Chucking Big Buggers for Big Browns

It’s not the most elegant fly-fishing technique. But it is the best way to catch trout the length of your arm. By John Holt

There are many methods for taking large trout with a fly. Some even work. In a vain quest for angling immortality, I have tried most techniques. Over the years my favorite, both in terms of success and fun, has been to use a Woolly Bugger. I’ve caught more big trout on this streamer than all other patterns combined (which may be partially a function of the amount of time I use it). I’m convinced the Woolly Bugger succeeds because it mimics so many foods that big trout eat: large stonefly nymphs, sculpins, dace, and crayfish. As it flutters and pulses or even just dead-drifts through a run or brushy bank, a Woolly Bugger looks like something a fish would want to devour.

I first learned just how effective buggers can be more than 25 years ago one October day on the Bitterroot. John Talia, my sometimes angling mentor, showed me how truly wicked they could be in taking large brown trout. Back in those days, we had the river pretty much to ourselves. John knew anyone else we’d run into, one or two other outfits at the most. We’d all say, “Hello,” talk about the fishing, the weather, the baseball playoffs, and then go our merry ways.

About halfway through the float, John pulled the boat onto a wide gravel bar formed directly below an enormous, emerald pool that must have been over a dozen feet deep. John tied on a heavy black boger. He cast the fly far up the pool along the inside bank, where he allowed it to sink, roll, and twist its way to the bottom. The bugger worked around in the eddy for a long time—nearly a full minute—before John stripped in most of the slack and started to impart life to the imitation with quick jerks of his line. After the third pull he felt a powerful tug in the opposite direction. When John lifted his rod to set the hook, an enormous brown blasted through the water surface before running and then leaping back and forth across the pool. After a few minutes, he brought the fish to the shallows near shore.


“I’d say 23 or 24, but the thing is a boxcar,” he said and laughed. “This brown’s as thick as I’ve seen in a long time. Four pounds anyway. Buggers are the best when they sink down and dreg the bottom. The big ones can’t resist.”

I followed his lead, casting my boger downriver and across, letting it sink, then stripping the fly. I was immediately into a trout that turned out to be a brown just short of 20 inches. Using buggers for the remainder of the float, we caught a number of sizeable browns, rainbows, and one fat westslope cutthroat. I was sold.

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Trout on the feed

By “big” browns, I mean fish that are larger examples of this species in a particular water. For most rivers, these are fish over 20 inches long.

Why do buggers work so well for big browns in particular? As they mature, brown trout switch from eating tiny insects to larger foods such as crayfish, sculpins, and stonefly nymphs. Buggers come in a variety of sizes and colors, mimicking all of these foods. By using a Woolly Bugger, you can catch a fish on its first cast just like it did on the day it was born. It’s the best way. It’s not the most elegant technique, but it’s the best way to catch trout the length of your arm.
consuming much bigger prey. Big rainbows and cutthroat also feed on larger foods, but not to the extent that browns do. Another reason is that browns don’t tolerate bright sunlight as well as other trout species, spending much of the day in deep holes, under submerged trees, or along undercut banks. You need a big, heavy fly to get to those fish.

As for time and weather conditions, I’ve occasionally taken browns in bright sunlight in the middle of a July afternoon by dredging my bugger deep. But usually, the nastier the weather the better. When the sky has lowered and rain or even autumn snow moves in, browns become less wary and browns become deadly. During these conditions, time of day doesn’t matter, but in fair weather, early morning or dusk and later are best. Lower light levels offer the illusion of security for feeding trout.

One of the best times to catch big browns on buggers is just after spring runoff. All trout in a river, big and small, are moving into feeding lanes to gorge on insects and smaller fish unavailable or hard to catch in the rolling waters of the snowmelt surges. The mountains of ice and snow have melted and washed away to the Pacific. Rivers and larger creeks no longer resemble flood footage from the Weather Channel. They are in an ebbing summer mood, running with soft burbling sounds, afternoon sunlight bouncing off the riffles and lazy seams in the current.

Big, ugly patterns

On the small river I’m fishing this afternoon, Steller’s jays squawk loudly among themselves over something important, maybe a dead field mouse, as they jump around in the darkness, swirling among clumps of exposed roots. Very big browns hold here, but they are hard to move. It’s tough to get their attention with so much food—rainbows, nymphs, drowned crickets—floating right into their big jaws. A large pattern, in this case a size 4 brown Woolly Bugger, tied with a mixture of golden brown, tan, and off-white feathers in a Palmer hackle, is my favorite pattern. The Palmer hackle makes the feather filaments stick straight out from the hook shank, causing them to pulse in the current like a living creature when the pattern is retrieved in short jerks. To give the bugger weight, I wrap the hook with a dozen off-white feathers in a Palmer hackle, my favorite pattern. The Palmer hackle makes the feather filaments stick straight out from the hook shank, causing them to pulse in the current like a living creature when the pattern is retrieved in short jerks. To give the bugger weight, I wrap the hook with a dozen

The key, I think, is to use a streamer pattern you believe in. Faith in your fly can become territorially aggressive and big rainbows and cutthroat beef up in preparation for the cold, hard times of winter, all of them attacking streamers with abandon.

Though spring and fall are best, the bugger works well any time of year. No matter the season, I can tie on this bulky pattern with confidence that, played down deep into the dark water where arm-length trout lurk, I will eventually make contact and feel that thrush in my fly rod that mirrors the hard beating of my heart. Using Woolly Buggers is fly-fishing’s version of hunting for big game. Nothing gives me more pleasure.

Sun Shunner

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