

Fly Fishing for “Coarse” Fish Before 1900

by Andrew Herd



Whitewell, Yorkshire: a good place for a spot of fly fishing for dace?
Plate by W. Linton and W. R. Smith in T. C. Hofland, Esq., Edward Jesse, ed.,
The British Angler's Manual (London: H. G. Bohn, 1848), facing page 332.

ONE OF THE MOST MEMORABLE fish that I ever caught took my fly in a Hat Creek riffle in northern California. We were “high-sticking” for trout in the fast runs between the trailing weed. If you haven’t had the pleasure, this technique involves holding the rod high and trundling a weighted nymph on a short line along the bottom with only the leader wetted. I’ll confess that because this isn’t exactly my favorite way of fishing, my mind had wandered, but if you have a longer attention span than mine, the idea is to strike every time the leader hesitates.

Somewhere around the twenty-third trundle, as my thoughts settled on whether my waders really had a leak in

the left knee or not, a fish pounced on the fly as it passed near my left foot. When he stopped to think it over a second later, he was a full thirty yards away. Then, deciding that the circumstances were not entirely to his liking, my quarry set off at such high speed that he would probably have spooled me had not a weed bed gotten in the way a hundred yards downstream. The guide gave a whoop and forged through the water after the fish, while I recovered line and ran down the bank.

I didn’t get to see my catch clearly, but the guide’s face was a picture when he retrieved it. I guess I had better not repeat exactly what my companion said, but the gist of it was that I had caught a

sucker and that his intention was to release it pretty quick. Although I never found out what it was, exactly, I can make an educated guess. The only fish I know that would give that kind of sport at home is a barbel, and I have only ever managed to catch one on a fly. In the United Kingdom, barbel are what we call “coarse” fish, angler’s shorthand for every creature that swims in fresh water that isn’t a trout or a salmon; in the United States, they are known as “white fish” or “suckers.” Fly fishermen don’t go out looking for them very often, but when they do, they become part of a long fishing tradition, as I did, that summer day in California.

