

# STRAIGHT TALKING

AN INTRODUCTION TO  
THE BASICS OF



**barbless** flies  
for the catch & release angler

First Published 2021  
By Barbless Flies Limited  
3 The Hillyard, Wykeham, Scarborough, YO13 9BP

© 2021 Barbless Flies Limited  
Images Subject to Copyright  
Owner of Images:  
Barbless Flies

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photography and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Authored by:  
Richard Fieldhouse

Designed, Collated and edited by:  
Jack Fieldhouse

# Introduction

Our sport, especially on rivers, has what I think of as an image problem. All too often you hear “It’s only for those with loads of money” or “it’s too complex to start”.

This book will introduce you to the basics of fly fishing in rivers. We’ve called this series of books ‘Straight Talking’ because we want to cut out all of the unnecessary jargon and present you with the facts in an easy to digest format, this will get you started in the quickest way possible.

It’s very easy to overcomplicate fly fishing, and many people do – to make them seem more knowledgeable, we’re only interested in equipping you with the knowledge you need to get you started on the river. It’s amazing how quickly you will amass knowledge, once you’ve taken the leap.

The logo features the name 'Richard' in a black, cursive script. Below it, the words 'barless flies' are written in a bold, sans-serif font. 'barless' is in green and 'flies' is in orange. A black fishing hook is positioned at the end of the word 'flies', with its point resting on the letter 's'.

# A Brief History

Fly fishing is defined as:

"An angling method that uses a light-weight lure—called an artificial fly—to catch fish. The fly is cast using a fly rod, reel, and specialized weighted line. The light weight requires casting techniques significantly different from other forms of casting. The flies may resemble natural invertebrates, baitfish, or other food organisms."

Fly fishing in its current form dates back to 1496, things have obviously moved on since then, but the techniques and equipment are not that far removed from their originals.



If you're looking for the most effective way to catch fish in rivers, fly fishing is not the best option, however it is one of the most enjoyable because:

- Generally fly fishing on rivers always takes place

- in stunning locations with fantastic scenery.
- It's good for the soul – the majority of time when you are on the river, you are watching and waiting, surrounded by wildlife – generally in the middle of nowhere.
  - It makes you think – every time you arrive at the river the conditions are different, you have to crack the code on what tactics to use – more of that later.

It may sound obvious, but fishing on rivers does differ quite widely from fishing stillwaters.

When fishing rivers the angler has to contend with water that is moving, they also need to keep a keen eye on what is going on around them. Successful river fishing is all about being willing to adapt your tactics to what you can see happening around you.

When fishing rivers the way you present the fly to the unsuspecting fish is key. Presentation is the ability to make the fly seem as natural as possible to the fish. As soon as your fly starts to act unnaturally (i.e. if the fly is moving across a current), then the fish will realise this and not take any interest, possibly even spooking all of the other fish in the pool.

Therefore the way you approach the river and present your fly to the fish are the key skills to master, once you have this you are half way there.

# River Fly Tackle

Often described as an art form, casting is the way we get the fly onto the river (and in front of the fish). Casting is the most important aspect of fly fishing – done correctly (or even just adequately) it will make all the difference to your success rate. All of the decisions you make when selecting tackle (rods/lines/reels etc) should revolve around making casting the fly as easy as possible. There are various types of casts (see later in this book for descriptions of the two most common casts used on a river), the tackle you choose to use is key to make casting the fly easier.

## Fly Fishing Tackle – What You Need

So, you know you want to have a go on rivers, but what gear do you need to start? The first thing to note is that when casting a fly to a fish, the weight used to get the fly to the fish is all in the fly line.

**Rod** – Every fly rod is described by its length and weight rating, this shows what weight fly line it will cast, for example a 9' 4wt rod is 9 feet long and will cast a 4 weight line. For small rivers/streams an ideal length of rod is 7'6" to 8' as you will generally only be casting pretty short distances - 20 to 30 feet – and often have lots of undergrowth to contend with. For larger rivers a longer rod is required as you generally will need to cast a little bit further, so a 9' to 10' rod

is best. Remember (in general) the length of rod is dictated by the size of the river you are fishing. When fitted with a similarly rated reel, the fly rod should balance on the cork handle. It is always better if the balance point of the rod is in the centre of the handle.

