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Ellis Hatch

CONJURING MAGIC FROM FUR AND FEATHERS, THIS QUIET CONSERVATIONIST, ANGLER AND MASTER ARTIST IS ONE OF NEW HAMPSHIRE'S LIVING LEGENDS | BY TUCKER CUMMINGS



Among fly-tiers and fly-fishers, the name Ellis Hatch is spoken in hushed, reverent tones. If fly-tying is an art, then Hatch is its Leonardo da Vinci. But Ellis Hatch is more than just his body of work. In addition to crafting untold thousands of flies over the course of his career, he's also been a dedicated steward of New Hampshire's natural resources.

Hatch is a charming, humble man, with large hands that are surprisingly nimble and dexterous as he ties flies at his workbench. While some people are eager to tout their own accomplishments, Hatch undercuts his own important role in New Hampshire conservation by playing up the contributions of others. That humility is refreshing, and a bit unexpected, considering all Hatch has managed to achieve during his long life.



Ellis Hatch in his studio in 1976 – very little has changed nearly 40 years later.



Green ghost



Hatching pupa



Magog smelt



Golden demon

Ellis Hatch's legendary hatching pupa (above), a soft hackle wet fly pattern that is famous for fooling trout, has become a must-have for any serious trout angler. Hatch's flies stand alone as works of art, heralding a prolific career that spans more than five decades.

The Early Years

Ellis Hatch is a life-long New Hampshire resident, hailing from a family tree that can trace its roots all the way back to a knight who battled in the First Crusade. He was born in 1931 in a farmhouse that was without electricity or a bathroom. His early years were spent on his grandfather's farm or playing in the fields around Rye that were owned by his extended family. Some of that land in Rye was later donated to the state and became part of Odiorne Point State Park.

Best known for his fly-tying skills and long tenure on the New Hampshire Fish and Game Commission, Ellis Hatch is also an incredible cook. These days, he contents himself with making delicious hermit cookies for the grandkids and great-grandkids, but in earlier days, he ran a bakery and a catering business out of Rochester. Due to New Hampshire's historic role in the Presidential primaries, Hatch found himself cooking for politicians like Richard Nixon, Nelson Rockefeller, John F. Kennedy, Margaret Chase Smith and New Hampshire's own Governor Hugh Gallen.

In fact, it was Gallen who wanted Hatch to join the Fish and Game Commission. Hatch was appointed to the Commission in 1979, and served for many years. That position enabled him to continue protecting and promoting New Hampshire's wildlife and natural areas, though Hatch admits the politics could sometimes be frustrating.

"I find some people who are passionate about the outdoors have little patience with the politics that sometimes comes with conserving the outdoors," he says.

The Art of Tying Flies

Fly-tying is an art. It requires painstaking attention to detail, and various pieces of fur, feathers and fibers need to be precisely manipulated to create the desired look. Taking raw materials and transforming them into the likeness of a real insect, larva or small bait fish is a craft that takes months or years to develop, and many more decades to truly master. With every fly he ties, Hatch is continuing the tradition first started by the ancient Egyptians and Macedonians.

To the uninitiated, fly-tying may seem a placid way to spend your spare time. But those who have taken the time to study the craft know that there is a great challenge in replicating certain classic patterns. Even the names of the flies can be interesting, conjuring up scandals and intrigues from days gone by. That's an aspect of the sport that Ellis Hatch will gleefully recount to any interested visitor.

Ellis Hatch first became interested in tying flies because of his fish-loving family members. Ellis credits Uncle Ralph, his father's brother, with inspiring him to take up fly-tying and fly-fishing. That branch of the family, located in Maine, had a fly-tying bench in the house. Hatch says he doesn't remember tying any flies on that particular bench, but seeing it being used by others definitely awakened his lifelong curiosity about the craft.