Early writings about coarse fishing

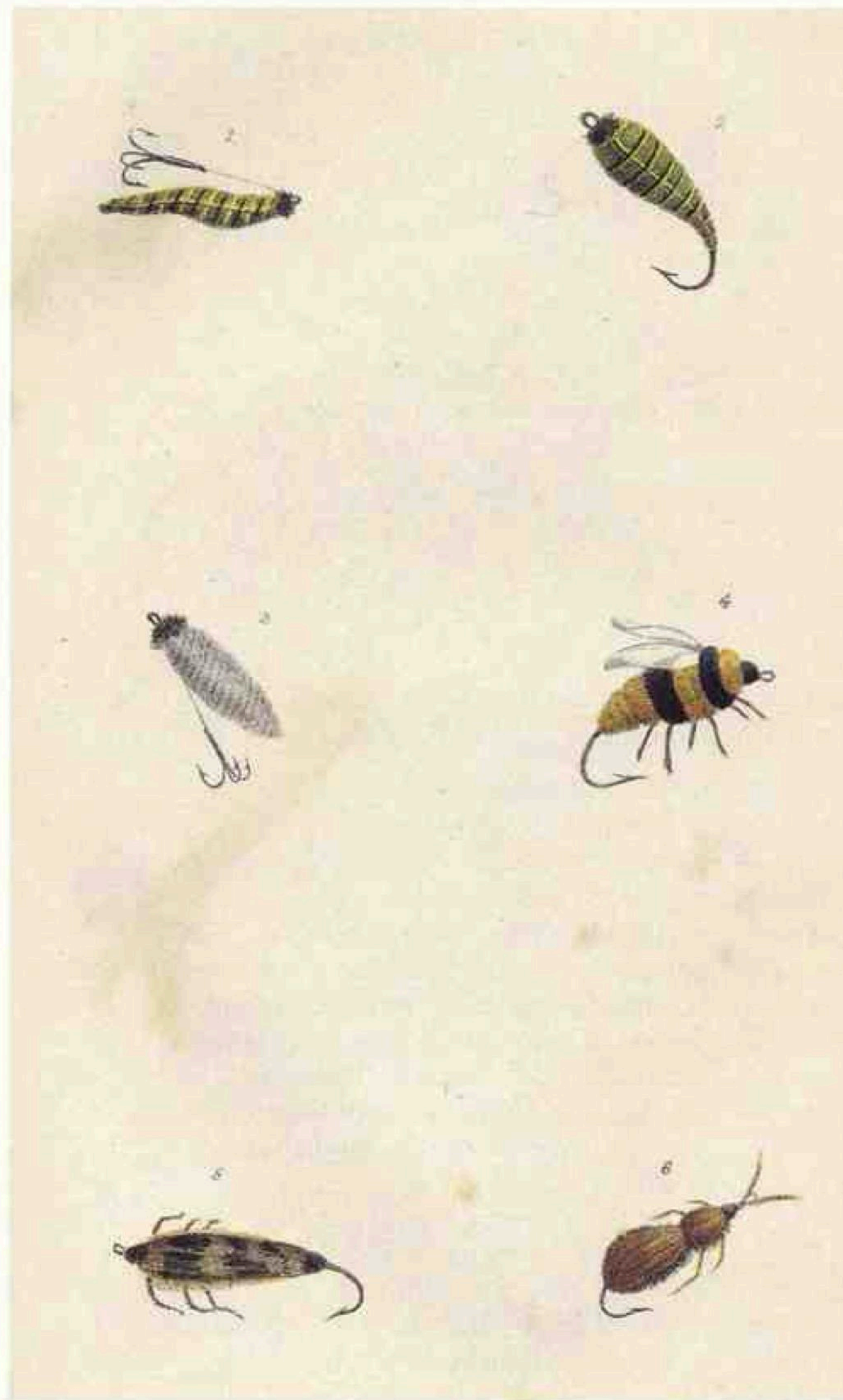


Plate 9 from Francis Francis's *A Book on Angling*, showing imitations of grubs and beetles. Note the rather wonderful bumblebee imitation, a pattern he specifically recommended for chub.

with a fly are scarce. A *Treatyse of Fysshynge wyth an Angle* mentions fly fishing for roach and dace;¹ the Tegernsee manuscript talks of fly fishing for carp, pike, catfish, bream, perch, and burbot;² and there is another passing reference to fly fishing for dace in *The Arte of Angling*, published in 1577.³ Apart from these snippets, the general lack of references is rather odd, because there is no particular reason to fish for trout with a fly in preference to any other fish. Most coarse fish are delicious if cooked properly, and some, like the chub, the carp, and the barbel, can match a trout for speed and surpass it for power.

By the seventeenth century, when the literature on fishing started to take off,

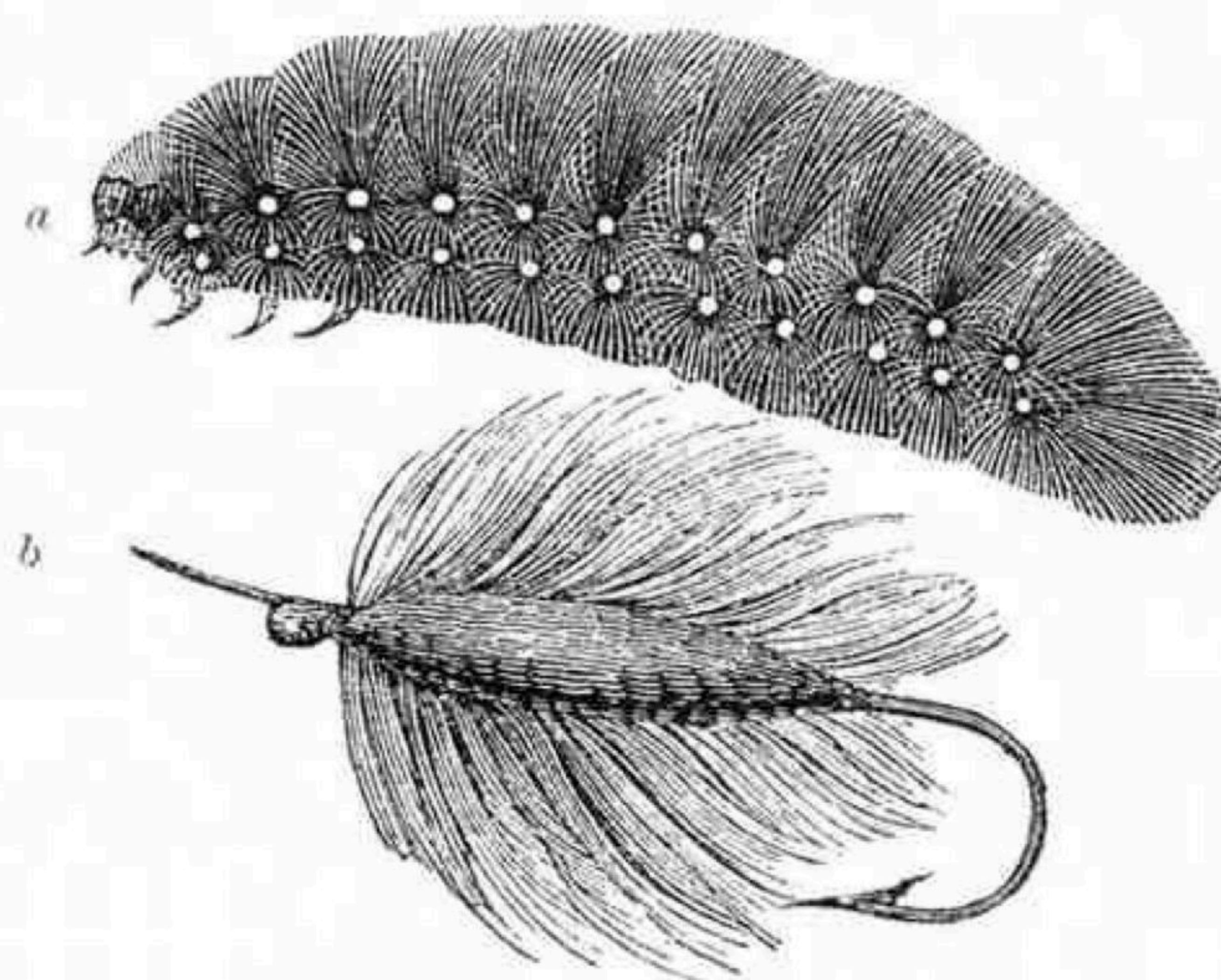
there was reasonably general agreement about which fish took a fly, although trout were the favorite quarry. In 1662, Colonel Robert Venables commented that:

...for such fish as will rise at the fly, viz. Salmon, Trout, Umber, Grayling, Bleak, Chevin, Roach, Dace, &c. Though some of these fish do love some flies better than other, except the fish named, I know not any sort or kind that will ordinarily and freely rise at the fly, though I know some who angle for Bream and Pike with artificial flies, but I judge the labour lost, and the knowledge a needless curiosity; those fish being taken much easier, especially the Pike, by other ways.⁴

It is a shame that Venables held such a low opinion of fly fishing for pike, but it

was a commonly held prejudice at the time, probably because of the limitations of the tackle then in use, which made fishing large flies, or fishing deep, very difficult. "Other ways," incidentally, included tying a baited hook to the foot of a pinioned goose and settling down to watch the fun when a pike struck.

James Chetham, writing just a few decades later, seems to have been an enthusiastic coarse fly fisherman. From the way he wrote, it is clear that "dibbing" a natural fly on the surface was one of his favorite methods, although he used artificial flies as an alternative.⁵ He didn't give any patterns, but we can guess which ones he might have favored because the natural he suggests for chub



Rennie's illustration of a palmered fly and the caterpillar some thought it should represent. From James Rennie, Alphabet of Angling (London: William Orr, 1833), 79.

is the fern fly, with caddis, palmer worms, caterpillars, grasshoppers, oak worm, and hawthorn worm as substitutes. This list goes a long way toward explaining the tradition, still strong today, of fishing palmered flies for chub.

Richard Brookes makes reference to a "Caterpillar-Fly" used for dace in 1766,⁶ which might be Richard Bowlker's Black Caterpillar Fly (also known as the Black Palmer),⁷ but otherwise the earliest specialist fly we know of tied specifically for coarse fish is Thomas Best's Humble Bee, concocted to seduce the wily chub. This fly, dating back to the last quarter of the eighteenth century, was tied on a no. 2 hook. The body was "best black spaniel's fur," with a black cock's hackle over it (presumably palmered), the tag deep orange, and the ensemble was winged with crow wing feather.⁸ It was by no means the last word on chub flies, which went on to become daringly sophisticated.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, dishing artificial flies for chub was so popular that artificial moths, bees, butterflies, cockchafers, and grasshoppers tied specifically for the purpose could be bought quite easily in the shops. Thomas Hofland suggested a red-hackled palmer ribbed with gold, a black-hackled palmer ribbed with silver, the Marlow Buzz, a fly with a peacock herl body, and a fly with a mallard wing as essentials in the chub fisherman's fly box.⁹ At this time, one can begin to see a growing formalism in choice of chub flies, and by the middle of the century, even Francis Francis was still recom-

mending large rough red or black palmers, although he added an imitation bumblebee, alder fly, and the cinnamon fly to the list.¹⁰ Chub flies don't seem to have advanced much further since then and neither do the tastes of their quarry, because the last one I caught fell for a Soldier Palmer.