**Reel** – Fly fishing reels are rated by the weight of fly line they will hold (i.e. one rated 2 to 4 will comfortably hold a 2wt, 3wt or 4wt line). When starting out on your river fishing journey in the UK, reels are really only used as a fly line holder, you're not going to be fighting big fish. The only consideration to make is that the reel is rated to hold the fly line you are using.

**Fly Line** - When fishing rivers you will usually be fishing with flies which are close imitations to the natural insect – therefore the flies you will be using will be pretty small. When using small flies you only need a small amount of weight to cast them out so a 4 weight line is a perfect weight as this will allow you to fish any style of fly on a river. As well as their weight, fly lines are also classed by their taper design. All fly lines have different styles of taper (this is what allows the energy to transfer along the fly line in the most efficient way), each of the tapers give a slightly different presentation of the fly. The most common taper to use on a river is a Weight Forward (WF), for the more inexperienced these lines are easier to cast. You will see these identified as WF4 – a weight forward 4 weight.

**Fly Line Backing** – This is just a way of padding out your reel so the reel is full once you have added your fly line. Backing is generally an inexpensive braid which you add to your reel before you install your fly line.

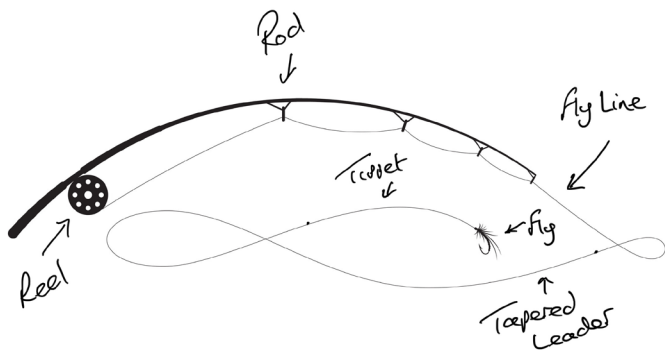
**Tapered Leader** – In the above section on fly lines I mention that the energy created by the cast travels down the fly line due to its taper, if you just attach a length of fishing line to the end of the fly line the energy will not effectively travel to the fly (which is what you need to allow the fly to land in front of the fly line). So a tapered leader is used, this is a length of fishing line which continues the taper of the fly line down to the size of the tippet. When starting out, choose a tapered leader of 9' – choose the thickness of the tapered leader based on the thickness of the tippet you are using.

**Tippet** – Tippet is just a fancy name for the fishing line which you attach your fly to. You always add tippet to the thin end of the tapered leader and then attach your fly to the other end of the tippet. Tippet is specified by its 'X' rating, this dictates the tippet's diameter (not its strength), with 2X being thicker than 8X. The 'X' system originates from the times when catgut was used, and the 'X' was the number of times the gut was fed through a machine to make it thinner (i.e. if you fed it through 8 times it would be thinner than if you only passed it through twice).



A common 'rule of thumb' that helps you determine what 'X' size tippet to use, is to take the size of the fly you will be using, say a size 14, and divide the fly size by 3. In this example, our fly is a size 14, divided by 3 gives you 4.66. That would work out to be approximately a 5X tippet size. It's a simple and easy to use rule to help you determine the correct diameter tippet to use while out on the water.

Note: Whenever you change flies you will eat into the tippet you have added, once you have a small amount of tippet remaining, just replace it with a fresh, longer length of tippet. This way you will never eat into the tapered leader and in turn never change the taper of the leader.



## **All of this really boils down to the following:**

**For Bigger Rivers** – Choose a 9'4wt rod, 4wt reel with a WF4 line. Pair this with a 9' 5X tapered leader and 6X tippet.

**For Smaller Rivers & Streams** – Choose a 7'6" 4wt rod, 4wt reel with a WF4 line. Pair this with a 9' 5X tapered leader and 6X tippet.

**Flies** – Always try to 'Match the Hatch', i.e. present a fly to the fish which imitates the flies which are hatching around you – there are lots of resources available online to point you in the right direction for matching your fly to the insect (here's one – [www.which-fly.co.uk](http://www.which-fly.co.uk)), you can also find monthly hatch charts at the end of this book. When you are starting out it's best to start with only a few flies. Call any reputable fly shop (try [www.barbless-flies.co.uk](http://www.barbless-flies.co.uk) first though!) and they will be more than happy to help you select the right flies for the time you will be fishing.

