



A 16-inch brown trout batted

my cheap mouse imitation like an orca on a seal, launching itself and the fly into the air. A few minutes later, another trout of about 15 inches repeated the commotion. It was a cloudy April afternoon near Twin Bridges, Montana, and the fauna seemed particularly active.

A family of otters squealed and wrestled under the bridge, the streamer bite had been strong all day, and I even swung up a trout with my switch rod before a 17-inch brown trout slammed my little brown mouse fly—my first mouse-caught trout ever. It was a smashingly successful half hour.

But that's rare. Most anglers in the lower 48 don't have the confidence to stick with a mouse longer than 20 minutes, and rarely see any action in that time. So it made me wonder, what happened that particular afternoon? What made it so special that the fish decided mice were on the menu? Was there a full moon? Was there an overly active mouse population in that stretch of river? Or did my flies just look like succulent protein moving too seductively to ignore? Je ne sais quoi?

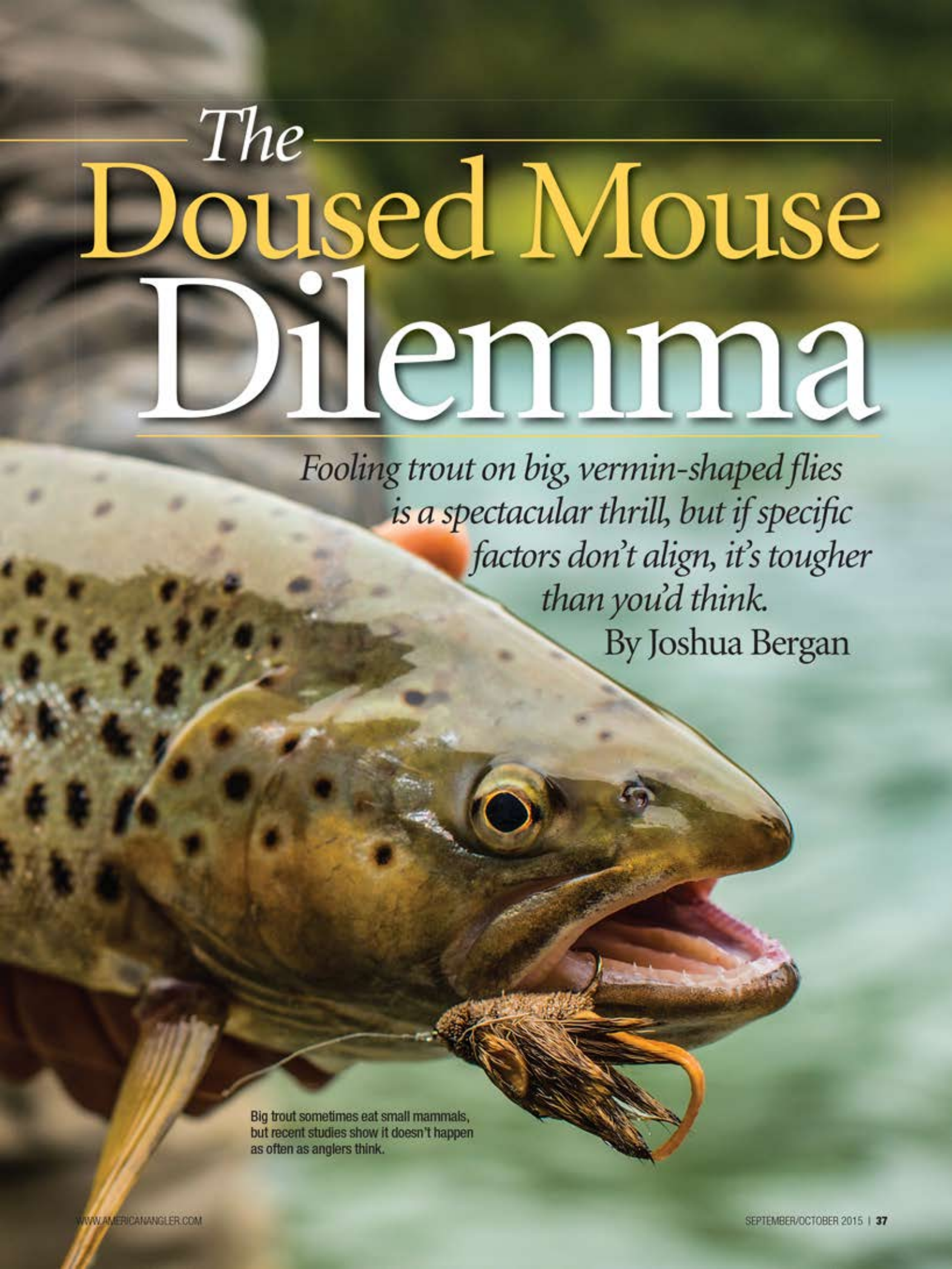
So I set off to get some answers. If anglers better understood the what, when, and why of fishing mouse flies, maybe it would instill the confidence to change the game when nothing else seems to be working. The first step is becoming acquainted with the mammals themselves, similar to how we know stoneflies, scuds, and sculpins.