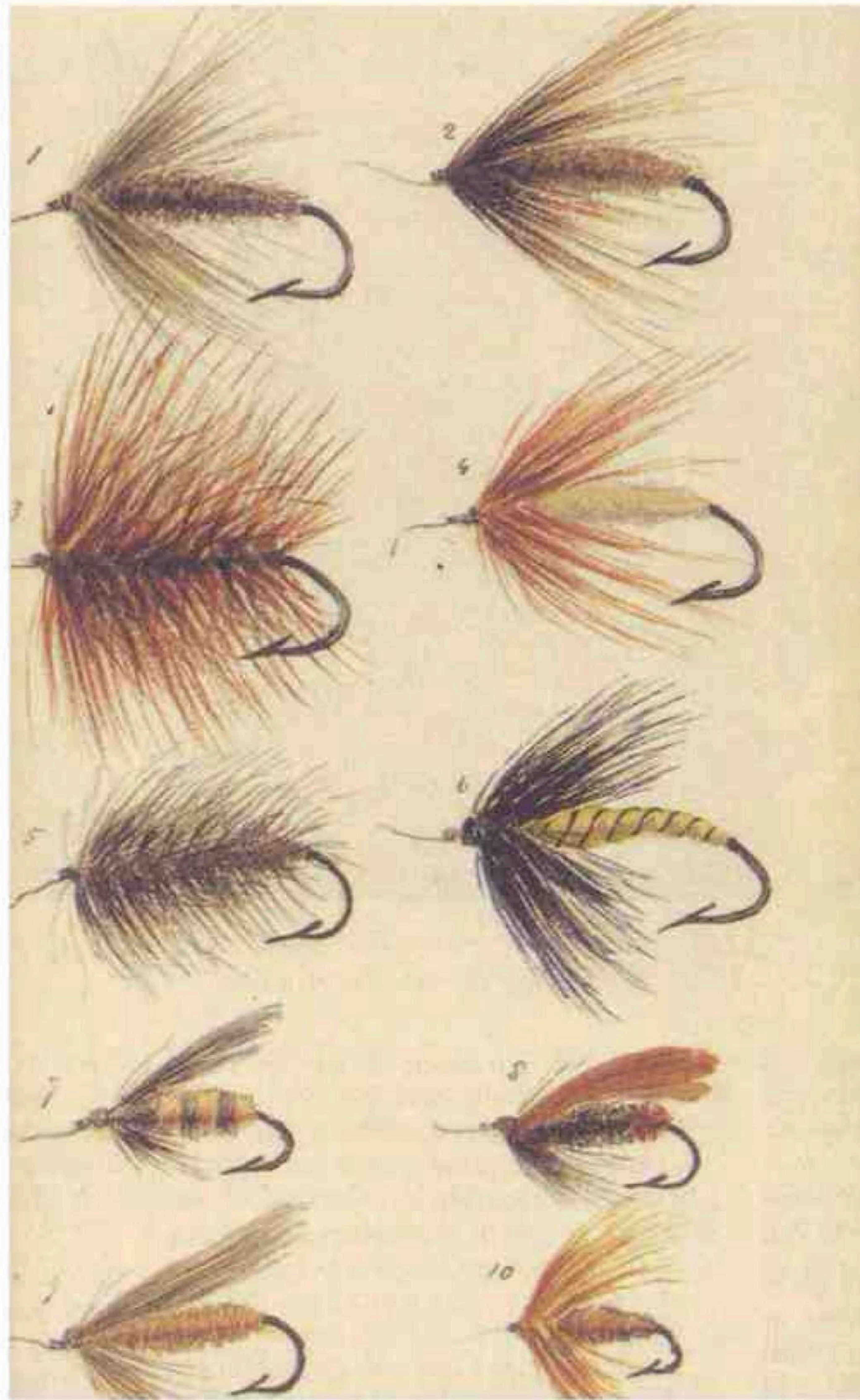
By the end of the nineteenth century, fly fishing for coarse fish had a well-established place, although changes in fashion meant that it was doomed to become something of a minority sport. Nonetheless, John Bickerdyke was spoiled for choice of chub patterns.

