



THE SLEEK, SEXY SALMONFLY,
EMPEROR OF ALL STONEFLIES.

So Many Stones

If you don't know me by now... BY MYERS REECE

GROWING UP on the Yellowstone River, I was familiar with two types of stoneflies: salmonflies and golden stones. When I moved to Missoula for college, I began hearing incessant talk about this peculiar “skwala,” for which I eventually gained the kind of irrational zeal endemic to stonefly-chasing flyfishers, particularly giddy springtime anglers. Then I started living in the Flathead Valley and had to recalibrate my insect taxonomy once again, now to include “snowflies,” or winter stones.

Fortunately, I'm a rigorous linguist, and I was able, with great perseverance, to expand my fishing vocabulary by two bugs. But then I began hearing of other stoneflies, shaking my entomological foundation to its core, followed by the kicker: I read a report coauthored by Jack Stanford, a world-renowned freshwater ecologist at the University of Montana's Flathead Lake Biological Station and an avid flyfisherman, that identified 100 species of stoneflies in the Glacier National Park and Flathead Valley area alone.

I had to confront the ugly truth that all fishermen must periodically face as a rite of our existence—I didn't know shit. I knew less than shit. I knew a small handful of stoneflies, broadly, yet there were 100 in my backyard.

The order of insects known as *Plecoptera* has more than 3,500 species worldwide. Anyone who flyfishes in Montana, even casually, is aware of the big boys—salmonflies and golden stones—in all their variations of species. They are big both because of their ubiquity in angling lore and because of their physical size. Their nymphs emerge from river bottoms and slither onto rocks looking very much like prehistoric creatures. When these dinosaur nymphs hatch, they produce bulky winged adults that are a dry-fly angler's dream.

You know this, of course, and depending on where you live

you may also be aware of the much-discussed but often-elusive spring skwala hatch. Hit it right, and you can catch nice fish all day on bushy dry flies, not long after winter has relinquished its grip. I've had skwala experiences ranging from decent to wonderful on Rock Creek, the Bitterroot, Clark Fork, Flathead, and Blackfoot.

But I've also had many days of nothing. By the end of each, I typically feel like a moron for chucking an enormous piece of fake meat repeatedly onto the surface of still-frigid waters, blindly embracing a simpleminded conviction that they can't resist it. I forget that both skwalas and cold rivers are reliably unreliable, not to mention how debilitating my stubbornness can be in the pursuit of dry-fly action after a long winter.

The truth is, we're often chasing an idea rather than a specific bug. In their report, “Stoneflies of Glacier National Park and Flathead River Basin, Montana,” Stanford and fellow researchers, Robert Newell and R. W. Baumann, identified two distinct species of skwala in the Flathead River basin, *skwala americana* and *skwala curvata*. A third species, *skwala compacta*, dwells in North American lakes. The *americana*, which appears in old literature as *parallela*, is the most widely distributed species in western Montana. If indeed you are chasing a skwala hatch in the Big Sky state, it's this bug.

But odds are that you're actually pursuing any one of about 20 Montana stoneflies that emerge in the spring, generally lumped under “skwalas.” These stoneflies, scattered across eight genera of the *Perlodidae* family, share characteristics that further cause anglers to misidentify them as skwalas, according to Stanford. The males have short wings and dart rapidly across river rocks, while females have “robust” wings and flutter across the surface depositing big balls of eggs.

But Stanford, who is retiring this year from Flathead Lake Biological Station after a distinguished 36 years as the institute's director, says it doesn't matter what you call these stoneflies. They're all fun as hell to fish.

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FEEL THE ACTION



“That’s what fishermen should know—that there’s a bunch of them out there,” Stanford says, “Fish aren’t discriminatory between them. If the bugs are floating down the river, the fish will eat them all.”

Stanford ties bucktail patterns on number 8 hooks that, with slight alterations, work as well for grasshopper imitations in late summer as stoneflies in spring. He dead drifts the fly, or occasionally gives it a little twitch.

“I’ve caught steelhead on the same fly, but I just put a little more attractor in it,” he says. “Steelhead and trout are always feeding on stoneflies. Even after going to the ocean, when they go back to the river it’s still stuck in their brain to come up for these fluttering stones.”

Stanford says that catching steelhead on dry flies is “the ultimate fishing for me.”

In the winter, I’ve wasted many freezing hours trying to capitalize on the presumed presence of snowflies, those small black winter stoneflies of the *Capniidae* family that I occasionally see chilling on sheets of ice, though never when I’m fishing. Later in the summer you’ll find me slapping grotesquely big yellow bugs onto the water—when the fish really just want mayflies—all provoked by a single sighting of a golden stone three hours earlier. Similar to skwalas, there are numerous species grouped under “golden stonefly.”

In between those hatches, after our toes have thawed from misguided *Capniidae* quests but before we begin depositing salmonfly patterns in riverside willows, we set our sights on the skwala, or one of its many cousins.

Stanford’s report appeared in the 2008 book, *International Advances in the Ecology, Zoogeography, and Systematics of Mayflies and Stoneflies*, a title that excites me more than it should. Stanford was also one of the book’s editors, just one more footnote in an influential career of exploring stonefly ecology. His research has taken him to remote destinations like Russia’s Kamchatka Peninsula, as well as Papua New Guinea, in the southwest Pacific Ocean, north of Australia. He even once

hosted an international symposium on stoneflies and mayflies at his institute on the shores of Flathead Lake. The man knows his bugs.

Stanford says the Flathead River basin, due to its ideal latitudinal and longitudinal location within the Rocky Mountains, is a hotspot of stonefly biodiversity. Two continental divides—the Great and Laurentian—converge at Triple Divide Peak in Glacier National Park, making it one of the only places in the world that feeds rivers destined for three different oceans: the Pacific and Atlantic, and the Arctic via Hudson Bay. Stanford says he once identified 42 different stonefly species at a single site along the Flathead River. Among the 100 species listed in his report, there are 45 genera and nine families.

My own research has been more primitive. Once, in the spirit of immersive entomology—a distant cousin of method acting—I ate a large salmonfly nymph. At one point, it started crawling out of my mouth before I slurped it back in. It was 3 a.m. and I was 21 years old. You get the picture. But if I had hoped to gain a better understanding of a stonefly’s appeal to trout, alas, my experiment failed. The bug tasted as disgusting as it looked. It was one of many mistakes that night.

I’m not sure what it says about me that I read scientific studies on stonefly ecology for fun. What I do know is that the subject matter is an ideal way to ruin a party conversation, unless you attend those parties as Stanford. Anyone else will be less receptive to the following icebreaker response: “No, I haven’t been paying much attention to the Republican primaries, but did you know there are actually 45 distinct genera of stoneflies in northwest Montana alone?!”

However, later in the night, when the weak have already gone to bed, and your inner trout rises under a full moon, the night will be yours. After you bite into the hard exoskeleton of a giant insect five seconds removed from the river, to the raucous applause of several dim-eyed spectators teetering precariously close to the water’s edge with drinks in hands, you’ll think to yourself, “Who’s interesting now?”

COREY KRUITBOSCH



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