His brother-in-law Dick also tied flies, and Hatch fondly remembers a night when the two went out fishing. They were after bass

"SLIPPING A MICKEY"

The names of flies are a source of fascination for anyone interested in the art of fly-tying. Perhaps the most interestingly named fly is the iconic "Mickey Finn," originally known as the red-and-yellow bucktail. The fly was later given the name Mickey Finn as a sort of macabre tribute to film star Rudolph Valentino. Urban legends and conspiracy theories say that Valentino died after someone slipped a "mickey finn" (drug) into his cocktail.



that night, with a stunning full moon up in the sky that made it easy to see all of the hungry bass looking for a meal. There was just one problem: the bass were more interested in the real insects skimming across the pond than the lures Dick and Ellis were using. Dick turned to Ellis and said, “We gotta tie a fly to match those bugs.” That conversation stuck with Hatch, inspiring him to take up the craft.

Over his decades of fishing throughout New Hampshire, Hatch became an important figure among fishing enthusiasts. He founded the Hackle & Tackle Fishing Club in Rochester, and worked closely with Maine’s Shy Beaver Trout Hatchery, which has been in operation since 1870.

In the Studio

Hatch works from a fly-tying bench in the basement of his Rochester home. The walls of his little studio are almost impossible to see, because nearly every surface is plastered with art, photographs, awards and fishing memorabilia. Crayon drawings created by Hatch’s grandkids and great-grandkids are proudly displayed, along with many photos of Hatch fishing with friends and family.

For Hatch, a good day at the office means tying around a hundred flies. A few years ago, he was still tying as many as 14,000 flies each year. That’s dropped off slightly in recent years, with Hatch noting that he “only” managed to tie 10,818 flies in 2013.

Hatch uses a variety of items to create his signature flies, which are sold at independent tackle shops throughout northern New England. He prefers to work with donated materials from hunters whenever he can, but some require commercially dyed feathers to achieve the right effect. His own output of hand-tied flies has slowed down in recent years. Some might attribute this to age, but Hatch’s hands are as nimble as ever. The change in Hatch’s output has more to do with economics. Flies made in China can be sold in the U.S. much more cheaply than a Hatch-made fly, and many fishing enthusiasts have opted for the cheaper streamers that come from overseas. That’s a shame, because the creations that come from Hatch’s home bench have much more charm than a mass-produced fly from a factory in Asia.

Even if you aren’t skilled at fly-fishing yourself, it’s still possible to appreciate Hatch’s flies from a purely aesthetic perspective. They are balanced and colorful, and each one catches the light and

the wind to give the appearance of a living creature. Hatch also has a charming habit of creating a custom fly to celebrate the birth of every new addition to the family, resulting in a colorful assortment of fantastical flies that are unlikely to see the water. There’s a lot of heart in every fly Hatch ties with his own two hands, whether they’re destined for a family member or for a customer.

Paying It Forward


In 2003, Hatch was honored for his fly-tying artistry at the Governors Arts Awards, in the category of Folk Heritage. His original fly patterns have been featured on video and publications created by nationally known professional fly-tiers, and he’s taken on more than a few fly-tying apprentices over the years. Hatch says it takes about 24 four-hour sessions for a novice to really grasp the intricacies of his work. He has also lent his name to the annual Ellis R. Hatch Jr. Commission Award of Excellence, which is bestowed each year in recognition of people or groups who promote, enhance or benefit fish, wildlife or marine resources within the state of New Hampshire.

Hatch also has a N.H. Wildlife Management Area (WMA) named after him: the Ellis R. Hatch Jr. WMA, which spans 1,492 acres in the area around Brookfield, Middleton and New Durham. Three mountains – Moose, Perkins and Rand – are located within the WMA. Moose, deer, bear, grouse, otter, beaver, turkey, snowshoe hare,

chipmunk and many other animals call this area home. And, as befits any land that bears Hatch’s name, aquatic life abounds in the ponds and streams that dot the property.

This Wildlife Management Area may be the most perfect expression of Hatch’s legacy. For him, there is nothing more important than passing on his knowledge of wildlife and his passion for outdoor living.

“Fishing has been my life,” he says. “As long as there are fish there for the next generation, that’s fine with me.”


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Ellis Hatch in his studio today.

Tucker Cummings is a freelance writer based in Dover. She is the proud daughter of two retired N.H. Fish and Game Division Chiefs, and a passionate advocate for preserving wild spaces in New Hampshire.

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