

# How to Fill Your Fly Boxes

Select useful groups of flies for the White River tailwaters

By Scott Branyan  
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The illustration shows the basic groups of fly patterns which are effective for the White River tailwaters. An angler should have patterns from each of the representative styles to cover every angling situation.

One of the most common questions a fly-fishing guide gets asked is, “What flies do I need in order to fish the White River tailwaters?” The implied question is, “Out of all the patterns available, which ones work?”

There are effective patterns which work day in and day out, but there are also times when even the usual ones don't produce as one would expect. Rather than focusing on individual patterns, anglers may find it helpful to look at the flies in their boxes in a different way.

Anglers need to think in terms of groups of patterns and make sure they have representative flies in each of those groups. When an angler fills a fly box in this manner, he or she is apt to have many more options when the fishing gets slow or when unfamiliar water or conditions are encountered.

Think about the food groups available to trout, and you will be able to decide which patterns will be the most useful to have and fish at any given time. You may want to have one box for each group of patterns.

### **Caddis and Mayfly Patterns**

On northern Arkansas tailwaters, we have several important hatches.

Intense hatches of tan caddis (Family BRACHYCENTRIDAE) in a size 14 hatch can be found in March and April. More sporadic hatches of other caddis can be seen hatching throughout the fall. Microcaddis (Family HYDROPTILIDAE) in sizes 18 and smaller hatch regularly from April through October. Anglers should have patterns which represent the larva, pupa and adult stages. The larva and pupa patterns are frequently tied in a beadhead nymph configuration and often have a black bead with a bright green or yellow body. The adult insect can be represented by a traditional Elk Hair Caddis or the effective X-Caddis pattern.

The all important mayfly hatches on the White are the lighter colored mayflies which occur primarily in May and June. Pale Sulphurs (Genus *Ephemerella*, size 16) start as early as the end of April and are generally followed by an overlapping hatch of Light Cahills (Genus *Stenacron*, size 14).

Sulphur nymphs are crawlers and are very active a month before the hatch. They hatch below gentle riffles. Light Cahill nymphs are clingers and prefer a slightly faster water habitat emerging closer to riffles and runs. A Pheasant Tail Nymph with or without a beadhead is a perfect representation of the sulphur nymphs. Emerger patterns should make use of a yellow color somewhere on the fly, either as a ball of yellow, some yellow CDC overwing, or pale yellow hackle. The adults will also be light in color like the traditional Pale Evening Duns or Light Cahill dries or parachutes. In low evening light the female sulphurs appear much more yellow than the males which have tinges of orange on their bodies and bright orange eyes.

In recent years, I have witnessed heavy localized hatches of hexagenia mayflies on several of the tailwaters. These are not so predictable, but late June and early July is the typical timeframe for hexs to be found. Look for them in slower pools where there is a silty/muddy bottom as the nymphs are burrowing types. This large mayfly is delectable to trout.

### **Midge Patterns**

These small flies, like the caddis, are found in larva, pupa, and adult stages. They hatch daily on all the tailwaters. Even newly stocked trout can become frustratingly selective on these tiny insects. Beadhead Brassies, Zebra Midges, mosquito type larva patterns, Griffith's Gnats and midge cluster patterns in sizes 18 and smaller are essential to imitating these smaller aquatic insect forms. Carry some 6 and 7x tippet to effectively fish midge patterns.

### **Crustaceans**

Scuds, sowbugs, and crayfish are all related. And since these make up such a very important category on the White River, make sure you have scud and sowbug patterns in a variety of sizes, say sizes 10-18 or even 20. Experiment and try different versions of these patterns along the way as you have opportunity. On the crayfish patterns, I've found the more simple and impressionistic ones work better than the realistic looking flies. A brown woolly bugger is often hard to beat as a crayfish pattern.

### **Baitfish Patterns**

Minnows, threadfin shad, and sculpins provide a lot of nourishment for larger trout. Bigger fish are often on the lookout for these food items, and the angler should be accommodating. Make sure you have some larger flies that represent these food items in your box in sizes 12 and all the way down to size 2. Beadhead Woolly Buggers with and without flash, sculpin patterns, and white shad patterns for the late winter (and occasional late summer) shad kills will be primary patterns of choice.

