

## Backyard Briefs

*A weekly column*

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Most all of us have seen adult mayflies, small almost translucent pale yellow insects that flutter, often in swarms, over water. These critters are one of the most important groups of bottom-dwelling animals found in fresh and brackish water. They are a vital link in our food chain because they eat algae and other aquatic plants thereby collecting the energy stored in these tiny plants and making them available to fish, birds and other animals that eat mayflies. Any fly fisherman will expand on the value of mayflies as food for game fish. It is the reason that these anglers tie lures that look like mayflies in three different stages of their maturity.

Mayflies spend most of their lives in the larval stage of development and are called nymphs (one of the stages anglers mimic), molting 20 or more times as they grow. They are equipped with gills and you can best identify them by their three tails. In fast moving creeks they often cling under rocks, eating algae and other vegetation growing there. In slower moving silt bottom streams and rivers, the nymphs make U-shaped burrows and collect algae and other plant matter by filtering it from the slow moving water.

When a mayfly is nearly mature it goes through a special molt, emerging from the water as a winged insect, which is not yet an adult (anglers mimic these also, calling them duns). Duns have very tiny hairs on their wings and are smaller than adults. This stage is very brief for the mayfly, usually lasting just long enough to dry off and fly to a nearby tree where it molts again into a true adult. Adults, known by fisherman as spinners, have long slim bodies, usually three extended thread-like tails, and wings that are held upright when at rest.

The adult phase of a mayfly's life is very brief—they have no mouthparts for they do not feed as adults. Their sole purpose is to mate and lay eggs. Males swim together while females visit these swarms and choose a male; pairs leave the swarm flying off to mate. The female then lays eggs in water, a few at a time as she flies, by dipping her abdomen along the surface. The eggs sink to the bottom where the cycle begins once again.