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Putting together the Mayfly Puzzle

Being in the right place at the right time and with the right flies is essential if you are to enjoy the best of Ireland's Mayfly fishing, claims **PETER O'REILLY**, who recalls a typical trip to Lough Corrib ➔



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continued

← **T**HE MAYFLY SEASON can best be described as something of a jigsaw puzzle. It was only when wondering what goes into making the perfect Mayfly day that I realised just how many parts must come together successfully to complete this annual puzzle.

Choosing the right lough, and being on the right part of it at the right time, using the right flies in the right way and, above all else, getting the weather just right, are just some of the pieces that must be slotted into their proper place. Is anything in this life simple?

Happily, it is possible to tip the odds in your favour with some advance planning and a proper understanding of the task in hand. I have at last reached the conclusion that the choice of lough is something of a lottery.

On form, any one of a dozen of the big loughs, from Erne in the north to Derg in the south, and from Sheelin in the east to

Corrib in the far west, can provide a memorable Mayfly trip. For me, the choice wasn't all that difficult. Just add the word "Mayfly" to Lough Corrib and Oughterard and you have the makings of a fishing trip to remember.

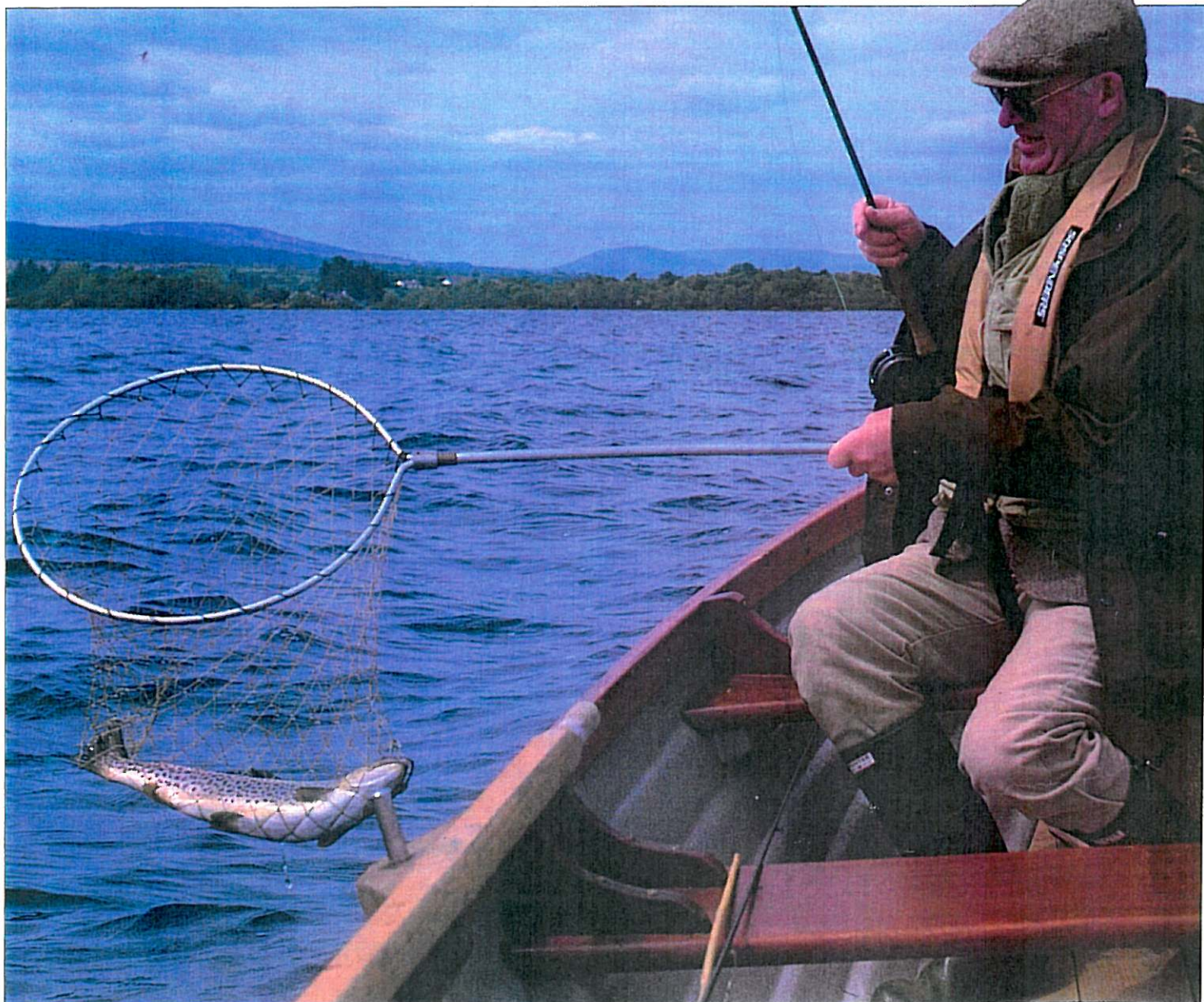
Generations of Mayfly fishers have long converged on this gateway to Connemara. That Oughterard had a railway station must have been of immense benefit to the travelling fishers in the first half of this century. Indeed, it was popular enough to boast a couple of hotels that catered especially for the gentlemen anglers and their families.