### **Attractor Fly Patterns**

There are a number of patterns which work wherever trout are found. These flies are often effective in hatch situations but especially when no hatch activity is demanding the trout's attention. Anglers think of them as attractors because they may not represent a real insect in every particular, but they perhaps generally suggest a lot of different types of insects. In nymphs, these are the Copper Johns, Zug Bug, Half-Back Nymph, Full-Back Nymph, Prince Nymph, Flash Back Pheasant Tail Nymph, and a Gold Ribbed Hare's Ear Nymph. An angler ought to have a few of these in a box labeled attractors. Wet flies are useful for fishing in a variety of ways and representing a variety of insects and forms. The Gold Ribbed Hare's Ear wet fly is a very important one. Soft hackles such as Partridge and Orange, Partridge and Yellow, and any wets with peacock or pheasant tail bodies are generally very good on the White. For dry flies, I like Royal Wulffs, Royal Coachman parachutes, Cracklebacks, Gray Ugly, and many others.

I'll put terrestrial patterns like grasshoppers, ants, beetles, inch worms, lightning bugs, etc. in this category too since many times trout are opportunistic for these items rather than looking for a true hatch of them. Hoppers and beetles are my most used terrestrial patterns on the White.

### **Summary**

Most of the fly patterns anglers have to choose from can be fit within one of these five categories for the White River system. Some anglers like to fish egg patterns and micro-jigs, and they are certainly effective at times. An egg pattern is essentially an attractor since trout everywhere notice and often respond to an egg even when there is no spawning activity present, and the micro-jig can represent small fry or even tiny nymphs.

Make some mental notes of these categories, and when you visit your local fly shop, ask the salesperson to help you find some flies in these styles. I'm sure they will be eager to assist.

Keep your flies organized in this way, and you will find it an easy task to cover the basic patterns when fishing the White River. Such a system also makes it easy to know when you need to restock on particular patterns or sizes.

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# Ozark Fly Flinger

White River Hatch and Fly Chart, Copyright © 2001-2006 [www.flyflinger.com](http://www.flyflinger.com)

Insect or Baitfish	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Scud												
Sow Bug												
Sculpin												
Threadfin Shad												
Crayfish												
Midges												
Crane-fly												
Spring Stoneflies*												
Giant Black Stonefly*												
March Brown Mayfly												
Sulphur Mayfly												
Light Cahill Mayfly												
Tiny Blue-Winged Olive												
White Mayfly												
Tan & Spotted Caddis												
Microcaddis												
Hoppers & Terrestrials												

Shaded areas indicate months when insect or baitfish is of primary importance. \* Indicates rather rare daytime occurrence.

## Recommended Fly Patterns

(A good assortment would be weighted and un-weighted woolly buggers, a number of nymphs such as a pheasant tail or prince in the 12-18 range, a few dries in sizes 14-16, and some midges patterns in sizes 18-20 or smaller)

### January - March

White Marabou Streamer or Zonker #8-10; Olive Beadhead Woolly Bugger #10; Olive Near Enough Sculpin #8; Red Fox Squirrel Nymph #10-14; Sparrow Nymph #10; Prince Nymph #12-16; Olive WD-40 #18; Olive/Black Woolhead Sculpin #4; Griffith's Gnat #20; Adam's Midge #20; Beadhead Midge Pupa #16-18; Scud #14-16; Sow Bug #16-18; Bleached Elk Hair Caddis #12-18; Deer Hair Caddis #14-18; Crackleback #12; Peacock Softhackle #12-18; Beadhead Pheasant Tail Nymph #14-18; Gold Ribbed Hare's Ear Nymph (#12-16).

### April - June (also include Jan-Mar flies)

Light Cahill (standard & parachute) #14-16; Pale Evening Dun, #16; Beadhead Pheasant Tail Softhackle #14; Pheasant Tail Nymph #14-18.

### July - September (also include Jan-Mar flies)

Olive Bullethead Hi-Vis Hoppers #10-12; Parahopper #12-14; Brown Near Enough Sculpin #8; Ants #14-16; Adam's Parachute #16-18; Foam Beetle, #12-14

### October - December (also include Jan-Mar flies)

Gray Beadhead Caddis Larvae #14; Royal Coachman #14-16; Royal Wulff #14-16; Blue Winged Olive (#14-24); Soft Hackles #14-16, Gray Midge #20; Woolly Buggers #8-10; Orange/Peach Colored Egg or Y2K Bug (#12).