

San Juan Wormin'

After he heard me speak at the November Mountain Home Trout Unlimited meeting, Mike Tipton asked me to write an article about how I fish the San Juan Worm during high-water generation cycles. Well, I thought, “what the heck, why tell half a story when the whole story is better.” So the article will include: tying a better worm, both high and low water wormin', playing with colors, and techniques that work for species other than trout.

I believe that every fly has two presentations. The first, does it look like the natural? The second, does it fish like the natural? If the answers to these two questions are both yes, then the tier has accomplished what he/she set out to do. But for some flies the answers are both, yes and no. The pattern looks good but fishes poorly. This is true of several worm imitations. There are a few very common mistakes when tying a worm. First, never use a bent shank hook because the worm will spin like a propeller in heavy current. A straight shank turned-down-eye hook rarely spins but it will wobble from side. Second, don't use a heavy wire hook. You are going to need a weight of some kind about 24 inches above the worm to get it to the bottom as an extra heavy hook will cause the worm to foul in the bottom debris and gravel. A light wire hook is preferred in low-water fishing and a medium wire in high-water. Third, never tie a worm with the material sticking out in front of the eye of the hook. Whether the worm is floating faster than the boat or slower than the boat, or slower than the current when dead-drifting, the pattern is drifting in a “V” with the head portion of the material folded back against the body portion. This is not a natural presentation and produces fewer fish. Next, the hook-bend should be in the middle of the worm, so using a 3X or even a 4X streamer hook is advisable.

The materials that worms can be tied from are endless, but Ultra Chenille seems to be the favorite. Ultra Chenille comes in three sizes – micro, medium, and large. Micro is my favorite size for low-water worms for trout and sunfish. Medium size works well in high-water for trout and slow or still water for bass and sunfish. Large size is good in extremely high-water (7-8 units on the White River and 2 units on the North Fork) for trout and any type water for bass. Large Ultra Chenille can be purchased at Blue Ribbon Fly Shop.

The possible colors for worms are just as varied as materials. The color that catches fish at any one time depends upon the clarity, color, and temperature of the water, the current volume, the amount of sunlight (early morning, late evening or midday), cloud conditions (clear to overcast), precipitation and wind (rain, snow, wind or calm). The best colors range from fluorescents (oranges, reds, pinks, and chartreuse), bright colors (reds, pinks, yellows, and greens), to dull pallid browns, greens and grays to black and sometimes blues or silver and gold flash – in other words, any color is possible.

Because of all the possibilities that might catch fish on any given day, the fishing guides I used to fish with and I developed a system that continuously caught fish all day. Winter and early spring is when most of our high-water trips happened, and because the days are so short at this time of year, we were out on the water from dawn until dusk. In the early morning we would tie two worms on at least a ten foot leader with a one and one half inch Styrofoam indicator about six inches to a foot below the fly line. At the end of the leader we would tie on a fluorescent red worm and on a two foot dropper tied on to the hook-bend of this worm a fluorescent orange worm. A “BB” split-shot would be pinched on a dropper about six inches above the first worm. The reason for pinching the split-shot on the dropper and not tying it on is that the dropper could be pulled through the split-shot if it became fouled with the bottom. If the split-shot had been tied on, the entire rig would be broken off. Let me review the setup again starting at the fly line. Six inches from the fly line is the indicator, eight foot down the leader from that is a dropper with a split-shot pinched on it, one foot from the shot dropper is the first worm (in this case a fluorescent red worm), and on the hook-bend of this worm is a two dropper with another

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worm on it (in this case a fluorescent orange worm).

In the low light of the early morning all of the trout would be caught on the fluorescent orange worm, but after a couple hours of daylight the trout would begin hitting the fluorescent red worm and not the fluorescent orange. When the trout were no longer taking the fluorescent orange worm, we replaced it with a fluorescent pink on a sunny day or a wine colored on a cloudy day. If the day was partly cloudy and partly sunny, we would remove the fluorescent red worm and put on both a fluorescent pink worm and a wine colored worm. On days when it was extremely bright, we would replace the fluorescent red worm with a fluorescent pink and used an earthworm brown worm for the dropper. Now about one or two o'clock in the afternoon, this process would start running in reverse until at dusk you were again fishing the fluorescent orange worm as the dropper. This was the best system when the water was clear or very slightly olive stained. If the water was stained with a lot of green algae, we would use a fluorescent chartreuse instead of the fluorescent red. Instead of using fluorescent pink and wine for the sunny and cloudy days, we substituted fluorescent yellow and olive. In the shortest, coldest, cloudiest dark days of winter, this system often never progressed past the fluorescent red and fluorescent chartreuse worms. In the brightest days of the summer we often used bright lime green and bright blue worms. Also in the summer, black worms will often work the majority of the day if fished above the bottom.

Lots of fishermen like to use eggs in high-water also. They work well even when there are no fish laying eggs. Why? Because they closely resemble the Oligochaete Worm that lives in the waters of the Mississippi and White river systems. When caught in the current, the Oligochaete worm takes on the shape of a short door spring, small ball or sphere. Small jigs work for this same reason. Here's one of my best kept secrets: if worms, eggs and jigs all work well at the same time, why not combine them to make a great high-water pattern. This sounds simple but the problem is the weight and hook of a jig. If the jig head is not fished off the bottom, it often fouls and the hook of the jig is too short to tie an egg with a worm behind. So tying the egg on a 3X or 4X streamer hook with a worm tied on behind it, then putting the weight a foot or two above the pattern is the best "fishable" method. I call these patterns "Wormy Eggs". My favorite color combinations are (egg color first then the worm color) fluorescent red with fluorescent pink, fluorescent pink with cerise, fluorescent orange with fluorescent red, fluorescent chartreuse with fluorescent red, and white with black. If you down-size the egg and worm, Wormy Eggs work well in low-water too.

Because I would rather catch smallmouth than trout, I live where I do; but I still like to apply trout tactics to smallmouth fishing. I read a book several years ago by Charlie Brewer named "Slider Fishing". In this book, Charlie made the statement that 90% of the worms eaten by bass of all species are four inches long or shorter. Believe it or not, medium and large sized material San Juan worms tied about four inches long catch smallmouth bass, shadow bass, spotted bass, and largemouth bass like crazy. One of my favorite hot summer day tactics is to use a one, two, or three weight rod, a nine foot 6X or 5X leader, a bright blood red San Juan worm tied weedless on a Gamakatsu G-lock hook with a 5/32 inch black or gold cone above it for a weight. I fish logs and log piles in the brightest part of the day with this rig. The bass are ganged up hiding in the shadow of the logs. Cast the worm on the other side of the log or log pile, swim it over the log then let it drop to the bottom between the logs. When the bass takes the worm it will start to move away slowly with it. **Don't set the hook yet.** Instead apply a little tension and ease the bass out from the logs then set the hook. Brewer also said in his book that a bass will hold a rubber worm for up to two minutes before releasing it. He also mentioned leading the bass out of the timber before setting the hook. A three inch Berkley Power Bait Trout Worm rigged weedless on the same hook will cast and work just as well for this tactic.

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Dead-drifting a San Juan worm under an indicator in a rush, especially one that empties into a deep pool, is also very productive.

It's All Fly Fishin',
Fox Statler