The number of anglers has mushroomed since those early days, and now they have the choice of staying in guesthouses, town and country homes, holiday cottages or at the many angling centres dotted along the shoreline.

Even so, finding somewhere to stay is not always easy, especially if you are looking for a place with its own gillie and boat jetty at the bottom of the garden! Such little havens are generally booked up months in advance and anglers often return year after year for the same week or fortnight.

My base for the three-day-long Mayfly trip was to be the Corrib County Angling Centre, run by Deirdre Forde. This brand new, and definitely angler-friendly centre, has its boats moored on the river only a moderately long cast from the front door. The location was ideal, but what about the fishing? Would all the essential ingredients of weather, fly hatches and the other pieces of the puzzle fit together just for once?

The fact that it is possible to have good Mayfly fishing, and



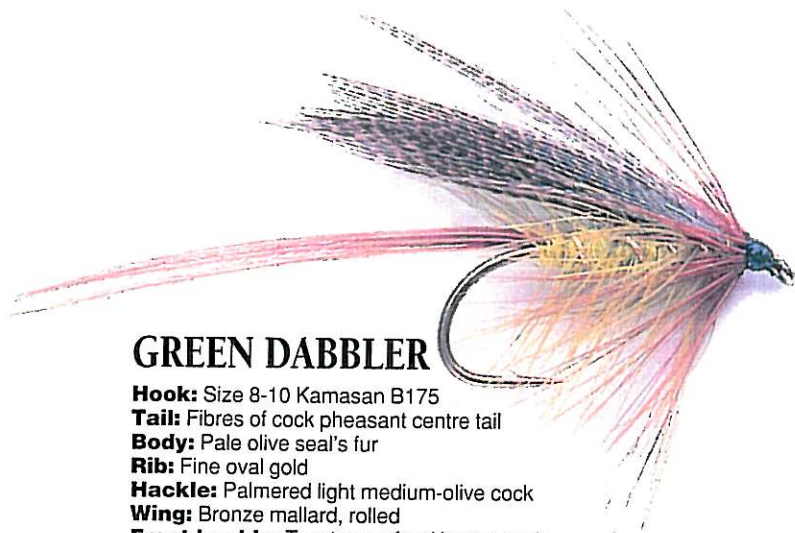
Peter O'Reilly with a Corrib four-pounder in the net.

enjoy oneself hugely, on Corrib, even if the conditions are only half right, is probably why anglers are being attracted to the lough in increasing numbers.