As to the fly, I hardly know what to recommend, there are so many good ones. The favourite of Mr. W. Senior ("Red Spinner"), is dressed on a Sneaky Limerick grilse hook. The body is of chenille tinsel, with a tail $\frac{1}{8}$ inch long, of white kid. Close to the head is wound a long coch-y-bondu hackle. For dark days this fly should, I think, be dressed with a dark shade of tinsel and the coch-y-bondu hackle, but for bright days with a brighter body and ordinary red hackle. The favourite chub-fly of the late Mr. Francis Francis was of grilse size; body, silver tinsel, a furnace hackle (dark red with black centre) wrapped round it, a few turns of black heron over that at the shoulder, an under-wing of a few sprigs of emerald peacock harl, and an over-wing of dark turkey; and for a tail, a tag of white kid glove or wash leather. Another favourite of his had a yellow crewel body, with red hackle and a dun turkey wing.¹¹

Choosy things, the chevin. By the 1920s, there was general agreement that they liked a large fly, Hugh Tempest

Sheringham going as far as to suggest that flies up to an inch long were needed to guarantee success. Bickerdyke's chub selection included a fly dressed with a palmered badger hackle; a large Coachman, leaded to sink if necessary; a beetle imitation; sundry artificial bees; wasps; cockchafers; and even the long-fabled Alexandra. He wasn't averse to fishing a dry fly for chub, or dace, for that matter; and neither was he above fly fishing for rudd (he gives a couple of half-hearted pattern recommendations before remarking that rudd aren't particularly fussy about their flies, a fact that I can confirm). Sheringham suggested a dry Wickham or a wet kid-tailed Alder as the right stuff for rudd, adding that he found roach took dry flies almost as well as chub in shallow water, rising much the way that dace will.

Fly fishing for pike is an old pastime that has come back into favor recently. Pike certainly seem to have been a popular quarry in central Europe during the late middle ages, but as we have seen, many early British writers labored under the impression that they could not be caught on a fly. This view came under attack once salmon fishing became fashionable in the early nineteenth century, probably because salmon fishers inadvertently took pike occasionally and found out what a sporting quarry they made in winter and spring. This upsurge of interest meant that pike flies were available for sale at the end of the eighteenth century from tackle dealers such as Ustonson and Chevalier. Alexander Mackintosh even gives a pattern.



A page of chub flies from A. J. Lane's manuscript. Reproduced with permission of the Medlar Press, The Grange, Ellesmere, Shropshire, U.K.

The fly must be larger than even those used for salmon; it must be made on a double hook, formed of one piece of wire fastened to a good link of gimp; it must be composed of very gaudy materials, such as the feathers of the gold and common pheasant, peacock, mallard, & c. with the brown and softest part of bear's fur, a little dark and reddish mohair, with yellow and green mohair for the body, and four or five turns of gold twist slanting round the body; the head must be formed of a little dark brown mohair, some gold twist, and two small black beads for the eyes; the body about three inches long, and made rough, full, and round; the wings not parted, but to stand upright on the back, and some smaller feathers continued thence all

down the back to the end of the tail, so that where you finish they may be left a little longer than the hook, and the whole to be about the thickness of a tom-tit, and near three inches long.¹²

Quite apart from being an overdressed horror that must have been exciting to cast on period fishing tackle, Mackintosh's pike fly is notable because it makes the first use of bead eyes of which I am aware. These are usually thought of as a modern invention.

Another early pike fly is pictured above by A. J. Lane in a manuscript thought to have been written in 1843.

Once again, the fly is a fearsome thing that would have posed more danger to the angler than the fish. Lane records the somewhat unlikely fact that one of the best flies was an imitation of the sand martin, and he added that pike "... rise tolerably freely to flies dressed very largely & of gaudy peacock feathers, sho'd be made up on large double, or even sets of hooks. They are commonly fished for in this manner on the Irish lakes with a boat and four or five rods with flies on different lengths of line and then rowed very gently over the lake."¹³ This was the beginning of a tradition in truly frightful pike flies



The pike fly from A. J. Lane's manuscript. Reproduced with permission of the Medlar Press, The Grange, Ellesmere, Shropshire, U.K.

because only twenty years later, no less a fisherman than Francis Francis records this dressing.

