

Winter Stoneflies

(Order *Plecoptera*)

by

Jim Greco

How many times have you been on Hunting Creek, Morgan Run, the Gunpowder, or on one of our other local streams during the latter part of winter or early spring and managed to catch fish on a dry fly? Have you ever tried fishing the adult, Little Winter Stoneflies? From the end of January through the early spring season Little Black Stoneflies and Early Brown Stoneflies compete well with midges and Little Blue Winged Olives as our most productive surface flies.

The literature I have available concerning stoneflies informs me that the insects I refer to as The Little Black Stonefly and the Early Brown Stonefly are of the Order *Plecoptera*. I suspect there are many different genera that get lumped together under these two common names, mainly because I see so many different sizes on the waters I fish. Common wisdom in the literature leads one to believe these stoneflies exist only in sizes #14 through #18, however, on our waters don't be surprised when you see winter stoneflies from #12 all the way down to #22.

Not being an entomologist, I find the Latin names interesting, but confusing. Since I don't see much practical difference in the habitat or life cycles of the stoneflies I researched, I believe I'll stick to the common names and hope those of you who really do know the difference between the genera *Capnia*, *Taeniopteryx*, *Strophopteryx* and *Allocapnia* will keep it to yourselves.

When compared to mayflies or caddis, stoneflies are relatively simple to fish. The reason for this simplicity is the fact that you don't have to contend with emergers or spinners. When stonefly nymphs are ready to hatch into adults, whether they inhabit highly oxygenated riffles or leafy debris in back eddies and holes, all of them migrate along the bottom to above water structure or the shoreline and crawl out of the water to make their transformations to adult flies. The adult stoneflies mate and return to the water to lay eggs without metamorphosing into spinners as mayflies do. Since there are no emergers or spinners, you only need to carry imitations of the nymphs and adults to be prepared for any occasion when the trout are feeding on winter stoneflies.

On our streams, it is rare to see a blanket hatch of any insect, and the winter stones are no exception. Often you will see sporadic rises and only a few adult stoneflies bouncing around the stream surface. On closer examination, you may see fish flashing in the runs and deeper holes downstream of the rises. When this happens, take a close look at the rocks, logs and tree trunks adjacent to the stream. If you see nymphs or many split shucks adorning the structure at streamside, the probability is good that the fish are taking stonefly nymphs as they migrate to shore. At times like this, some of the fish are hitting the adults as they get blown back into the water or return to lay eggs, while others are taking the nymphs. Try using a dropper rig with a stonefly nymph tied to an adult stonefly with a piece of 6x or 7x tippet using an improved clinch knot around the bend of the dry fly hook. This combination is especially deadly when fishing the usually low and clear water of winter. To see what size stonefly the fish are taking, use a small seine held close to the stream bottom or, if you have been lucky enough to catch a really hungry fish, pump its stomach.

For tying the patterns I list below, try to keep the abdomen very thin and about twice as long as the thorax area. If you collect a few specimens this winter, be sure to notice the proportion between the thorax and abdomen. I think you will agree, using a 3x long hook for the nymph is just about right, and the standard dry fly hook is just barely long enough if you keep the proportions in mind when you are tying; a 2x long dry fly hook would not be impractical. There is no need to tie antennae on the nymph imitations because when the nymphs drift freely, they drift with their antennae folded back over their wingcases.

This winter and spring, when you venture out on one of those rare, forty degree days with the sun shining through a broken cloud cover, look to the banks for stonefly shucks and probe the crevices in the bark of the streamside trees to see if there are any Little Winter Stoneflies lurking in the neighborhood. Carrying a few stonefly adults and nymphs from #14 through #22 will greatly improve your luck at enticing our winter fish to strike when the Little Winter Stoneflies are on the move.

Winter Stoneflies

Tied by Jim Greco



Brown Stonefly
Nymph

Brown Stonefly
Adult

Black Stonefly
Adult

Black Stonefly
Nymph

ABOVE PHOTO AND FLIES BY JIM GRECO



Little Black Stonefly
real bug size #20

Little Black Stonefly
Tied fly size #18

ABOVE PHOTO BY DR. CARL SMOLKA

Winter Stoneflies

Note: the adult dry fly patterns listed below are derived through Charlie Gelso's post publication efforts to improve this pattern. For those of you who do not tie, many fly shops now carry the stonefly adult provided by the Brookside Fly Company using Charlie's pattern **AS ADAPTED FROM CHARLIE GELSO'S AND LARRY COBURN'S BOOK –**
GUIDE TO MARYLAND TROUT FISHING, THE- CATCH-AND-RELEASE STREAMS

LITTLE BLACK STONEFLY - ADULT:

Hook: Mustad R-30/94833 #14 - #22.

Thread: 6/0 or 8/0 black.

Tails: none.

Body: black Superfine.

Thorax: black Superfine.

Wings: gray mallard quill (treated with Dave's Flexament) tied downwing style no more than ½ the hook gap distance wide. (Tip: use a hook two sizes smaller than fly to split quill wing to size)

Hackle: 3 ½ turns dark dun or dark grizzly, or black (sometimes the grizzly may be too bright).

LITTLE BLACK STONEFLY - NYMPH:

Hook: Tiemco 200R or Mustad AC80050BR size #14 - #22.

Thread: 8/0 black.

Tails: 2 strands of black Krystal Flash.

Body: #14 or #16 use Larva Lace, soft hollow midge tubing – black. For #18 though #22 use Hareline, hollow, micro tubing – black.

Thorax: Hareline dubbing, stonefly. Pick out sides for legs.

Weight: #14 - #16 use 4 or 5 wraps of .015 lead wire. #18 - #22 use 4 or 5 wraps of .010.

Wing case: Swiss Straw – black with drop of lacquer.

EARLY BROWN STONEFLY - ADULT

Hook: Mustad R-30/94833 -- #14 - #18.

Thread: 6/0 or 8/0 brown.

Tails: none.

Body: brown Superfine.

Thorax: brown Superfine.

Wings: dark gray mallard quill or mottled light brown turkey quill (treated with Dave's flexament) tied downwing style no more than ½ the hook gap distance wide. (Tip: use a hook two sizes smaller than fly to split quill wing to size)

Hackle: 3 ½ turns brown or dark dun.

EARLY BROWN STONEFLY - NYMPH:

Hook: Tiemco 200R or Mustad AC80050BR size #14, #18.

Thread: 8/0 brown.

Tails: 2 strands of black Krystal Flash.

Body: Larva Lace, soft hollow midge tubing – Brown.

Thorax: Haretron # 16 dark brown; pick out sides for legs.

Weight: #14 - #16 use 4 or 5 wraps of .015 lead wire.

Wing case: Swiss Straw – brown, with drop of lacquer.