**Fly Box** – Does what it says on the tin (literally), it's a box to store your flies in.

**Landing Net** – A small river landing net (often called a scoop net) is essential for ensuring the best welfare for the fish you will catch. Always practice the best fish handling care you can. Stick to the principles of Keep Fish Wet (more details later in this book). Before

handling any fish always make sure your hands are wet and never lay the fish on the ground.

**Chest Waders & Boots** – If you are going to be fishing rivers, at some point you will have to enter the river, this is where a pair of waders are essential. Some waders are supplied with boots already attached (called boot foot waders) and some require you to buy boots separately (called stocking foot waders). When buying boots for stocking foot waders, always go up a shoe size, this will allow for the extra thickness of the stocking foot on the wader.

**Nippers** – These are really cheap and are essentially a pair of nail clippers which can be bought for a couple of pounds.

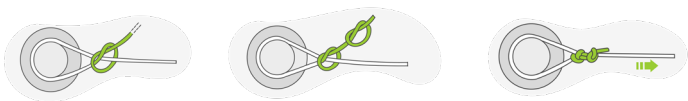
**Floatant Powder** – When fishing dry flies - as the fly name suggests - these need to be dry to float on the water's surface. Once you have caught a fish, the fly will be wet, so use a piece of kitchen roll to dry the fly and then apply the floatant powder to the fly to expel any moisture and get your fly floating again.

**Eye Protection** – Always protect the most important piece of fishing equipment, your eyes. It's essential that whenever you are casting a fly that you wear some sort of eye protection. Polarised sunglasses have two advantages; protecting your eyes and the polarisation allows you to see where the fish are.

# Setting up your Gear

When setting up your fly gear for the first time there are a number of different knots which are used to hold everything together:

**Arbour Knot** – To tie your backing to your reel.



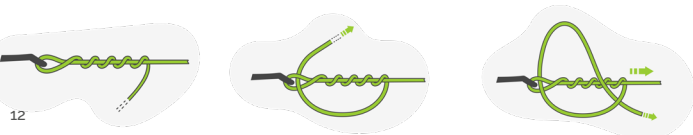
**Surgeon's Loop** – To connect your tapered leader to your fly line, using a loop-to-loop connection.



**3-Turn Water Knot** – To connect your tippet to your tapered leader.



**Clinch Knot** – To tie your fly to the tippet.



# Flies Flies & more Flies

Ok, so you've got all your gear ready, what fly do you use? That is the million-dollar question, and herein lies part of the fun in fly fishing. There are thousands of different flies available, but every fly will fit neatly into one of three different categories:

- **Dry Flies** – Flies which float on the surface of the water
- **Emergers** – Flies which sit in the water film
- **Wet Flies/Nymphs** – Flies which fish under the water

Generally, on rivers, you are trying to imitate the flies which are hatching now – i.e., the one's the fish will be expecting to eat. Once you have been fishing a while you will instinctively know what flies to use, but when you are starting out you will need a little help.

That's where the internet and this book are your friend, look at something like [www.which-fly.co.uk](http://www.which-fly.co.uk), this will show you what flies are expected to hatch in your locality and give you a few ideas on the flies you may want to try. See later in this book for our monthly hatch charts.

Alternatively, you can always watch what flies are around you and then select a fly of similar colour and proportion from your fly box.

# The Importance of Casting

The art of getting the fly onto the water is 'casting', this is what sets fly fishing apart from all other forms of angling. Remember that the weight you are casting is all in the fly line, so the general idea is to get the fly line to flex the rod so the rod acts like a spring. To do this we don't just 'waggle' the rod about, we perform a specific motion with the rod, the 2 main casting styles you will need for fishing rivers are the Overhead Cast and The Roll Cast.

A quick point to note, the best investment you can make when starting your river fly fishing journey is in some casting lessons.

## Putting Fly Line onto the Water

Thread the fly line, leader and tippet through the rod rings so there is around 2m of fly line out of the tip ring of the rod. Pull approximately one and a half to two rod lengths worth of fly line from the reel. Drop the tip of line into the water in front of you, with your rod tip low and the loose line in your free hand, wiggle the tip of the rod from side to side smoothly with the flow of the river, letting fly line slip from free hand onto the waters surface. This process means less thrashing of the fly line and almost no water disturbance or frightening the fish away.

# Casting Style (Overhead)

The Overhead Cast is used when you have plenty of space behind you, this cast is the easiest to master and practice definitely makes perfect – this cast can easily be practiced at home on the grass. The Overhead Cast cast can be broken down into 3 sections:

**The Pick Up:** With your rod tip low to the water and the line straight in front of you, peel the line off the water slowly, start to accelerate using your forearm - remember not to break your wrist - into the Back Cast.

