

Tie One On!

Flies to Fool the Fish

BY JIM RICCARDI

As the pages turn on the fly angler's calendar, winter takes hold and our fly-fishing experiences fade to happy memory. The spring thaw seems an eternity away. But, many of us anglers tie flies through the long New Hampshire winters, making the off-season seem a bit shorter and bringing us just a little closer to our sport.



For me, the winter months provide an opportunity to fill in the empty spots in my fly boxes. Most of my favorite flies have by now either been chewed up by hungry fish or left dangling from a tree branch overhanging a good spot on the river. Tying more of the same flies may seem tedious, but as my fingers repeat the familiar steps, my thoughts wander to the places where I have used these flies, and I relive those angling moments in my mind. I'm reminded of time spent on the water and the fish I caught — or maybe those that wouldn't be caught. I'll put together some new and different patterns also, because fly-tying is fun and creative as well as functional.

Some say that the act of assembling fur, feather and tinsel on a hook to create something that would attract a fish is an art form; others call it a craft. For some it's only a means to a noble end — catching fish. Any way you look at it, tying a fly yourself and having a fish take it as food leaves the angler with a great satisfaction. Getting feathers to bend just right, correctly spacing the turns of tinsel, and putting on just the right amount of material is a learning process; when you get it right, though, you'll be glad you made the effort. For some folks, tying flies is equally or even more important than the actual fishing. To these devout tyers, the accomplishment of putting together the perfect fly rivals making the perfect cast. Some of their flies may never even see water — they are just to be admired as a job well done.

Learning to Tie

The aspiring fly-tyer has several avenues for receiving instruction. Volumes of good books, videos and CD ROMs exist to help you get started and keep on learning. Taking a fly-tying class is a great way to start, and they are available from several different sources. Conservation groups such as Trout Unlimited (www.TU.org) offer fly-



To a hungry fish, this fly looks like a juicy grasshopper. A skilled fly-tyer can learn to imitate any insect that might lure a fish.

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tying classes through their various chapters around the state. Local sportsmen's clubs and organizations may offer classes also. Adult education classes offered through schools and community recreation departments are a great place to learn, and can also give you the opportunity to meet like-minded anglers. Several accomplished fly-tyers from around the state offer one-on-one instruction. Fly-fishing pro shops are another good place to gain fly-tying knowledge. Your fishing buddies who tie flies are another source of fly-tying education — but be advised, if you get too good at it you may be tying as many for them as for yourself! Learning from family members is not only convenient, but is often part of family tradition. Many fly-tyers are part of a rich sporting heritage that has been passed down for generations and will continue into the future. Just as fishing can bring a family closer together, tying flies as a family activity can provide a lifetime of enjoyment.

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TOOLS OF THE TIE

If you decide to learn to tie flies, you'll need some basic tools to get started. There are several quality fly-tying tool kits on the market today; or, you can assemble your own kit. Like any hobby, the gadgets and accessories available for fly-tying are endless, but here is a list of must-have tools:

Vise: Holds the hook so that you can use both hands to tie.

Bobbin: Holds a spool of thread.

Threader: Pulls tying thread through the bobbin tube.

Scissors: To cut material. Sharp scissors with fine points are one of the most important tools.

Bodkin: Otherwise known as a "dubbing needle."

Half Hitch Tool: To tie basic knots. Often part of a two-sided tool with the bodkin.

Hackle Pliers: Small spring-loaded pliers with which to grasp tying material.

Hair Stacker: To even up the tips of a bunch of hair.

Tying Lamp: Good light is important — a crane lamp works well.



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TRY IT AT HOME!

The list of fly patterns in existence today knows no limit, but two of my chosen ones are the Elk Hair Caddis (below) and the Boulder Bend (facing page). The Elk Hair Caddis is for fishing on the surface and is productive in New Hampshire waters and around the world. Vary the size and color, and you can be ready for many different situations. The Boulder Bend is a fly of my own creation for imitating baitfish of several species, and is especially effective for rainbow trout and landlocked salmon. Both flies are easy enough to tie, even for the beginner.

ELK HAIR CADDIS

Hook: Dry-fly hook, any size (#12 to #16 are my favorites).

Thread: Brown or tan, or to match the color of the body.