TIM ROMANO

The Doused Mouse Dilemma

Fooling trout on big, vermin-shaped flies is a spectacular thrill, but if specific factors don't align, it's tougher than you'd think.

By Joshua Bergan



Big trout sometimes eat small mammals, but recent studies show it doesn't happen as often as anglers think.

ROB ELAM

Beyond mice

There are actually several different mammals that fall under anglers' "mouse" classification. Mice, voles, shrews and lemmings are, for all intents and purposes, the same thing to those of us this high up in the food chain—small, furry, beady-eyed scampers. But to trout, for whatever reason, these animals are quite distinct. After I read a few studies and talked to both mammal experts and fishermen, one thing stood out; salmonids can prefer shrews over other small mammals, including mice.

Shrews are small, cylindrical-snouted mammals, similar to mice (to humans anyway), except smaller. They are common throughout North America and usually range from about 8 to 15 cm long from nose to the tip of the tail, are gray or tan, and are not actually rodents; they're part of the mole family.

A recent finding published in the journal *Ecology of Freshwater Fish* (*Episodic Predation of Mammals by Stream Fishes in a Boreal River Basin* by Peter J. Lisi, Kale T. Bentley, Jonathan B. Armstrong, and Daniel E. Schindler) revealed fish have a taste preference for shrews over mice after a 13-year study in Alaska's Wood River basin. In the more than 2,400 rainbow trout and 1,500 grayling examined, researchers found 75 shrews and one vole in the fish's collective stomachs—zero mice and zero lemmings, even though populations of all four mammal species were present in the geographic area.

As further evidence of the study's findings, a photo showing a dissected rainbow trout from Alaska's Togiak National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) with the remains of 20 creatures laid out beside it recently made the social-media rounds. At first, all 20 looked like mice, but it was later determined they were actually shrews.

Furthermore, on a recent three-day "mousing bender" on New York's Upper Delaware River, *Field & Stream* magazine's fishing editor Joe Cermele found small mouse flies to be more effective than standard large ones.

"When most people think of mouse flies, they think of big, bulky patterns made out spun deer hair," Cermele says. "And although we did have some success with flies like that, most of our hits and fish came on a really simple foam mouse with a really slim profile."

One theory as to why trout prefer shrews to mice relates to the shrews' inability to swim, thus making it easier to capture, as opposed to its size. But only scattered empirical evidence supports that idea.

The Right Time

The study previously mentioned also noted fish showed more shrew predation than others in some years, but unfortunately, those high-predation years were not regular or predictable, unlike other non-annual fly-fishing events like a cicada hatch or years when New Zealand's mouse populations explode.

"We found that both large-bodied arctic grayling and rainbow trout episodically consumed shrews, every two to three years, with particularly large peaks occurring in two of the 13 years," the study said. Those two peak years were 2003 when researchers found eight total shrews consumed among all sampled fish, and 2011 when they found 56. The other two- to three-year spikes (2001, 2006, and 2008) were relatively minor in comparison.

"The population swings of most small mammals in the continental U.S. are not very predictable," Dr. Tim McCay, head of the Biology Department at Colgate University in upstate New York said. This makes it difficult to anticipate full seasons of enhanced mouse fishing, but doesn't mean those years don't happen unannounced, or that smaller stretches or individual days won't be hot, like the day I experienced on the river mentioned earlier.