**The Back Cast:** Go high and hard stopping at around 1 o'clock. Now wait and let the rod 'load' – you will feel this. Again, don't let your wrist break as the line loads the rod on the back cast. As soon as you feel the rod tip tug back move into the Forward Cast.

**The Forward Cast:** Accelerate your forearm forward. Don't apply too much power too soon; accelerate gradually to a brisk forward stop at 10 o'clock. Let your rod tip drop by about an inch at this stop and no more, it will ensure you deliver an efficient loop at your target. Watch your fly line, after the line straightens out, lower your rod tip to the water having presented the fly.

# Casting Style (Roll Cast)

The Roll Cast is used when you have very limited space behind you – like when you are wading in a river and there is a high bank directly behind you. The main steps to the Roll Cast are:

**The Pick Up:** Lift the rod towards you in a controlled and smooth manner. Keeping the tip of the fly line on the water (Surface tension is required to help load the rod in this cast). Allow the line to pass behind you to form a loop – called the 'D' loop - the bigger the 'D' loop, the more the rod will load. Stop when your hand is almost at ear height and the rod tip is at 1 o'clock. You should be facing in the direction you want to cast.

**The Forward Cast:** Move the rod forward from the 1 o'clock position, slowly, but gradually accelerating to a quick abrupt stop at 10 o'clock. Drive the cast through your thumb, closing your wrist at the 10 o'clock stop position. You must hold the rod still at this point and allow the fly line to travel forward to your target. I always think of this as the same action as hammering a nail into a wall!



# Watercraft

## What to look for

Watercraft is the art of looking at your surroundings and translating that into how you fish the river. At first glance there will not seem to be much happening but take a moment to sit down and actually watch the water and the air above it. You should see that there are numerous insects flying about (this will give you an indication on which fly to use), you will also see that the water is moving at different speeds all across the river - where these two speeds meet is called a 'seam'.

Fish want to expend as little effort as possible, so if a fish has to expend more energy to catch the food than the food will give the fish, it will not try to eat it. Where a 'seam' exists in the river the fish will usually sit facing upstream on the side which is slowest moving - remember the river acts like a conveyor belt, delivering food to the fish - it's much easier for the fish to sit in slow moving water (expending little energy) and then dart into the faster water to intercept any passing food. The other areas of a river which will hold fish are at the tail of a pool, where the 'white' water is and under any overhanging vegetation. A good rule of thumb is that if you can hear the water, that's where the fish will be.

# Fishing the Fly

Usually when you are fishing you will be casting the fly upstream (so the river will bring the fly back towards you).

As the fly comes back to you this creates slack in the fly line, leader and tippet. Your job now is to retrieve the slack in the line so if a fish takes your fly, all you need do is lift the rod to set the hook. Retrieving line is done by simply pulling the line (using your free hand) back through the rod rings.

This is not as easy as it sounds and will take a little getting used to, if you retrieve the line too fast it will move the fly (so the presentation will not be natural), but if you retrieve the line too slowly there will be too much slack in the system to allow you to set the hook. This can be even more tricky when you are fishing across multiple currents (that's where different styles of casts are used).

A good rule of thumb is to retrieve the line at a similar speed to the water is moving.

# Hooking and Playing a Fish

So, your dry fly is now on the water and you are fishing, what next? Assuming the gods are looking down favourably on you, i.e. you have selected the right fly and cast it to the right place. Hopefully a fish will try to eat it, by taking the fly you have presented to it, turning around and disappearing below the surface again.



Again, this is all about timing, leave it too long and the fish will realise that it has a mouthful of fluff and metal, too quickly and you will pull the fly out of its mouth. There was a saying that you should say the words 'God save the queen' and then lift the rod to set the hook, but I much prefer to do it on instinct, you will only miss a few before you have the hang of the timing.

In river fly fishing a small trout can be easily retrieved on the reel. However, the easiest way is to play the fish with the fly line in your reel hand while pinching the line between the rod handle and the index finger of the rod hand. When playing a trout it's very important that you keep the rod tip high. This allows the bend of the rod to absorb any shocks to the tippet as the fish struggles against the line.

When playing a larger fish you will need the help of the drag on the reel to subdue it. Normally when you hook a fish, you will have extra fly line coiled between the reel and the index finger of the rod hand. The challenge then is to reel the loose fly line back on to the reel. Once you have the line on the reel, you can use the drag system to tire the fish out.



