

Blasts from the past

ALL HAIL THE GODFATHER OF THE NYMPH!

Stevie Munn has a few heroes, and one of the greatest is GEM Skues, the controversial proponent of nymph fishing.

FACT FILE

Stevie Munn has fished many places in the world but grew up fishing on rivers and loughs of Ireland where he now guides.

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I have many angling heroes who have influenced me immensely. Some are from angling's rich history, while some are modern day anglers who are still casting a fly. Some are local anglers, and a few are even friends of mine who I won't embarrass by telling them that I think they're great. But one of my all-time heroes and a true angling legend is a man known as GEM Skues.

My father used to talk about him as if he were a fly fishing god, a strange thing in itself as my father was a working class Belfast shipyard worker and Skues was a privileged gentleman. But what connected them was they both loved to catch trout in rivers, showing how angling not only conquers time but also class. Fly-fishing makes all men equal.

Around 100 years ago George Edward Mackenzie Skues (1858-1949) was nymph fishing for brown trout on the chalk streams of England. He was one of the greatest trout fly anglers of all time, and has many angling books to his credit. But in 1910 he started some controversy with his book, *Minor Tactics*. The book is dedicated to "my friend the dry-fly purist, and to my enemies, if I have any". This was most likely directed at the great dry fly man of the time and another hero of mine, Halford. In fact Skues' work did make him some enemies, for at the time the upstream dry fly was at its peak and the only 'gentlemanly' way to take a trout. Skues was talking, and what is worse writing, about fishing with a wet fly, or a nymph. Simply not cricket my good man, may have been a common response at the time.

I can't help but wonder what anglers like Skues, the true all round river fly angler, and the great dry fly man of his time FM Halford, would think of today's modern flies with their twinkle, beads, cone heads and other synthetics. I do think Skues would have liked the progress. Fly fishing, like almost any sport or pastime, evolves over time, and that's one of the reasons why fly fishing and fly tying can be so enjoyable. That said, we should never forget the great fly patterns of the past as they are the foundation of our craft and many are still great fish catchers and will be for as long as man fly fishers.

The three flies I list here are all superb hackled river wet fly nymph representations that Skues would have carried in his fly wallet and will work on most rivers in Ireland for trout.



BLUE WINGED OLIVE NYMPH

Hook: 12-16

Tails: Blue dun or natural red cock

Body: Olive to brown fur or olive goose or turkey herl

Rib: Gold wire

Body hackle: Hare's ear fur

Hackle or legs: Blue dun

'THE THREE FLIES I LIST HERE ARE ALL SUPERB HACKLED RIVER WET FLY NYMPH REPRESENTATIONS.'

Introduced by Skues for use on chalk streams before and during a BWO hatch, this pattern works well in relatively clear rivers. It incorporates a distinct, dark-coloured thorax to represent wing cases. These unweighted flies can be fished across and upstream just beneath the surface film with minimal movement on a dead drift the same way you would fish a dry fly on a river most of the time, though of course you can't see your fly. Start at the bottom of a likely looking run or glide on the river and search the water, casting to

likely looking holding spots. If fish are showing, cover them. Trout showing 'bulging' rises to pre-emergent nymphs can be difficult to detect unless the water surface is relatively smooth. Another useful tip while nymphing is to retrieve your flies back towards you just slightly faster than the stream. This would not be considered fishing the nymphs on a dead drift, but it will help you to feel for the takes, especially in fast water. It's a tactic I use a lot on my local rivers.



PALE WATERY NYMPH (SKUES NO.4)

Hook: 16-18

Tails: Pale blue neck of guinea fowl, though I use light blue dun hackle fibres

Body: Very pale yellow/olive silk

Rib: Fine wire (optional – makes the fly more durable)

Thorax: Hare's fur or rabbit. Original used hare's poll or squirrel's blue fur

Hackle or legs: Blue dun

When you look "nymph" up in a dictionary you get the definition of underwater insects but you also get among others: "A nymph in Greek mythology is a female spirit, typically associated with a particular location or landform. Other nymphs, always in the shape of young nubile maidens, were part of the retinue of a god, such as Dionysus, Hermes, or Pan." Skues is reported to have said: "that like all nymphs, they are certainly more attractive

the less they are dressed". His little pun holds very true. Most river trout flies should be sparsely dressed and this will make them more tempting to the trout. This is certainly the case with the Pale Watery, a great pattern which I use often. At times I fish it on the dropper with a heavier nymph on the point. It's fantastic on rivers in the summer months, but also useful on stillwaters when trout are taking small green or grey buzzers.



MEDIUM OLIVE DUN (SKUES NO.4)

Hook: 14-16

Tail: Two dark strands of guinea fowl, or dark pheasant tail, dressed short

Body: Stripped peacock herl from the eye feather

Rib: Fine wire (optional – makes the fly more durable)

Thorax: Hare's ear fur

Hackle or legs: Blue dun

This pattern is a perfect fly to try when Medium Olives are on the water and works very well on most rivers in May, June and July. It has also worked well for me on stillwaters when pond olives were hatching and also when trout were taking grey buzzers or chironomids, so it's a very useful pattern to keep in your fly box.

On rivers, fish the same tactics as above. This fly is an early form of emerger and was one of my father's personal favourites. It landed me a wild brown

trout of 4lb in 1979. I remember catching this fish by default, while walking down the riverbank, false casing. My fly line got tangled in some brambles. As I tried to free it, my fly washed under the bank and suddenly everything went solid. I looked down to see the large trout wallowing on the surface. I walked straight through the brambles into the river, onto a small sand bar that was in the middle and eventually beached my prize, a great trout that I should never have caught but did due to a happy accident and a fabulous pattern.