

Fly Tying is a Family Affair

BY LAURA LIEFF



Father and son with the rainbow trout they caught together.



Long before a fly lands on the water, it begins at a vise. Feathers, fur and even unlikely materials are carefully shaped into tiny insects meant to fool a fish. For anglers who tie their own flies, the practice is part science, part art — and for some families, a tradition now being passed to the next generation.

Fly fishing is an art in and of itself, but tying your own flies is another level. Not only do you have to physically know how

to do it, but recognizing which patterns and materials will attract fish is essential. While most people purchase flies from shops or websites, a small percentage of local anglers tie their own flies because of the sense of pride that goes with successfully catching a fish using your own creation.

According to longtime local guide Mark Wechsler — who works for Anderson's Fish Camp and Gore Creek Fly Fisherman and is an ambassador for Cortland Line Company — the most important aspect of creating flies is understanding that they imitate what fish are eating. "You're tying flies to look like the insects they are feeding on, and in order to do that you need to accumulate the appropriate materials," he explains. "It's very satisfying to sit down and tie a fly based on what you saw fish eating and which bugs were hatching."

Clearly producing flies is a complex process as watching nature provides clues anglers look for, but then it's up to the creator to replicate it. "If you observe long enough, the fish might show you what to use," Wechsler adds. "You may have to examine a series of insect life cycle stages to key in on what they are eating and then delve into your arsenal of materials and make something that looks similar."

Material Fish World

Wechsler explains that most anglers start with dubbing — a synthetic material comprised of a variety of sources including fur or feathers. For example, CDC (Cul de Canard) dubbing is made from oily duck feathers which work well because of their buoyancy and resistance to water. In addition to conventional options like dubbing, anglers who enjoy a creative challenge often integrate unconventional materials as well.

In fact, Wechsler says that avid fly tiers are always analyzing materials, so mixing the conventional and unconventional helps them replicate what they observe on the river. "Fly tiers see the opportunity to imitate so they might walk the aisles of Costco, Walmart or Ace Hardware to find

things that emulate casings of bugs,” says Wechsler. He also utilizes different types of UV and fluorescent glues that each offer unique properties in terms of color and consistencies.

Another longtime local angler who ties his own flies is my husband, Brian Fleming, who learned to fly fish in 1998 and started making flies a year later for two reasons: to save money and to have a creative outlet when he was sidelined with a broken femur. Fleming’s love for using unconventional items runs deep as he has used fur from our dog’s tail, a decorative gold adornment found on the outside of a wine bottle, bungy vinyl from one of our son’s summer camp bracelets and holiday gift bag ribbons.

“When it comes to tying flies, I’d rather bet on myself which means producing them myself,” he says. “Doing so also allows me to keep current with what’s

hatching and, instead of going to the store, I can generate a fly or add to an existing pattern before heading back out.”

The Next Generation


After years of producing flies for himself and close friends, Fleming recently began teaching the next generation — our 7-year-old son Fleet. Learning to tie a fly is a rite of passage for young anglers as it requires patience, precision and knowledge, which Fleming says he loves passing on to our son. “I’m self-taught so teaching Fleet is exciting,” he explains. “While I learned on a \$10 vise, he’s learning advanced techniques on my upgraded equipment which will make it easier and more enjoyable for him in the long run. It will also help him create quality flies.”

So far so good, as Fleet already understands how to use dubbing and what to look for when making a fly. “Kids get

better results with a mentor which also helps keep their interest,” he adds. After the fly is completed, next comes the excitement of putting the creation into practice. Fleming says that catching fish with a fly they crafted is thrilling because it’s a one-off they designed together. He also says that teaching Fleet to tie flies with both conventional and unconventional materials encourages creativity and innovation.

Now that Fleming has been fly fishing for almost three decades, passing on his wisdom has become a bonding experience. “The key is giving just enough help to ensure Fleet stays interested and is having fun,” says Fleming. “He has his own vise, so he can leave a fly hanging and revisit it any time. In fact, today he added a wing to a fly he was working on by using a piece of foam and was so excited about it. That means everything to me.” +




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