It is also noteworthy that about a third of those fish from that study (at least 13 of 40) that consumed any shrews, consumed multiple shrews, with up to eight found in a single fish

COURTESY OF TOGIAK NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

The stomach contents of a rainbow trout from Alaska's Togiak National Wildlife Refuge (bottom left) proved to be the exception, not the norm. Trout simply don't key in on small mice often. However, for those rare moments when fish are hungry for mammals, skate a floating pattern like a Morrish Mouse across the surface (top left), or slowly work a subsurface fly to mimic a water shrew diving for a meal (right).

TOSH BROWN

in 2011. This fact, combined with the trout's documented gluttony at the Togiak NWR suggests there are times or situations when fish gorge on mammals.

Explaining the "why" is another issue altogether.

There are many possible explanations for the high-predation events and years, like high populations of fish large enough to eat mammals, high water that flushes mammals into the rivers, cooperative weather that allows for the mammals' large-scale survival, lack of other food for the trout, and plenty of other food for the shrews' other predators. Or could it be that fish simply get hot on shrews for the same, seemingly enigmatic reasons they prefer any other food source. There's simply no data to support any conclusive claims.

"Sometimes you just have to have faith and give it a go," Ken Morrish of Fly Water Travel and designer of the well-known Morrish Mouse pattern said. "When everyone and their brother is fishing size 18 nymphs under indicators and a big 'ol rodent swims by, there are plenty of big fish that see it as a novel and worthwhile opportunity."

However, Morrish also noted situations that seem more conducive to mousing.

"I feel that there are a few trends dictating when fish are most willing to eat mice. The first is when the overall water temps are fairly warm or warming. . . I also feel that well-rested water fishes really well with mice."

Cermele also noted his favorite times.

"If you're out fishing in the evening, instead of bailing at dark, stay an extra hour or two and mouse it. I can't say I'd recommend the all-nighters. . . The major crushes were all very early in the night (sunset and within the first two hours of dark) or just before or right after dawn. It seemed like a magic-hour scenario."

Some argue that adding a stinger hook is key, but that was not Cermele's experience.

"Only one fish fell to a stinger, which tells me that if they really want it, they're going to eat the whole thing and get the main hook. Even on flies with stingers, it was the big, main hook that planted."

You also might consider dropping a dry, nymph, or streamer off the back of a mouse, which would allow you more fishing opportunities and buy you more time with the mouse.

Shrew Kids on the Block

Different shrew species can be dominant in different areas. For example, in upstate New York, it's the masked shrew (*Sorex cinereus*) and the northern short-tailed shrew (*Blarina brevicauda*), while in the Northern Rockies, there's the common shrew (*Sorex araneus*), Hayden's shrew (*Sorex haydeni*), the montane shrew (*Sorex monticolus*), the northern water shrew (*Sorex palustris*), Preble's shrew (*Sorex preblei*) and the vagrant shrew (*Sorex vagrans*). While a

BEN ROMANS

CHERNOBYL SQUIRREL

HOOK: Gamakatsu B-10S, size 1/0.
THREAD: Black Big Fly thread.
WEED GUARD: 40-pound monofilament.
TAIL: Black rabbit strip with ½" tag of 20-pound monofilament tied to tail to keep it from fouling.
BODY: Black rabbit strip.
LEGS: Three yellow medium round rubber legs knotted and trimmed to create feet.
SHELLBACK: 1/8" black Evasote foam.

SCUBA SHREW

HOOK: Streamer hook, size 2 to 4.
THREAD: Brown or gray UTC 140 denier.
WEIGHT: Yellow dumbbell eyes.
BODY & TAIL: Chinchilla Zonker strip as the tail, then palmered over the hook shank.
EARS: Leather from used elk- or deer-hair patch.

MCNEIL'S MAD MOUSE

HOOK: Gamakatsu B10S, size 2 or 4.
THREAD: Brown UTC 140 denier.
WEED GUARD: 40-pound monofilament.
TAIL: Black ultra chenille, trimmed Zonker strip, or rubber band.
BODY: Deer hair, spun and trimmed into a teardrop shape (leave tips long on top).
LEGS: Knotted black round rubber.
EARS: Leather from used elk- or deer-hair patch.
EYES: Red stick-on eyes.
WHISKERS: Thin moose hair.

