The Ngarigo family of flies

Peter Gibson

The eastern Monaro trout streams all rise within a few kilometres of each other in the country around Nimmitabel in south eastern New South Wales. A couple flow north towards the Murrumbidgee River and eventually find their way to the sea half a continent away in the Great Australian Bight, while others head south across the Monaro plains, dropping into the Snowy River and then the Tasman Sea at Orbost on the Victorian coast.

These are very small rivers, with waters so slow that drought often brings them to a complete standstill. They are born in cool, misty, damp tussocky country surrounded by granite boulders, snow gums and black sallies, but are amongst the warmest of Australian trout streams by the time they find the basalt plains of Monaro. They are shallow and the lack of streamside vegetation leaves them fully exposed to the sun, raising water temperatures to the mid twenties in summer. Despite all this they are recognised as some of Australia's highest growth rate streams.

One of the reasons for their productivity is the abundance of turkey brown mayflies, and no day is quite so pregnant with possibility as a drizzly November morning with the first turkey brown duns starting to drift off the surface of a Monaro creek, and a box of useful imitations in your pocket.

The mayflies generally known as 'turkey browns' form a substantial part of a trout's diet throughout the year. They are particularly important on eastern Monaro but are also found in other parts of New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania. The Monaro mayfly is probably *Atalophlebia albiterminata,* or what was once described as *Atalophlebia costalis,* but there are several similar species and they probably coexist in some areas. Close examination of nymphs and adults from the same stream sometimes reveals subtle variations in wing patterns and other characteristics but differentiation between the types is extremely difficult, even for experts. From a fly fisher's point of view the various species may as well be considered the same, but Michael Ball's research over the past couple of years has laid the groundwork for a better understanding of the various species and will undoubtedly lead to more refined patterns and techniques.

The fat, brown and tan nymphs can easily be found on a slow flowing stream. They usually have lighter tan marks on a dark brown background, particularly on the legs. Turn over a rock the size of your hand and you will find a dozen in various stages of development, from tiny nymphs a few millimetres long to large, dark winged nymphs in their final instar, with only a day or so to go before hatching.

During a hatch you might see the grey brown duns popping off the surface of the slower parts of a pool every few seconds. Some dally for up to a minute, blissfully unaware of the speckled danger lurking below, but most sit on the surface only briefly before flying briskly upwards and sideways in the breeze. The duns disappear into the surrounding paddocks to develop—probably within 24 hours—into spinners. The nervous squadrons of spinners, often containing dozens of the gigantic, glossy, black adults, many up to 45 mm in length (including the tails), are a common sight at dawn or in the late afternoon over any rippling section of the stream.

Turkey browns are usually considered a mild weather insect on Monaro. They are only occasionally seen in the cold, early weeks of spring but appear in greater numbers from late October. On a warmish November morning, with the temperature rising to about 16 degrees, a broken sky and the occasional light shower of rain or wave of mist, you might experience the turkey brown hatch of the year.

While they are more noticeable in these cooler, moister months they are just as active in the middle of the season, when the dry heat seems to drive off everything except the 'yellow winger' grasshoppers. Make a dawn trip in January or February and you will see clouds of the big black spinners hovering in the still air, although you might not have noticed a single dun hatch the previous day. As some species of mayfly are known to hatch at dawn or last light, it is even possible that some turkey brown duns hatch during the night in extremely hot weather.

The nymphs are adventurous throughout all stages of their development and even the immature nymphs are mobile enough to wander about and fall prey to trout. This makes a sunken nymph imitation a useful speculative fly throughout the year, not just when hatches are occurring. There are other mayflies of similar shape and colour in these streams, but most are slightly smaller. A brown nymph tied on a size 14 hook, smaller than the fully fledged version, is not only a match for an immature turkey brown but also a reasonable approximation of those other species.

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