

FFF Fly of the Month

Featured Fly - Oligochaete Worms



Oligochaete (ol-i-go-ket) Worms

By Fox Statler

Could Every "San Juan Worm" That Has Ever Been Tied Be Wrong??

I bet you are all saying, "That this guy has lost it." Am I crazy? Nope, and here is the story.

In June 2003 I had a guide trip with an 82-year old fellow and his son. Because of his age, I wade fish him only in gravel that is as flat as a parking lot. I admire his courage.

On this particular day we were fishing at the Norfolk Dam pool on the North Fork of the White River in north central Arkansas. The water seemed to be colder than other years and the gravel was caked over with an inch thick crust of olive-brown, dead algae. The fishing was slow, but the fish were good size. The fly had to be dragging on this yucky algae in order to get a strike.

We were using a dark gray "Planarian" imitation dropped under a "White River Dead Drifter Sowbug" and catching fish 14 to 17 inches long. While they were enjoying themselves, I was busying myself with the awful algae on the gravel. I backtracked our trail into the water and noticed that the fish were feeding wherever the algae crust was broken by our boot tracks.

The water was about 18 inches deep and a large flake of the algae had floated downstream from where it had been disturbed. I placed my boot next to it. Then I yanked my foot up quickly trying to create an upwards current that would carry the algae chunk near the surface, where I could capture it without getting too wet. The algae chunk disintegrated from the sudden current, and a pink object caught my eye. Quickly I thrust my hand into the water below the object and let it descend into the palm of my hand. Slowly raising it out of the water, I realized that I had captured a worm as it began to crawl about. I dropped it back into the water and something very strange happened. I caught the worm again and dropped it. I must have done this 10 or 15 times, each time the same thing happened. Letting that worm go, I quickly found another one to test. I dropped it and the same strange thing happened again.

After my guests quit for the day I returned to the water to investigate my worms. I caught about 50 worms in the next two hours and believe it or not, they all did the same thing. I borrowed a worm from a bait fisherman, but his worm acted differently than the worms in the river. I had never heard another fisherman mention what I had seen. I knew I had discovered something that could change worm fishing forever.

Once home I searched "aquatic worms" on the internet. I read and read and read but nowhere was there a mention of what I had seen. I read about what lives in tailrace waters of Arkansas. I found that there are over a hundred species of aquatic worms. Some even have eyes. The worms that live in our lakes and rivers are called Oligochaete (ol-i-go-ket). For some reason, I like the ring of that word.

When you drop an earthworm in water it tries to wiggle free of it. Oligochaete do not. Instead they coil up like a corkscrew with a short tail and fall to the bottom quickly, then disappear into the gravel, mud, or debris on the bottom. This is what I saw. As long as the Oligochaete worm is falling or moving in the water column it is coiled up tight like a spring or corkscrew with a short tail. Once it stops moving it quickly crawls away. So not all of the San Juan Worms are tied wrong, just the ones you fish in fast water. I don't know if the aquatic worms in all rivers and lakes exhibit this behavior.

The adult worms in my river are 3 to 4 inches long and about an eighth of an inch in diameter. They are shell pink to cerise on the main portion of their bodies and have a bright red tint on the ends due to the collection of blood vessels at the hair-fiber breathing apparatus. A mud line, usually dark gray, can be seen under their skin

What I observed has brought about several changes in tying the worms that I fish on the White River system. Now instead of tying a single colored worm, I always color the ends with red permanent marker pen. Because of the shape that the Oligochaete worm assumes when not on the bottom, it is easy to add weight. Different amounts of weight can be added to help the worm sink to near the bottom in fast water. When fishing high water caused by a heavy generation cycle of the dams, I use a worm with as many as ten wraps of .035 lead wire. This is enough weight to replace the "BB" split shot, 18 inches above the worm that I had been using. During low water periods, I generally prefer patterns with six to eight wraps of .020 lead wire. However, I do carry a few worms that have no weight in them. I use these when dropping a worm under another weighted fly.

This pattern is a great imitation of an Oligochaete Worm caught in the current. I have discovered that Oligochaete Worms work extremely well in fast water for trout, smallmouth, and other species of fish. I generally start the morning using a fluorescent red worm. Change to the fluorescent pink by mid morning. Fluorescent shell pink or shrimp pink for midday. Follow these colors in reverse for the afternoon and evening. The wine colored worm works well on very cloudy days from mid morning to mid afternoon. The reason the colors of the worms that work well changes during the day is due to the angle of the sun, cloud cover, and the color of light that is penetrating the water. This is also true of San Juan Worms and Jigs.

Here is my imitation for a drifting Oligochaete Worm, it is simple and versatile.

Materials List:

Hook: 2170 series Daiichi Bent Shank hook, sizes #12 - #4.

Thread: Red or Fluorescent Red 8/0 Uni-Thread.

Weight: None to 8 -10 wraps of .035 lead wire depending upon the amount of lead wire needed to get the worm down.

Body: Ultra Chenille, small to medium, length 3 to 4 inches. In colors of Fluorescent **Shell Pink**, Fluorescent Pink, Fluorescent Red, Shrimp Pink and Wine.

Marker: Red Prismacolor Pen or Red Permanent Marker Pen.

Tying Steps:

Step #1: Place the hook in the vise. Wrap the amount and size of lead desired in the middle of the shank of the hook. Start the thread at the eye of the hook. Wrap toward the bend of the hook, tie down the lead (if used).

End at the beginning of the hook bend. Cover the thread wrappings with a light coat of glue.

Step #2: Cut the desired length of Ultra Chenille for the body. Color the last ¼-inch of each end lightly with a red pen. Tie in the Ultra Chenille at the beginning of the hook bend leaving a ½- to ¾-inch tail. Wrap the thread forward to the middle of the lead. Loosely wrap the Ultra Chenille to this point and tie down with two wraps of thread. To help make the wraps loose and uniform, wrap Ultra Chenille over a small knitting needle or toothpick.

Step #3: Wrap the thread to the eye of the hook. Loosely wrap the remainder of the Ultra Chenille to the eye of the hook. Tie down the Ultra Chenille. Whip finish and glue the threads of the head.

Fox's first sentence intrigued me a little, but I have seen half a dozen ways to tie a San Juan Worm. However, as I read it became more interesting. Maybe we should all look at the worms in our lakes and rivers. The looseness of the Ultra Chenille lets the worm move a little making it look alive. If your worms are smaller, just use smaller hooks and Micro Ultra Chenille. I did some heavy handed editing to cut his article to my guideline size for a Fly of the Month article. The full article is on his website: http://www.fishinwhattheysee.com/Page_16.html He also has a couple of tying steps pictured. (Bob Bates, FOM Editor)

Please Credit FFF Website or FFF Clubwire with any use of the pattern.
You can direct any questions or comments to flyofthemonth@fedflyfishers.org