Pike are also taken in some waters with an artificial fly, and it is not a very uncommon thing for the angler to hook one on his salmon fly, nor to lose fly and all in consequence. The kind of fly most commonly employed is one of large size, with a pair of big, out-spreading hooks, the body composed of divers coloured pig's wool, blue, yellow, and green, as thick as a man's little finger, with a large heron's or other hackle for legs; and for the wings two eyes from a peacock's tail, with a few showy hackles, wide gold or silver foil; and a tail of various coloured hackles; at the head two glass beads are strung on to represent eyes. This which is more like a good sized hummingbird than anything else, is cast and worked like a fly, and when pike are inclined to take it, it is the most sporting and agreeable way of fishing for them in shallow pools, where there is very little water above the weeds, it will be found the most serviceable. There are many such places which are full of jack, and which it would be found very difficult perhaps to fish in any other way.¹⁴

There is no need to look far if you want to anchor the foundations of American "coarse" fishing. Theodore Gordon, of all people, experimented with a hairwing pattern as early as 1880, a date confirmed by Roy Steenrod.¹⁵ His intention was to tie a better pike fly, but he found accidentally that the pattern would catch other game fish, including salmon.

Some years ago we tied some flies on an entirely different principle, our notion being to turn out something that would have real life and movement and resemble a small bright fish in colouring. If you could see one of these large flies played, salmon-fly fashion, by a series of short jerks of the rod top, and notice how the long fibres expand and contract, how the jungle fowl feathers (in a line with the hook) open and shut, you would see at once that it must be very attractive to any large game fish.¹⁶

Gordon's Bumble Puppy pattern is well known by name, but few people have ever seen the dressing.

Tag—Silver and red silk. Tail—Scarlet ibis, two mated feathers, back to back and quite straight on hook. Butt—Red or yellow chenille; have tried black ostrich. Body—white silk chenille, ribbed flat silver tinsel (must be bright), body full, not thin. Hackle—Badger, large long, and lots of it. Wings—Double or single, according to size of hook; strips of white swan or goose, over white hair from deer, white bear, or goat. Sides—Jungle fowl, low. Shoulder hackle—Over wing, a good widgeon feather as long as or longer than the badger. Head—Red or yellow chenille, or black, plain varnished.¹⁷

So next time you catch a sucker when you were hoping to take a trout, relax and take the long view. You are just one in a long line of anglers who have tried their luck with white fish. If Francis and Gordon thought "coarse" fish were worthy quarries, then perhaps we should pay them more attention than we do. ~

ENDNOTES

1. Best accessed in John McDonald, *The Origins of Angling* (New York: Doubleday and Company Inc., 1963), 54.
2. Best accessed in Richard Hoffmann, *Fisher's Craft & Lettered Art: Tracts on Fishing from the End of the Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 147–52.
3. Best accessed in Gerald Bentley (ed.), *The Arte of Angling* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1956), 57.
4. Robert Venables, *The Experience'd Angler, or Angling Improved* (London: Marriot, 1662), 17–18.
5. James Chetham, *The Angler's Vade Mecum*, 2nd edition (London: Baffet, 1689), 174–75.
6. Richard Brookes, *The Art of Angling* (London: Lowndes, 1766), 43.
7. Richard Bowlker, *The Art of Angling* (Worcester, U.K.: Olivers, c. 1746), 61–62.
8. Thomas Best, *A Concise Treatise on the Art of Angling*, 2nd edition (London: Stalker, 1789), 109.
9. Thomas Hofland, Esq., *The British Angler's Manual*, Edward Jesse, ed. (London: H. G. Bohn, 1848), 162.
10. Francis Francis, *A Book on Angling* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1867), 31.
11. John Bickerdyke, *The Book of the All-Round Angler* (London: The "Bazaar, Exchange & Mart" Office, 1889), 87–90.
12. Alexander Mackintosh, *The Driffield Angler* (Driffield, U.K.: Etherington, c. 1806), 64–65.
13. A. J. Lane, *Angling MS* (Ellesmere, U.K.: Medlar Press, 1995 edition), 67 (originally published in 1843).
14. Francis, *A Book on Angling*, 115.
15. Joseph D. Bates, *Streamers and Bucktails* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 21.
16. Best accessed in John McDonald, *The Complete Fly Fisherman* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947), 14–17, 39–42.
17. John McDonald, *The Complete Fly Fisherman* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947), 43.