I was not quite half an hour in the village when the whole Mayfly experience began to unfold in the golden rays of early-morning May sunshine. Across the road at the tackle-shop-cum-filling-station, a small group of men grew larger, and amid the clang of outboard-motor petrol tanks the boatmen discussed where each one would take his guests for the day. To the uninitiated, all this early-morning chatter between friends might appear to be nothing more than light-hearted banter.

The truth is that every boatman is trying every trick he knows to discover where the other boatmen are going without divulging anything of his own plans for the day. Some will travel a long way by boat in search of sport, maybe as much as six or eight miles to Dooras or Inchagoill or the Carrick Shore, while others will stay close to the home bay and around the islands.

Down the street at the corner of the village square, another drama was unfolding. The youthful Mayfly sellers, bicycles carelessly propped against the nearest wall, eyed every passing car for a potential customer who might purchase a few dozen insects for a day's dapping. At 70p a dozen, it's worth risking being late for school!



GREEN DABBLER

Hook: Size 8-10 Kamasan B175
Tail: Fibres of cock pheasant centre tail
Body: Pale olive seal's fur
Rib: Fine oval gold
Hackle: Palmered light medium-olive cock
Wing: Bronze mallard, rolled
Front hackle: Two turns of red brown cock

Oughterard area peaks around May 20, so my visit was timed for May 16. Farther north on the lough it will be a few days earlier. But was my prediction anywhere near the mark? The view in the village was that, yes, the fly was up and the trout were starting to take it, but it would be a few more days before the Mayfly carnival proper began.

My first day's fishing was to be a solo affair, and, easing the boat out of the Oughterard River, I felt the lift of the first lough waves and viewed the almost unending vista of shoreline, islands and blue water stretching as far as the eye could see.

But where to begin?

Ahead were thousands of acres of water, some filled with trout and fly life, but many of them devoid of either, which is how Nature designed it all, I suppose.

The prospect of facing the lough alone for the first time can be daunting, which is why I always strongly advise employing a gillie for the first few days of the holiday. Even with 20 years' experience of the lough, including the making of a detailed fishing map with the help of the best of local knowledge, I found it difficult to decide where to go. Incidentally, I still find that fishing map invaluable and had a quick check before I set out. Since it was cold with a north-east wind and a hint of hail in the air, I headed for the shelter offered by the back of Carby Island before a possible move into Bog Bay and thence to Malachy's Island.

Selecting the best flies for a fishing trip has always been a matter of fascination coupled with not a little anxiety. To fish well, I must have complete confidence in my flies, and that means



LOUGH ARROW VARIANT

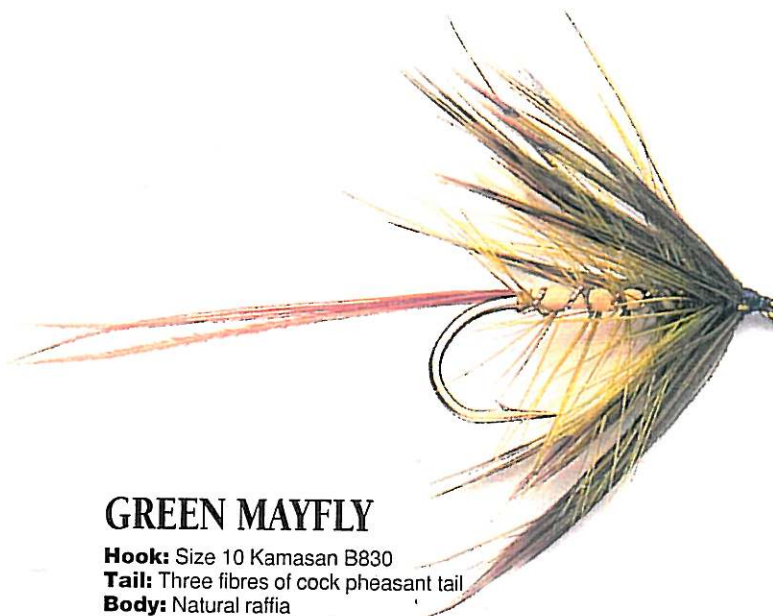
Hook: Size 8-10 Kamasan B175
Tail: Three fibres cock pheasant tail
Body: Natural raffia
Rib: Fine oval gold tinsel
Hackle: Badger cock palmered, with French partridge hackle dyed olive-green in front, and a grey partridge hackle dyed yellow in front of the French partridge.

