbers are high, they become available to fish in a stream through circumstance such as strong winds blowing them into the water. Fish are often eager for them, and I use heavy leaders on the larger flies because of aggressive takes, to avoid line twists, and to help yank flies out of the grass edge where they often land. For hoppers, six to ten pound test is appropriate.

Flows will determine where and how to fish the patterns. At high flows, banks are going to be of prime importance for concentration of terrestrials. Fish that are interested in a hopper, for example, will be looking for them where they are easy to spot and grab, so the slower back eddies or bank set-backs provide good spots to try from a boat or, if you have the patience, stealth bank fishing.

In low flows, mid-river areas become more important as the currents and depth along the banks decrease. I look for drop-offs, ledge areas, submersed rocks and logs, and put my fly along current edges that will take it close to those structures. On the larger patterns, I like to plop them hard on the surface close to good looking spots even if they are mid-river.

Minimum flow is bound to have an effect on the method and timing of terrestrial fishing. This is our first spring with minimum flow in effect on some of the tailwaters. Between minimum flow and the prolonged winter, water temperatures have remained very low and spring hatches have been delayed. I expect over the years, we'll see some minor change in timing of all the hatches including terrestrials. A month ago, in early April, stream temperature on Bull Shoals tailwater was forty-one degrees. It's only recently begun to rise into the upper forties to low fifties downriver, and at the dam, the temperature is still in the low forties. This will inevitably affect timing of hatches and what we know as average historical dates for a particular hatch. Since terrestrials are land-based creatures, water temperature affects their development less, but the response of the fish may be affected and hence the timing of the most productive fishing. Time will tell.

The benefit of more wetted perimeter from minimum flow is also changing how fish orient to areas of the river. Gone are the days of finding extreme dead low conditions and fish pooled up where the pickings are easy. Those artificial conditions are now thankfully mitigated. Every angler will have to relearn how to fish the tailwaters that have minimum flow.

On Beaver tailwater at low water, one of the prime times to find trout feeding on terrestrials is mid-day when the wind kicks up. Another good time is when afternoon generation begins. As the water comes up, again, it brushes off a lot of bugs out of the grasses and traps them in the currents along the edges and eddies. However, Beaver can be hard to effectively fish from a boat at high water, especially during full generation. Things go by very fast.

What Are Some Effective Patterns?

There are many good fly patterns for terrestrials. Most can be adapted readily to match bugs in your specific area. Materials used in tying terrestrials can be imaginative: foam, peacock herl, different sorts of hackle, synthetics and specialty items made for imitating legs and wings.

Here are some of my favorite ones to try:

Ants

An effective ant pattern is simple to tie. Tie a small tightly dubbed ball for the head tapered to thread in the middle of the shank followed by a thicker ball to imitate the abdomen, which makes a good ant silhouette. Add a hackle in the middle, and the pattern is a “killing fly,” to use Cotton’s phrase. Some store bought patterns are made with hard bodies or special round foam blanks with a spotter color on the end for visibility. The foam with hackle floats well, but the traditional dubbed ant body works better for a subsurface presentation.

Beetles

My June Bug is an easy foam beetle pattern to tie. This recipe is on my [dry fly patterns page](#).



Hook	Standard dry fly size 14 (debarbed)
Thread	Brown
Body	Brown or ginger squirrel or other favorite dubbing
Back	Two strips of craft foam cut wide enough to cover the top of the dubbed body, top strip (yellow) about an 1/8 of an inch narrower than bottom strip (brown)
Legs	Krystal Flash, other synthetic flash fibers, or rubber legs

Directions: Wrap thread to bend of hook. Tie in two strips of foam (narrower yellow strip on bottom). Allow strips to extend past bend of hook. These will be folded over to the eye later. Wrap over foam snugly so that it compresses on hook shank.

Dub squirrel dubbing onto shank, building up a thick, bulbous body. Fold foam strips over top of dubbing to the eye. Yellow foam will now be on top. Securely wrap and tie in foam with 5-6 turns of thread. Throw in a half hitch or two and trim foam squarely for a head. Leave about a 1/8-inch of foam over the eye. Tie in a few Krystal Flash fibers for legs. Flare them around the outsides. Whip finish and trim legs short.

See also the [tutorial for tying the pistachio beetle](#), which is some fun to tie and fish. It makes a

definitive plop sound when it hits the water.

Cicadas

[My Scott's Cicada pattern](#) was carefully designed to match the silhouette and color of the area 13-year cicada. It is also the basis for Scott's Hopper and Scott's Cricket.

Hook	3x long multi-purpose hook, straight eye, size 6 (Daiichi 2461)
Thread	Black 3/0 monocord
Body	Black squirrel dubbed on the hook overlaid by 3mm craft foam strip. Cut the strip no wider than 3/8" wide x 3" long. Taper one end. Foam is doubled back at the eye to form a rounded head.
Underwing	Gold Flashabou-like fibers
Overwing	Orange elk or deer hair
Legs	Black round rubber legs on bottom for stability; Orange Sili Legs on top for movement and blending color down the side a bit.

Tying demo.

Inch Worms

Often overlooked, an imitation of this little worm can provide some fun when you see them hanging from tree limbs over the water. A little wind can create good fishing opportunities. Fine green ultra chenille tied San Juan Worm style works just fine.

Grasshoppers

Affectionately dubbed "hoppers," grasshopper patterns are perhaps the quintessential terrestrial pattern. Big, splash-attention-getting presentations often provoke an instantaneous response. Hoppers rule in terrestrial fishing. The more teeth impressions there are in the foam along with a leg or two missing, the more effective the pattern seems to become.

Scott's Hopper is a variation of my cicada pattern. Tying demo.

Crickets

Scott's Cricket is a variation of my cicada and hopper patterns. Tying demo.

Conclusion

Fishing terrestrials is so much fun because the patterns are uniquely fun to tie, and trout seem to lose their inhibitions and take them with enthusiasm once they become numerous enough and available to the fish through the natural order of things. They provide fish a big bite of protein.

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