Body: Dry-fly dubbing. Olive and tan are favorites, but any color can be used.

Hackle: Brown, usually — but use any color to match the color scheme of the fly. Tied at the rear and wrapped over the body using 4 or 5 turns.

Wing: Elk hair tied tent-shape over the body.



Select a feather that is suitable for a dry fly and secure at the rear of the hook shank.



Build a body of synthetic dubbing keeping a slim shape. Wrap this toward the front of the hook, leaving a gap behind the hook eye for the wing.



Wrap the hackle feather around the body and secure at the front of the body (4 or 5 turns).



After trimming the hackle fibers off the top of the fly, secure a small clump of elk hair in the space between the body and the hook eye. Trim the excess elk hair, leaving a small amount showing to represent the head of the insect.



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To improve your fly-tying technique, take advantage of an array of how-to books.

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Fly-tying courses typically run about 4 to 6 weeks and will give you a good foundation to start with. Improving on your skills can be a lifetime pursuit, with new patterns and techniques coming out constantly. At first, take pride in being able to assemble a few basic flies that look good and catch fish — after all, the fish are the final judges of your efforts. In time, your skills will grow, and you'll be tying a wider variety of flies and using more involved techniques. Above all, remember to have fun tying flies: that's what it's really all about.

What Fly to Tie?

Once you've been through your basic training, what types of flies will you be tying? Just the term "flies" can lead us to believe that all fishing flies imitate small winged things — but this is not always the case. Some flies do imitate aquatic insects such as mayflies, caddisflies and stoneflies during their various stages of life. But, you can also tie nymphs, which imitate these insects below the surface during their immature or larval stage. Then there are dry flies and emergers, which mimic the nymphs hatching into adults on the surface. Wet flies are a good place for a novice to start. These are sub-surface flies that can be representative of a swimming or hatching insect; or, they may just be tied in attractive colors to get a fish's attention and induce a response.

Big fish eat little fish, and little fish are imitated by a style of fly called a "streamer." Streamers can imitate different species of baitfish when tied in

natural colors — or, you can tie them with bright colors and cause an impulsive, reactive strike. There are popping bugs that can bring a smashing strike on the surface, and large streamer flies for use in saltwater. Even land-based insects like ants and grasshoppers can be imitated with flies. An endless variety lies ahead of you.

Naturally, some flies are more popular than others, but a list of good flies to learn to tie for New Hampshire waters would include the Black Ghost, Woolly Bugger, Hornberg, Elk Hair Caddis and Hare's Ear Nymph. As your skills increase, the Gray Ghost, Golden Demon and the Muddler Minnow are important additions. Every tyer develops his or her own list of favorites in time; and as much as I like variety, there are a few that will always have a reserved spot in my fly box: the Elk Hair Caddis, the Woolly Bugger, and one of my own creations — the Boulder Bend.

Fly-tying is a fun and rewarding activity that complements the wonderful sport of fly-fishing. A fly-tyer can achieve immense gratification from creating the final link between angler and fish — the fly.

Jim Riccardi (right) is a freelance outdoor writer and fly-fishing/fly-tying instructor. He also is a volunteer instructor with Fish and Game's Let's Go Fishing and Becoming an Outdoors-Woman programs. He and his wife Kristen live in Newport, N.H.



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BOULDER BEND

Hook: Medium- to long-shank streamer hook, size #4 to #10.

Thread: I usually finish it off with a black or red head.

Tail: Orange marabou, tied short and slightly full.

Body: Bill's Bodi-Braid or other pearlescent mylar braid. Use two layers on flies size 6 or larger.

Throat: Orange marabou, short and slightly full like the tail.

Wing: Light olive marabou over which is a smaller amount of black marabou. I also tie this with brown instead of olive.



Tie on a tail of orange marabou. It should be short and fairly full.



Advance your thread to the front of the fly and secure a piece of pearlescent mylar braid. Wrap the braid around the hook shank rearward to the tail of the fly, then forward again; tie off.



Turn the hook upside down or rotate the vise and tie in a throat, same as the tail. Turn the hook upright.



Use a bunch of olive or brown marabou for the wing, topped with a smaller bunch of black marabou. The bottom section should be two-thirds to three-quarters of the total wing width.




Trim the excess marabou and finish off the head.

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