

Hand-tied flies aim for one goal — catch fish

By JOHN HEALY
Of the Emerald

Walking into The Caddis Fly Angling Shop for the novice outdoorsman is akin to taking a step back into childhood.

Flies — of the fishing variety — nestle by the hundreds in their individual compartments, bringing back memories of bumblebee marbles and Joe DiMaggio baseball cards.

The urge to pick one up is not a question of its utility value — after all, it's pretty obvious what something with a hook sitting in a fishing shop is for — but from an almost instinctual compulsion to grasp an object that looks so "real" and sports such brilliant colors.

That is the exact reason why fishing flies are so popular, says Bob Guard, owner of The Caddis Fly Angling Shop.

It's not because they attract the novice fisherman, but because they play on the instinctual needs of a different sort of animal — fish.

Guard has been tying flies since the age of nine and his shop, a fisherman's cast from the downtown train station, offers over 200 varieties of fishing flies. He teaches six-week fly-tying classes from September until late spring for the beginner.

For the curious who wander into his shop, he can talk for hours about the vagaries of fly tying.

Guard's shop brims with skunk, fox, beaver, muskrat, and innumerable other furs; rayons and other synthetic materials; cork and yarn and, of course, hooks. All are ingredients for the fishing fly and all are aimed at one objective — maximizing the attraction of the fly to the fish.

"I prefer natural stuff. The colors, the things it does in the water, its looks, its ease in tying," Guard says, explaining his preference for animal hair and bird feathers, two common fly-tying materials.

Exotic materials such as jungle cock feathers from India and polar bear hair from the Arctic and Alaska are the most popular fly-making materials, says Guard. Unfortunately for the fly fisherman, both are banned from importation into the United States. "Which is why they are so popular," Guard admits.

The enormous number of flies that Guard keeps in stock, with prices ranging from 65 cents to \$1.90, are generally made in other parts of the country or in large factories in India, Colombia or the Far East.

"It's a labor-intensive industry," says Guard, since nearly all flies are handmade. "Maybe a quarter are tied in town, and the major U.S.



The hands of Bob Guard demonstrate the art of fly tying.

producer is Dan Bailey's place in Montana. But most of the flies are cottage-industry made, like a husband and wife working together in their home."

To make a living tying you have to stress the uniqueness of your product, says Guard, as well as doing high quality work.

"You have to make six to nine dozen a day to make a living," he estimates, and an experienced worker can tie up to a dozen flies per hour.

Fish are attracted to a fisherman's fly for various reasons, according to Guard.

In many cases, the fly is made to resemble an insect — a fly, a mosquito, a bumblebee, he says. If the fly floats, it's called a dry fly; if it sinks it's labeled a wet fly.

Hunger isn't the only instinct that fishermen exploit with a fly, says Guard. Some flies, like the "greenbutt skunk," are designed simply to attract a fish's attention. Another type, called streamers, imitate bait fish and are excellent for catching brown trout. Others, called exact nymphs, are made to imitate a nymph crawling along the bottom.

What fly to use for which type of fish is the key to good fishing, says Guard.

To catch a typical western rainbow trout in an area of rough rapids, "use a heavily dressed fly with lots of feathers and deer hair to float above the water," says Guard.

And since the western rainbow "is used to things going by quickly," the size or looks of a dry fly used in rough water isn't very important.

On other hand, the same fly used in a lake would "look like a log in the water," he says.

"A fly for a lake should be tied sparsely and resemble a silhouette of an insect," says Guard, sitting in front of a desk overflowing with books on the physiology of fish and fly-tying methods.

But even with all of his books — and Guard has read just about everything he has been able to find on fish — he admits that flies are, at best, an inexact science.

"The bottom line is you don't know why the sucker hit. No one knows."

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