# Catch and Release

The majority of river fishing is Catch & Release, which is the reason for the popularity of barbless flies, the hooks just fall out of the fish once they are in the net – an added advantage of barbless flies is that they are easily removed from clothing, and the back of your head! The main principle to adhere to are the 'Keep Fish Wet' principles:

**Minimise Air Exposure** - Just like humans, fish need oxygen to support essential bodily functions and keep them alive. What's different is that fish get their oxygen from the water (it is dissolved), not the air. Fish respiration ("breathing") involves moving water into their mouth and over their gills, whether by pumping it or when swimming with their mouths open.

**Eliminate Contact With Dry Surfaces** - Fish have a layer of protective mucus (slime) and scales that protects them from disease. Contact with dry, hard, or rough surfaces (such as hands, rocks, sand, and boat bottoms) can remove slime and scales making fish more susceptible to diseases, especially fungal infections. Keeping fish in or over the water, and holding them with clean, wet hands or a soft rubber net will help keep their slime layer and scales intact and the fish disease free.

**Reduce Handling Time** - Fish are wild animals and

handling is stressful for them, whether they are in your hands or in a net. Most fish that are brought to hand are still amped up based on the release of glucose to fuel their 'fight or flight' response to being caught. It can take hours for a fish to physiologically return to normal once it is released.

The longer you handle a fish, the more stressful it is for them, which compounds the stress associated with capture.

You can read more about the 'Keep Fish Wet' principles here: [www.keepfishwet.org](http://www.keepfishwet.org)



# River Hatch Chart

## January & February

Species	Imitation	Hook Size
Shrimps	Grayling Bomb Gammarus	14 to 16 14 to 18
Gnat/ Midge	Griffith's Gnat Poly-Wing Gnat Knotted Midge Indicator Gnat Olive Micro Midge	16 to 20 18 to 22 18 to 22 18 to 22 16 to 18
Large Dark Olive	Large Dark Olive Kites Imperial Red-Neck PTN White Tungsten Nymph	14 to 18 14 to 16 14 to 20 16 to 20

Brought to you by:

**barbless**  **flies**

# River Hatch Chart

## March

Species	Imitation	Hook Size
Shrimps	Infected Shrimp Gammarus	14 to 16 14 to 18
Gnat/ Midge	Griffith's Gnat Poly-Wing Gnat Knotted Midge Indicator Gnat	16 to 20 18 to 22 18 to 22 18 to 22
Large Dark Olive	Large Dark Olive Kites Imperial Red-Neck PTN White Tungsten	14 to 18 14 to 16 14 to 20 16 to 20
March Brown	Jingler March Brown CdC March Brown	14 to 18 14 to 18 14 to 18

Brought to you by:

**barbless**  **flies**



# River Hatch Chart

## April

Species	Imitation	Hook Size
Shrimps & Midges	Spot-On Shrimp	12 to 16
	Griffith's Gnat	16 to 26
Stonefly	Copper John Nymph	16 to 20
Grannom	Grannom Pupa	14 to 16
	Grannom Emerger	14 to 16
	Grannom Caddis	14 to 16
March Brown	Endrick Spider	14 to 18
	March Brown Spider	14 to 18
	March Brown CdC	14 to 16
Hawthorn	Hawthorn/Biblio	12 to 14
Large Brook Dun	Upwing CdC	14 to 18

Brought to you by:

**barbless**  **flies**

# River Hatch Chart

## May

Species	Imitation	Hook Size
Shrimps & Midges	Spot-On Shrimp	12 to 16
	Griffith's Gnat	16 to 26
Stonefly	Copper John Nymph	16 to 20
Mayfly	Mayfly Dun	10 to 12
	Loop-Wing Mayfly	10 to 12
	Mayfly Spinner	10 to 12
Medium Olive	Parachute Adams	14 to 18
Cinnamon Sedge	Elk Hair CdC	14 to 18
Iron Blue	Iron Blue Dun	16 to 18
Large Brook Dun	March Brown	14 to 18
Pale Watery	Sherry Spinner	14 to 18

Brought to you by:

