

Book Review: “Selective Trout”

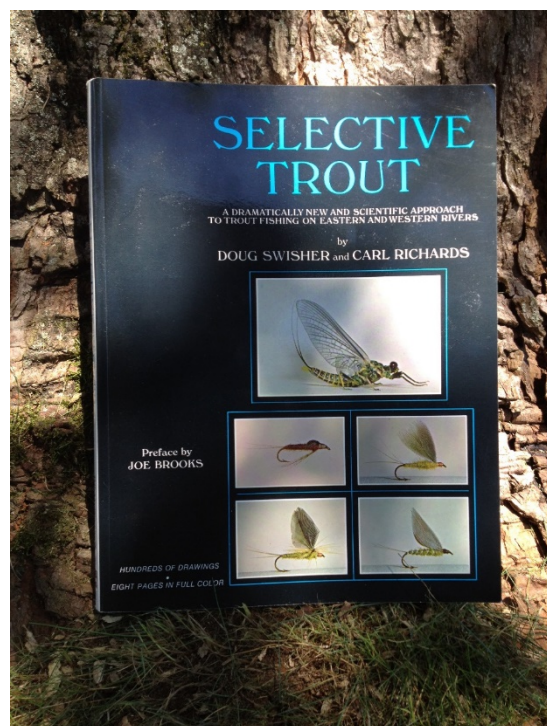
Buddy Randolph

[This is one in a series of reviews of classic fly fishing books, with “classic” meaning works that have been widely recognized as seminal for decades. Please send comments to buddyrandolph@comcast.net. –Buddy]

“Selective Trout” by Doug Swisher and Carl Richards (New York: The Lyons Press, 1971, paperback) has been hailed as a ground-breaking work in fly fishing’s history, and has also been sitting unread on my bookshelf for years. It turned out to be an incredibly detailed, even scholarly work, mostly about mayflies. There are no dramatic stories here about ten-pound trout on 8X tippets but rather a catalog of about two years of research on insects in and around trout streams.

Both living in Michigan at the time, Doug Swisher was a plastics salesman and Carl Richards (now deceased) was a career dentist. They loved fly-fishing for trout and had been frustrated by inadequate fly patterns to match hatches when trout became selective, so their first collaboration was simply taking good pictures of insects in order to tie better flies. It turns out these authors worked to resolve the same issue Vince Marinaro addressed in “A Modern Dry-fly Code” about twenty years earlier, inadequate fly patterns, but with more help from technology and a wider scope of research locations. What began as two guys and a camera ended up mushrooming into a consuming passion involving, according to [Doug Swisher’s website](#), “expensive cameras, scuba suits, aquariums, microscopes and books on entomology. Traveling coast-to-coast to check out various trout waters was also part of the plan.” Incidentally, this website also says that “Selective Trout” became “the best-selling fly fishing book of all time.”

The book begins by looking at trout selectivity and the importance of having really good imitations of what such trout eat. They note that glancing at a bug on the water from four feet away can easily lead to mistakes, and that having a box filled with only generic, bushy flies can all but ensure mistakes. Next come descriptions of their methods using nets, seines and magnifying glasses but then going well beyond streamside collection: Richards kept about six large aquariums in his basement and stocked them with aquatic



insects. Bringing the bugs to the camera enabled Swisher and Richards to use elaborate photography equipment, and this arrangement also allowed walking down to the basement to photograph emerging duns instead of waiting by a creek for such an event. Thirty-two superb color photographs of aquatic insects and selected flies to imitate some of them are included.

After noting that trout often become selective in slow, nutrient-rich water, they cover the surprising behavior of such fish often preferring small insects over large. Further, imitation size becomes more critical as the size of the naturals diminishes, because small differences between real and imitation are larger as a fraction of the total size of smaller insects. This is a new concept for me, that a #12 fly might imitate a #14 insect more successfully than a #22 fly would pass for a #24 bug.

Next, about half of the book is devoted to mayflies. Knowing lifecycles of different mayflies can help with both pattern selection and presentation, particularly with emerging and egg-laying behaviors. With this as a foundation, the authors researched how mayflies are viewed by fish and compared (quite harshly) how common fly patterns looked. They then presented original patterns to better imitate what they saw, some including what they considered their *“single most important discovery:”* *“...flies tied with spun-fur bodies on 3x fine-wire hooks need no hackle to float them.”* Swisher and Richards are credited with pioneering No-hackle flies, finding that they better represented the mayflies they observed from a trout’s point of view. It’s noted that they had just started working with a new body material called “polypropylene;” I don’t see a lot of 3x-fine hooks on the market today and wonder if their patterns work just as well on heavier hooks with lighter body materials. Their fly patterns also included extended-body wiggle nymphs and paraduns, incorporating varying degrees of originality. Here they emphasize one more point with italics: *“mayflies will emerge at the most pleasant time of day for the season.”* Reading this, I felt a lot better about sleeping late on fishing trips to the Smokies.

The mayfly section concludes with three big chapters of hatch data, broken into early, mid and late seasons. This is the real meat of their meticulous reference material, showing family, genus, species, emergence behavior, size of the naturals and their habitats for an extensive number of mayfly hatches. It’s divided into East, Midwest and Western sections of the US and includes detailed descriptions (by body part) of all life stages that are significant for fishing. Not something to curl up with in front of a fire but possibly a great source of information for anyone trying to catch picky trout.

Caddis, stone flies and midges are covered together in one section and very lightly in comparison to the mayflies, a choice explained by noting the larger importance of mayflies to trout in the streams they studied. Next is a short chapter on terrestrials with selected patterns for quite a few. As with Marinaro’s patterns, I realized how much they would have appreciated foam as a tying material, especially with grasshoppers.

A subsequent chapter called “The “Super Hatches”” is an attempt to distill a ponderous amount of mayfly information into a practical guide. Swisher and Richards identify eight or nine mayflies in each of three areas of the US that are “of major significance,” and in many cases only “one or two stages” of each matter much for fishing. This is all presented in four tables and a list of fourteen fly patterns, a tight format that dishes up the information in a very digestible form. Here also are detailed instructions for tying some of their suggested patterns.

Concluding “Selective Trout” are chapters on night fishing and barbless hooks, the last one an appeal to stop routinely killing trout that was really ahead of its time. Finally there’s an extensive appendix explaining how to identify mayflies; it’s one of several places in this book where the reader realizes how much work these guys did.

This review is much longer than planned but perhaps that provides a sense of how much solid material is here. Looking back over my notes I’ve found numerous points that struck me as very important to my fishing but that I’ve failed to mention because I don’t want this review to rival the size of the book itself. For example, using blended colors when the naturals vary, under the assumption that “the trout picks out the color he wants to see,” seems potentially brilliant. In the absence a good color match, the authors found that imitation wings that are darker than the naturals work better than ones that are lighter; this nugget also seems like it should be immediately helpful to flyfishers and fly tyers. To sum up, I fully understand why this book is so important to fly fishing. It’s an information-rich volume filled with original research data, distilled action plans, original fly patterns, entomological instruction, and more and still more. Read the prose and skip the mayfly descriptions for now, but keep them handy for dealing with your own “Selective Trout.”