

Blackfoot River, MT

By Michael Hamilton

You probably need a darn good reason to fly fish in western Montana in early August. The thermometer reaches triple digits. The blazing sun is unforgiving. The moon is waxing. Water temperatures hover in the upper 60s. Fish hunker down in deep pools after being pressured for several months. So what reason could I possibly have to challenge these suboptimal conditions? It just landed on my shirt. “So that’s what a spruce moth looks like,” I blurt out. Blackfoot Outfitters guide KynsLee Scott smiles and says, “The hatch is about to begin.”

My watch reads 10:30 a.m.

The western spruce budworm (*Choristoneura freemani*), aka spruce



PHOTO BY STEVE MAEDER

moth, is slowly being recognized as a big-league player in the majors of fly fishing. Many Montana rivers, including the Madison, Big Hole, Gallatin, Bitterroot, Rock Creek, and Blackfoot, experience a late-July–early-August hatch. The spruce budworm cuts

a wide swath through the forests of the Rockies, from Arizona and New Mexico northward into Colorado, Utah, Wyoming, Idaho, Oregon, Washington, British Columbia, and Alberta.

Unfortunately the moth, in its larval stage, is the destroyer of hundreds of thousands of acres of forest. In their report about the insect for *Forest Insect & Disease Leaflet 53* (U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service), David G. Fellin and Jerald E. Dewey write, “The western spruce budworm ... is the most widely distributed and destructive defoliator of coniferous forests in Western North America.” Forest entomologist Amy Gannon, pest management specialist with the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, Forestry Division, explains that these parasitic insects complete one life cycle, from

20 NORTHWEST FLY FISHING • July/August 2019

egg to adult, in 12 months: “In spring, when the larvae leave their silken-like sleeping bags nestled in treetops, they will eat conifer needles, bore into buds, and devour new foliage. They keep eating until they pupate into adults in late July and early August. Once airborne, the moths will mate and deposit their eggs, guaranteeing another cycle, then die after seven to 10 days.”

Looking downstream, over a boulder-strewn section of the Blackfoot



PHOTO BY STEVE MAEDER

River, we begin to see splashy rises. Simultaneously, armadas of mottled orange/brown winged creatures about the size of a quarter flutter in dense waves from the trees. “See how they occasionally dip into the river. They look like small butterflies,” Scott exclaims. For the next three hours, 14- to 16-inch trout, mostly rainbows, attack a size 14 imitation that I had tied based on a Bob Jacklin pattern. Scott says the most consistent imitation closely resembles an adult Elk Hair Caddis, tied with a blond or grayish wing, in sizes 12 through 16. She recommends using a 4- or 5-weight rod and a 9-foot leader with 4X tippet.

“I like to anchor up on rising fish rather than run and gun,” she



PHOTO BY STEVE MAEDER

explains. Her strategy is spot on. At the height of the hatch, we stop, cast, mend, watch for a take, then move downstream. As the hatch dwindles, we still have unanswered questions. Why do the moths land in the riffles and tailouts? Are they laying eggs? “Because they lay eggs in the conifers, maybe they are drawn to light, especially intensely bright, reflective surfaces of a river,” speculates Gannon.

Theories aside, consider moving the spruce moth hatch to the top of your list. No waders, little pressure, thousands of bugs on the water, and fat, hungry trout eager to rise. For guided trips, contact Blackfoot Outfitters, (406) 452-7411, www.blackfootriver.com.