

Fly of the Month

By Mike Ott

Defective Duns – Cripples, Knock Downs, and Spinners

The old fly shop secret of buying flies out of the emptiest bins does not always hold true. The idea is that that's the flies that are working, so that's what everyone is buying. Or is it that everyone is buying them because that's what they said was working. Either way, sometimes it works; sometimes it doesn't. What's more credible is what's in the guide's fly boxes and on their tippets. What I find is that the guides use their own "guide flies" – flies that are easy to tie, durable, and catch fish.

You generally won't find these in fly shop bins because they just don't "look" like a good fly. Guide's flies don't have pretty upright wings, spiffy legs coming out of neat little thoraxes, or streamers with stripes and scales and gill plates. Instead, they look like impressionistic suggestions of whatever is hatching, drifting, or swimming that fish might be eating. Now I love tying pretty flies and I love tying new patterns, but I really love catching fish.

On our recent trip out East – to Pennsylvania's Central Allegheny spring creeks and New York's Catskill streams – we found this more often than not. Lots of well-stocked fly shops with lots of expert advice and some really top-notch guides. These legendary streams have some of the most prolific bug-life anywhere, and the fish can be very selective. Mostly though, because there are so many insects to eat, they tend to select the easy meals – cripples, spinners, and stillborns. These flies are the least likely to escape and drift more consistently in the foam-lines and current seams. While the fly shops all stocked bins full of every pretty mayfly pattern imaginable, the guides capitalize on this behavior and make a living throwing simple flies to very sophisticated fish.

The patterns that worked repeatedly were Sulpher Cripples, Olive Knock-Down Duns, and Rusty Spinners – impressionistic flies that represent the most available and vulnerable bugs in the hatch. They also don't float high and dry. Instead, they are stuck in the film like the defective naturals. These patterns are very quick and simple to tie requiring just two or three materials. The Sulpher Cripple uses a sparse Z-lon tail, and tapered dubbed body, and a full wrapped hackle trimmed flat on the bottom. This pattern works for any mayfly imitation just by changing the colors and sizes. The Knock-Down Dun uses a splayed tail of micro-fibets, a tapered dubbed body, and two splayed upright CDC feathers as wings. Again, this pattern could be used for any mayfly by varying size and color.

The Rusty Spinner uses the same splayed micro-fibet tail and dubbed body with the wings out flat at ninety degrees to the hook. Some like to use antron, others like hackle fibers. The antron tends to work better earlier while there is still light on the water, while the hackle fibers work better once the sun is off the water. The thought being that there is a better silhouette with lower light. You can vary the size, but it has to be rust-colored. Reportedly, most mayflies are a rusty color after they lay eggs and die. No fly box in a mayfly-rich environment is complete without a few Rusty Spinners. Give these a try next time you find trout happily sucking down mayflies.

