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Maximize Your Salmonflies: The Big Bug's Itinerary

MONTANA IS IN THE MIDST of a wondrous thaw. It's no coincidence that flyfishers' thoughts have started drifting toward what many consider the apex of the fly fisher's season: the salmonfly hatch. The timing of the hatches is always a crapshoot, but if history is any indicator, the hatches do have a certain, albeit dubious timetable.

Follow along for a fishy and unreliable schedule of when you might be able to expect the biggest of the big.

Smith River: According to locals, this is one of the first big hatches, commencing in mid- to late May. But if you don't have a float permit, you'll be out of luck. If you do have a float permit, you'll probably still be out of luck, owing to runoff.

Clark Fork: The end of May typically ushers in the first salmonflies on the Clark Fork. The stretch between Rock Creek and Missoula is your best bet for a thick enough hatch.

Bitterroot River: Another early hatcher, the Bitterroot's salmonflies tend to appear the first week of June on the upper river. The bugs migrate up the forks, typically by the middle of the month. With a little luck, runoff will have subsided and the river will be fishable.

Rock Creek (Clark Fork tributary): Rock Creek is known for scenery and stonefly hatches. This hatch also gets going in the first week of June. It is one of the best times to be here, but be warned: runoff might leave dangerous obstacles in the river, often around the microburst area. Consult a local fly shop before launching your boat.

Blackfoot River: Anglers can expect to see pteronarcys adults by the middle of June, with the crescendo occurring around June 25. If an errant bull trout takes your imitation – whoops! Savor the moment, fire off a photo, and get it back in the water.

Big Hole River: The hatch here is my favorite for one big reason: it's much more than just salmonflies. It's pale morning duns, several varieties of caddis, green drakes, golden stones, yellow sallies, and more mayflies. The fish's eyes are almost permanently fixed upward during this magical time. It's often busy, but won't necessarily be.

And it's got zillions of salmonflies. On June 19, 2009, some friends and I played hooky to float at what

we hoped to be the peak – we must have been close. Salmonflies and golden stones were wafting through the sky from the water to the peaks. It looked like a World War II movie with legions of bombers advancing toward the enemy. I was unaware that stoneflies hatched in those numbers.

Floating the hatch can be a white-knuckled affair, so only launch if you're competent and confident.

Upper Madison River: By June 20th or so, Varney Bridge is often covered with veined wings and thick abdomens. The hatch will migrate upstream to the slide by early July. It gets quite busy here so many locals tend to fish elsewhere. But make no mistake – it's good.

Lower Madison River: If the hatch occurs at all, it's usually around June 25. The past couple years have seen slim to no hatch, though. When it's on, it's good, since the water should be clear and the trout get somewhat big here (and everywhere else in Montana).

Stillwater River (Yellowstone River tributary): The hatch often accompanies a thicker golden-stone hatch, so a big Stimulator or Madam X might be your best fly. It generally coincides with runoff, so this can be a tough one to hit. Salmonfly nymph patterns would be a good bet year round.

Boulder River (Yellowstone River tributary): Everything about the Boulder River screams stonefly water, but the salmonfly hatch here is sparse, and often occurs during the Boulder's significant runoff. The golden stone hatch is good, though. More than one species of golden stones appear and the river has generally come down enough to fish (but remain vigilant – it's still fast and high).

Gallatin River: Here, the salmonflies get a late start, which is perfect since most of the other hatches are winding down by early July. The hatch can be thick, and the crowds aren't quite as bad, since boats won't be floating and the average fish size is a touch smaller than nearby rivers. It usually starts in late June or early July around Axtell or Williams Bridge.

On many other smaller waters – if it's fast-running pocket water – there's a chance for salmonflies. In Carl Richards, Doug Swisher and Fred Arbona's book *Stoneflies*, they noted that 46 of the 56 western rivers they studied had salmonflies.

Salmonfly nymphs require a certain number of degree-days to hatch (for example, three days of 40-degree water temperature equals 120 degree-days), so a specific water temperature won't trigger their emergence. The exact number of necessary degree-days is unknown and impossible to measure, anyhow.

Hatches always move upstream, as the water temperature warms.

With all of this said, if spring conditions are particularly warm or cold, or if the previous winter's snowpack was particularly high or low, this all goes out the window. On every June 20th, there's a salmonfly somewhere taunting a trout, opening the door for anglers. Go fish.



PHOTO BY WILL JORDAN