**barbless**  **flies**

# River Hatch Chart

## June

Species	Imitation	Hook Size
Shrimps & Midges	Spot-On Shrimp Griffith's Gnat	12 to 16 16 to 26
Claret Dun	Adams Thorax	14 to 18
Mayfly	Mayfly Dun Loop-Wing Mayfly Mayfly Spinner	10 to 12 10 to 12 10 to 12
Medium Olive/ Blue Winged Olive	Parachute Adams	14 to 18
Cinnamon Sedge	Elk Hair CdC	14 to 18
Aphids	Krystal Midge	18 to 24
Large Brook Dun	March Brown	14 to 18
Pale Watery	Sherry Spinner	14 to 18

Brought to you by:

**barbless**  **flies**

# River Hatch Chart

## July

Species	Imitation	Hook Size
Shrimps & Midges	Spot-On Shrimp Griffith's Gnat	12 to 16 16 to 26
Claret Dun	Adams Thorax	14 to 18
Ants	Black Ant	14 to 16
Beetles	Coch-y-Bonddu	12 to 18
Medium Olive/ Blue Winged Olive	Parachute Adams	14 to 18
Caddis/Sedge	Elk Hair CdC	14 to 18
Aphids	Krystal Midge	18 to 24
Stonefly	Yellow Sally	10 to 12
Daddy Long-Legs	Daddyhog	10 to 12

Brought to you by:

**barbless**  **flies**

# River Hatch Chart

## August

Species	Imitation	Hook Size
Blue Winged Olive & Olive Upright	Blue-Winged Olive Indicator BWO Sherry Spinner	14 to 18 14 to 18 14 to 20
Black Gnat/ Midge	Griffith's Gnat F-Fly	18 to 22 16 to 18
Terrestrials	Indicator Beetle Winged Ant Daddy Long Legs	14 to 18 12 to 16 8 to 12
Sedge	Jingler Elk Hair Caddis White Tungsten Nymph	14 to 18 16 to 20 14 to 22
Autumn Dun	Blue-Winged Olive Copper-Head Mary	14 to 18 14 to 22
Medium Olive	Parachute Adams Greenwells Glory Sherry Spinner	14 to 18 14 to 18 14 to 20

Brought to you by:

**barbless**  **flies**

# River Hatch Chart

## September

Species	Imitation	Hook Size
Large Dark Olive	Orange-Head Mary PTN	14 to 18
	Parachute Adams	14
	Kite's Imperial	14
Iron Blue	Sawyer's PTN	16 to 18
	Lunn's Particular	16 to 18
Gnat/Midge	Griffith's Gnat	18 to 22
	Zebra Micro Midge	18 to 22
Shrimps	Olive Hot-Spot Shrimp	12 to 14
	Olive Shrimp	12 to 14
Caperer/ Sedge	John Storey	14 to 18
	IOBO Humpy	14 to 18
	White Tungsten Nymph	16 to 22
Beetles	Coch-Y-Bonddu	14 to 18
	Indicator Beetle	14 to 18
Other Terrestrials	Real Daddy	8 to 12
	Bibio Hopper	14

Brought to you by:

**barbless**  **flies**

# River Hatch Chart

## October

Species	Imitation	Hook Size
Large Dark Olive	Orange-Head Mary PTN	14 to 18
	Parachute Adams	14
	Kite's Imperial	14
Iron Blue	Sawyer's PTN	16 to 18
	Lunn's Particular	16 to 18
Gnat/Midge	Griffith's Sparkle Gnat	18 to 22
	Zebra Micro Midge	18 to 22
Shrimps	Olive Hot-Spot Shrimp	12 to 14
	Olive Shrimp	12 to 14
Caperer/ Sedge	John Storey	14 to 18
	IOBO Humpy	14 to 18
	White Tungsten Nymph	16 to 22
Pale Watery	Greenwells Glory	14 to 18
	Parachute Adams	14 to 18
Other Terrestrials	Real Daddy	8 to 12
	Bibio Hopper	14

Brought to you by:

**barbless**  **flies**

# River Hatch Chart November & December

Species	Imitation	Hook Size
Shrimps	Grayling Bomb Gammarus	14 to 16 14 to 18
Gnat/ Midge	Griffith's Gnat Poly-Wing Gnat Knotted Midge Indicator Gnat Olive Micro Midge	16 to 20 18 to 22 18 to 22 18 to 22 16 to 18
Large Dark Olive	Large Dark Olive Kites Imperial Red-Neck PTN White Tungsten Nymph	14 to 18 14 to 16 14 to 20 16 to 20

Brought to you by:

**barbless**  **flies**







Brought to you by:

**barbless** **flies**  
for the catch & release angler