The Corrib trout season is a long one, starting with the duck-fly in late March, then the lake olives in April before the arrival of the the Mayfly. August and September see the finale, when the fishing is based mainly on sedges and terrestrials.

Of all of these cycles, the Mayfly is by far the most certain to provide sport — when conditions are right. But "sport" means different things to different people. For some, it is a light-hearted affair, involving a few trout raised and perhaps a brace landed. For others, it is the size of the bag that counts, and I have seen anglers come ashore with more than two dozen trout. With such growing pressure on the loughs, I have a feeling that anglers are these days satisfied with far fewer fish and, if they average a brace a day and raise, hook, or lose a few more, they are quite happy.

The weather has more influence on the Mayfly fishing than anything else. The fishing day aside, the warmth of the spring will determine when exactly in May the fly will appear. In extreme conditions, this can probably vary by as much as a week or ten days. Given a mild spring, the fly will be early, and *vice-versa*, but if harsh weather coincides with the period of the main hatch, it may be delayed by several days. There is really no way of being certain, but it all adds a little extra spice to the enjoyment, the guessing and the anticipation.

I have always considered that the Corrib hatch in the



GREEN MAYFLY

Hook: Size 10 Kamasan B830
Tail: Three fibres of cock pheasant tail
Body: Natural raffia
Rib: Fine oval gold tinsel
Hackle: Medium-olive cock palmered with French partridge dyed olive green in front.



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having the right patterns dressed in the correct colours and sizes to suit the prevailing conditions.

Having too many patterns in the box can be confusing, and I tend to pin my faith on a carefully chosen few — but, naturally, there's always a new one to try! Even so, I would place my trust in a Lough Arrow Variant, Green Mayfly, Green Dabber, Green Peter, Sooty Olive and a Golden Olive Bumble, that marvellous fly at Mayfly time all over the west of Ireland.

The new one to join this select band was Purcell's Peter, given to me by someone who, when asking me to tie some, had praised its effectiveness and cited well-known anglers who claimed it as their secret weapon at Mayfly time.

As we passed the point of Carbry Island, two splashy rises came to nothing. Then, at the point of a rocky outcrop, a trout that turned out to be a borderline case in size took my Green Mayfly on the top dropper and was promptly returned. This was promising!

Another boat had just one trout on the boards but had found a lot of interest to the dapped fly. In the afternoon the temperature dropped further, the hours dragged by and the fruitless casting became monotonous. Even the dap wasn't moving anything. It was time to quit.

Tuesday dawned full of promise. The wind had turned into the south with a nice steady blow across Oughterard Bay, a huge expanse of relatively shallow water littered with underwater shoals, all of them ideal locations for both Mayfly and trout. The boatmen know the location of these prolific shallows to a foot, and many bear their own names, the Long Shallow, Black Rock, and Heatley's Rocks being but a few.

This was a day brimming with optimism — and for once we were justified. By 11 am the first Mayflies broke through and with them came the first trout of the day.

Dressed on a size 8 hook, the new boy Purcell's Peter was confidently pressed into service, first on the top dropper, where it evoked a lot of interest but little by way of solid takes. What

about trying it on the middle dropper? It matters little whether it was good judgment or an inspired guess, but it wasn't long in its new role before a heavily spotted four-pounder cut across the waves and grabbed it as we drifted on to the Black Rock.

But such special memories are often interlaced with lessons learned — not least of which is the importance of total concentration. Refusing to allow your mind to wander is particularly important when trout are on the move. When they aren't, it is all too easy to fall into pulling the flies back in the same old way...

