

Chuckling 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 play-offs, 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 bugger. 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

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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.

"Hell of a brown, Talia," I said. "What do you think? Twenty-six inches?"

"I'd say 23 or 24, but the thing is a box-car," 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 dredge the bottom. The big ones can't resist."

I followed his lead, casting my bugger 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.

From that point on, I worked on learning how to use Woolly Buggers and other big, ugly streamers, a process that didn't take long. Soon I was catching more large trout. As the years sped by, I refined the process to the point where, no matter where, when, or under what conditions I fish, I always catch at least one or two big trout, usually browns, using a brown, olive, or black bugger. I'm convinced it is the best, most consistent fly pattern for big brown trout.

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



GET IN HERE A big brown trout comes to the net in a deep side channel of the Bighorn River. Deep pools and runs with overhead cover are prime spots to target brown trout with Woolly Buggers and other big streamers

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 of day 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 buggers 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 roiling 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. Now they are in an easygoing 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 pines and aspen. Several deer, fluffy white tails flicking, always flicking, graze lazily on the fresh green grass in the wide, open meadows next to the river. The slightest, softest touch of warm breeze curls around the valley, drifting across the flats and slipping through the pines. The water pushes easily against my legs as I wade slowly across the gravel bottom, out to a position where I can reach a deep run along the far tree-lined, brushy bank. The bank here is deeply undercut, water running in the darkness, swirling among clumps of exposed roots. Very big browns hold here,



SUN SHUNNER Browns don't like bright light and seek the shade of overhanging banks, sub-merged trees, or deep water. Big browns feed on minnows, sculpins, crayfish, and large nymphs. A Palmer-hackled Woolly Bugger (right) will pulse in the current like a live creature.



but they are hard to move. It's tough to get their attention with so much food—minnows, 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 twists of thick .035 wire, tie the fly to a 2X tippet, and pinch a split shot onto the tippet at the knot against the eye of the fly.

Other big, ugly patterns like the Marabou Muddler, Clouser Minnow, and Matuka Sculpin also work well. The key is to use a streamer pattern you believe in. That allows you to maintain concentration and determination during the inevitable long periods when you are not catching anything but need to be ready should a fish strike. This is important, especially in the often rough weather of early spring and late fall. Cold wind, rain, sleet, and snow can douse the flame of even the most diehard angler. Faith in your fly can keep the candle lit.

When fishing the Woolly Bugger, I get it down deep to where big browns hang out. A strong tippet and leader ensure I can horse a trout through any tree roots and strong current into the open where I'll have a chance at

playing the fish, perhaps tiring it, and bringing it to my feet. This afternoon the water on this big river looks the same as it always does to me, full of promise and mystery.

Down and deep

I move into position and begin working line out to cast far enough for the bugger to drift long enough to sink down deep under the far bank. Along the bank in the current runs a line of foam, indicating a conveyor belt of current delivering a steady supply of food to the fish below. The fly plops into a small eddy just above the bank and sinks down into the darkness. I maintain contact with the fly by gently keeping light tension on the line as the bugger works down to near the bottom. I keep the rod tip just above or even in the water, pointing it toward the route the underwater fly is following. Lifting the rod tip would bring the bugger to the surface, which I don't want. I can now feel the fly bouncing off rocks by the gentle but slightly rough pings transmitted through the line, the rod, and my hand. Then the fly pauses. At first I think it's caught on a wad of tree roots, which I know from past experience are down there and hold some big fish. But then I feel a slight tug, ever so slight, and I know it's a trout. I pull my

rod back quickly and firmly upstream, parallel to the water, to set the hook. Then comes a throbbing that jumps up the line as the brown rattles its head and tries to pull even farther back into the tangle and undercut.

I steadily back away from the bank, giving the big fish no line, until I feel the branches of willows brushing my back from the bank behind me. The powerful trout fights to stay deep in the pool, and it's like dragging a brick through thick cement. Then the line slackens—have I lost the fish?—but only because the brown has raced toward the water surface. The huge fish, wild and angry, rips clear of the river, shaking its broad flanks and sending water droplets onto the grasses nearby. The trout slams back into the river with a splash before leaping and crashing downstream, sucking line out of my reel until I'm into my backing. I clatter along the bank and thrash through knee-deep water, chasing the fish, rod pointing directly at its fleeing form. Forty yards below me the trout stops, sounding the depths of a deep pool.

"Got you," I say to no one.

The brown holds steady, then flies into the air once again before trying to make another run. But each attempt to break free

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becomes shorter, weaker, until I finally pull the tiring trout to my feet. I drop to my knees in the water as I always do when I want to touch a truly special fish. Sliding my hands into the river and along the brown's belly, I measure its length against a mark on my rod—later tape-measured at 24 inches. The fish is heavy, solid, and muscular, colored in gold, rich brown, copper, and crimson with black spotting and clean white fin tips. I twist the bugger from the upper jaw, keeping my fingers away from the wicked rows of large, razor-sharp teeth, and wonder at the powerful perfection of this fish. I watch for several seconds as the sunlight glows around the trout's body like an aura. The fish holds motionless in the water, perhaps aware that

its fate now hangs in some strange, far-off balance. I ease it back toward the depths of the river, pointing its head into the current so it can be revived by the flow of water through its gills. Returning energy vibrates through the trout's body to the tail and up into my hands. I let go and watch the fish slowly swim off and disappear in the darkness on the other side of the stream.

Sure, catching trout with dry flies is a blast. But there is something intoxicating about probing dark, hard-to-reach runs, undercuts, and logjams with a Woolly Bugger. That's especially true in fall, when browns 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 throb 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. 🐟



TO FIGHT ANOTHER DAY A spent two-foot-long spawning brown is revived in the current before release. Big fish like these rarely take a fly from the surface and are usually caught in deep holes.

TOP TO BOTTOM: BULLBUCKLEY; GINNY HOOT; JOSHUA BERGAN