

# The Nature Things

by Todd Tanner

**I** just got back from the river a few days ago. A friend and I spent an evening on the quiet stretch near Last Chance and, through a quirk of fate, nobody else was around. Still, the fishing was tough. Insects blanketed the water's surface as if someone had spilled a giant bowl of mixed nuts and the trout were sorting through the smorgasbord, picking out whatever caught their fancy.

It seemed as if each fish was keying on something different – crippled caddis for one trout, emergent mayflies for another, small stoneflies for

a third – and even if you figured out what a particular rainbow was eating, there was no guarantee that it would choose your imitation from the bounty drifting down with the current.

I was looking through one of my fly-boxes, poking around for something a little bit different, when the thought popped into my head that, for the first time in memory, I hadn't come to the river to fish. My friend Ben, who was forty yards away trying to tempt a five-pound rainbow into eating something it shouldn't, was having serious problems with his business, and I'd driven down to discuss some possible remedies. Standing knee deep in the current, I contemplated the thin line we straddle every day – on one hand trying to solve our problems, and on the other trying not to dwell on them too much – and I couldn't help but think of Ben's situation.

Before the hatch started, we'd waited on the bank with our flyrods at the ready, looking out over the broad waters and pondering the wisdom of owning a small business.

Like so many people before him, a combination of bad luck and tight finances had put Ben's company in a hole, and his efforts to save it hadn't turned out well. We tossed ideas back and forth – marketing possibilities, potential investors, models for success – but every solution spawned its own set of problems, and with a wife and four kids at home, Ben didn't have much in the way of flexibility.

There was about an hour-and-a-half of daylight left when we stopped talking, saddled with the knowledge that, barring a miracle or a magic wand, some of life's nastier problems just can't be solved. For the next few minutes we simply stood there, watching the water slip by and enjoying the evening's quiet.

It wasn't a long silence. After a moment, Ben nudged my arm and pointed to the current directly in front of a mid-stream rock. Every few seconds the water just upstream of the rock bulged and then a giant rainbow creased the silver



surface and gulped down another insect. The rises were so consistent they looked like an extension of the rock's turbulence, and Ben, always a gentleman, sized up the situation and offered me first crack at the big guy.

"Thanks," I said, "but he's all yours."

**F**or the next hour I fished within sight of Ben and his big trout, watching as he changed flies every few minutes and re-tied his leader after every fourth or fifth fly change. From a distance he seemed to have relaxed, the fluid movements of his body and arm painting a different picture than the tense shoulders and furrowed brow he'd worn earlier on the bank, and it struck me that for the moment his worries were gone, washed away by his immersion in the river.

It was late, the last rays from the setting sun gilding the willows on the river's edge, when I heard him shout. I looked over to see a tremendous boil, a beaver-sized eruption that

seemed too large for an insect-eating trout, and then Ben's rod bent double as the fish rushed downstream, leaving a wake that creased the water's flat surface.

"Damn," he yelled, as he tried in vain to slow the fish's run, "my line's tangled around my reel!" A second later his leader snapped, and we stood there, watching, as the ripples from his giant trout slowly faded away.

It was dark when we made it back to the trucks. Our interior lights cast a weak circle of illumination around the vehicles, and we stowed our gear to the sounds of sandhill cranes calling in the distance. I wanted to say something – to tell him that I was sorry he'd lost his fish, to apologize for not offering better advice, to explain that everything was going to work out okay in the end. Instead, we shook hands in silence, neither of us finding the right words, and I drove off wondering why some of the nicest people I know never seem to catch a break. ➔