NO MISS MOUSE

HOOK: Long Fish Skull Articulated Shank with trailing steelhead egg hook, size 2.
THREAD: 3/0 black Kevlar.
TAIL: Dark gray Zonker strip (remove fur).
BODY: Dark gray crosscut rabbit strip.
OVERBODY: 1/8" black and yellow closed-cell foam (one strip each).
LEGS: Orange medium round rubber legs.

BETTER MOUSE

HOOK: Bass stinger hook, size 1/0.
THREAD: 3/0 black Kevlar.
TAIL: White Zonker strip (remove fur).
UNDERBODY: Brown sculpin wool.
OVERBODY: 1/8" tan closed-cell foam.
LEGS: Off-white medium round rubber legs, knotted and trimmed to create feet.
WHISKERS: Black medium round rubber legs.
EYES: Black permanent marker.

small mouse pattern such as a size 6 Morrish Mouse will imitate most species, creating your own representation of the local fare might give you an edge.

The northern water shrew sets itself apart from the rest. It can actually live on mid-stream rocks and will forage underwater on the same invertebrates that trout eat, meaning it can be imitated with a streamer and fished from shore (as opposed to casting toward the banks). It ranges from the majority of Canada to New England and Appalachia through the Midwest and to the Rocky Mountains.

"I have caught countless fish mid-current, even in large rivers (on mice)," Morrish said.

I have fished what I call the Scuba Shrew, which is basically a gray Zonker strip palmered over the shank, with an inch or two trailing to represent a tail. Maybe add a piece or two of silver tinsel or CDC to mimic the air bubbles that get trapped in their fur as they swim, and add a long, Clouser-style snout. Fish it slow and steady, allowing it to pop back to the surface now and then. It can act as something of an attractor streamer, which in my experience, elicits strikes.

Vole Oriented

Trout and grayling will also eat voles, which exhibit more predictable population swings, according to Dr. Kerry Foresman, a mammalogist at the University of Montana.

Indeed, a 2010 fish survey at Idaho's Silver Creek revealed the creek's brown trout were keying in on voles—some fish had multiple specimens in their bellies.

"The vole population exploded," said Matt Miller, Senior Science Writer for the Nature Conservancy, which owns a large public section of Silver Creek, on the Conservancy's blog.

"There were voles everywhere – you'd see them in fields, in sagebrush, running across roads. One night, I took a dark walk through the preserve and constantly heard the click-click-click of tiny teeth, as thousands of voles fed on grass."

The rodents in this case were montane voles, which range from 5- to 8-inches long including tails, and are brownish-gray with white underbellies. Their fur usually hides their ears, so imitations are simpler to tie.

"All of these (vole) species exhibit population fluctuations depending upon weather patterns over several years which may provide increased rain and thus vegetation which precipitates breeding," Foresman said. "Populations will build up over a two- to five-year period with high numbers but are followed by a crash, and the cycle starts over. The long-tailed vole most often exhibits a three-year cycle, the prairie vole a two- to four-year cycle, and the meadow vole a two- to five-year cycle."

During Silver Creek's vole boom, a Nature Conservancy staffer reportedly landed a 28.5-inch trout while fishing a vole pattern at night (a photo accompanies the Nature Conservancy's blog post).

ZACK BOUGHTON

One of the best times to fish mouse patterns is in the early evening after other anglers venture home.

Actin' right

A common misconception about fishing a mouse fly is that it should be boisterous and splashy, as if it was drowning. But if you've ever seen a mouse in the water, you might know that they swim rather smoothly, and are rarely in distress. Feel free to vary the speed of your retrieve slightly, but keep it steady. A hand-twist retrieve, usually reserved for stillwater, can be effective.

Effectively fishing mouse patterns is foreign and difficult for most anglers, but that's part of the practice—and there really is no greater substitute for research, and most importantly, first-hand experience. Wherever or however you decide to fish mouse or shrew patterns, the best advice is to simply jump in with both feet if you hope to buck the trend. North American salmonids just do not eat many terrestrial vertebrates, making mouse fishing more akin to swinging for steelhead than typical trout fishing. But we all know that magic happens with rod in hand. Do a little homework, tie one on, and cast with confidence. That's all anyone can really do.

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