

Mayfly Mayhem

By Alan Balliett

As darkness descends on a warm and sunny early July day, the National Weather Service's radar in La Crosse detects clouds mysteriously forming over the Mississippi River. This is not a weather phenomenon but a living blizzard of millions of adult mayflies emerging from their larval stage living in the bottom sediment of the river.

The adults take wing, mate, lay their eggs back in the river, and die within a few days. Large hatches may occur several times during the summer as water temperatures warm at different rates along the river and various species of mayfly emerge. This is a time of great abundance and a smorgasbord for birds, mammals, amphibians, reptiles, fish, and other invertebrates which feast upon the mayflies.

Though a boon to nature's food web; the adult mayflies may become a nuisance to humans by covering roads, bridges, and buildings. Highway crews sometimes use snowplows and street sweepers to remove the mayflies before pavements become slick from automobiles crushing them.

The abundant mayflies are important though as indicators of good water quality and a healthy river ecosystem. They show the success of past and current efforts to reduce pollution in the river. Continuing these efforts will allow future generations to witness the amazing living blizzard each summer.