Three days is not long enough to give to the Mayfly, but with one trout over 4 lb and a few smaller ones, all of them on the same day, it confirmed what Mayfly fishing is all about.



GOLDEN-OLIVE BUMBLE

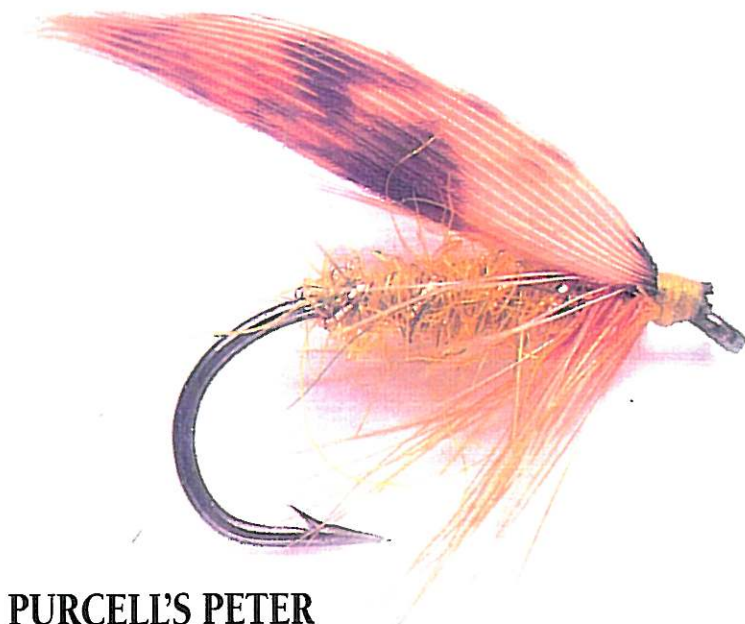
Hook: Size 8-10 Kamasan B175

Tail: Golden pheasant topping

Body: Golden-olive seal's fur

Rib: Fine oval gold

Hackle: Palmered golden-olive and medium red natural cock hackles with blue jay in front.



PURCELL'S PETER

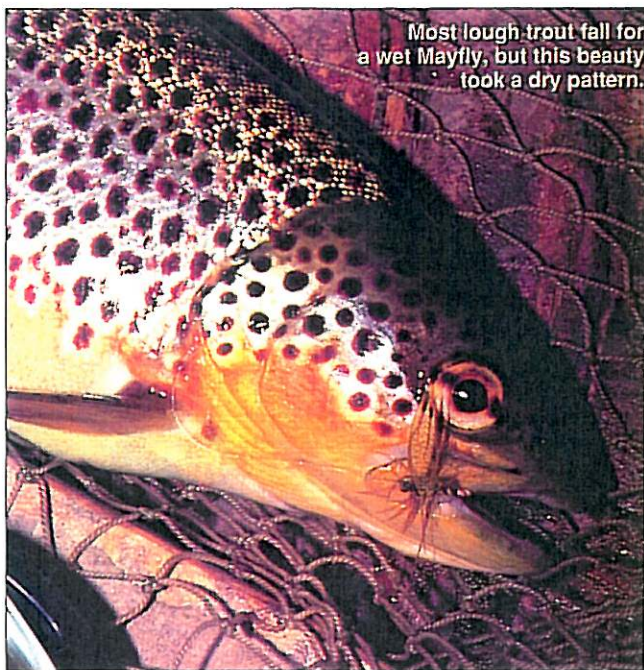
Hook: Size 8-10 Partridge L2A

Body: Olive-green and golden-olive with a pinch of yellow seal's fur

Rib: Fine oval gold tinsel

Wings: Hen pheasant wing secondary tied flat

Hackle: Light ginger.



Most lough trout fall for a wet Mayfly, but this beauty took a dry pattern.

FACTFILE

Corrib County Angling Centre, Oughterard, Co. Galway. Tel: 010 353 91 82678.

Accommodation, boat, engine and tackle hire. Gillies by prior arrangement.