



June 2008

Driftless Days . . .

Now that our fly fishing season is in full swing, I sometimes give thanks, albeit briefly, that the good Lord gave me enough blizzards last winter to get all of my fly tying for the year completed by March 1st, always my annual goal. I dearly love winter fly fishing and a mild winter often finds me out on a stream when perhaps my time would have been better spent staying home and tying flies. Actually, that usually happens even in a bad winter. I don't know whether it's a blessing or a curse to be able to walk to trout water from my home, but during the winter I certainly seem to enjoy the luxury. Nonetheless, as much as I enjoy tying flies, I'm not at all fond of tying them during the dry fly season, which extends roughly from March to November of each new season. That leaves me with December, January and February to get the job done.

Of course, every summer has one or two "emergency" tying sessions. Maybe I underestimate the number of flies needed for a certain pattern or size that suddenly comes into greater demand than expected, or perhaps something new comes up during the summer that becomes necessary for success. Occasionally a bit of spur-of-the-moment traveling requires a few flies I might not have considered during winter tying sessions. Sometimes it's fun to try something different mid-season just for the sake of having fun doing it. After all, now and then it may be raining too hard to fish. But I do try to keep my summer tying to an absolute minimum. If I **have** to do it, I generally stay with the standard three-fly requirement: one for the trees, one to break off in a trout and the third to catch fish with.

It certainly isn't necessary to tie all of one's flies during the winter. My friend Joe from Altoona enjoys tying flies throughout the summer. Since he has to travel overnight to reach good trout water, he says he likes to tie flies between trips northward to keep his head in the game and derive some enjoyment from the sport when he's not on the water. A number of fishermen probably experience that same situation and schedule. As Joe is the consummate dry fly fisherman, I'd say that approach works quite well, too. It all depends on where you live and what your season's itinerary might be. Spreading out the effort might alleviate some of the monotony of concentrated winter tying, if you occasionally find it tedious.



In regard to tying flies, at times I like to tell myself I'm not a "fish-counter", but in all actuality I very much am one. I really don't care how many trout I happen to catch, as long as I've made a reasonable effort for the outing, have done as well as the stream would allow and had a good time doing so. Fly fishing **is not** and **should not** be a competitive sport, and any method of fish-counting can sometimes lead the fisherman toward that entirely wrong direction. But I am very interested in **what** I caught them on, and that makes all the difference in the world, particularly

when I sit down to begin my winter's fly tying. Let's say I land twenty trout on a nice summer afternoon or evening, and I catch one of them on one fly and nineteen on another. The next day, I go out to the same stream and again land twenty trout, but this time I catch them on eight different patterns or sizes. To the average person or fisherman, I caught twenty trout each day and that's about the extent of it. Great fishing! But to the curious fly fisherman and efficient fly tier, these were two entirely different outings, worth of due pause and consideration.



So I've kept a fly fishing journal for many years now. Among other things, I note for each outing roughly how many trout I may have landed and what I landed them on, give or take a few fish. It doesn't have to be exact, but I like it to be rather close. At the end of each month, I tabulate the results and enter them into my "master notebook", as I call it. Sometime in December, traditionally during the first big snowstorm of the winter, I sit down and analyze my monthly notes and develop them into a synopsis which tells me how many trout I've landed for the entire year, along with the patterns and sizes I landed them on. Using the old "ten trout per fly" rule of thumb, I can then take the number of trout landed on a certain pattern and size, divide that number by ten and come up with a rough approximation of how many flies of that type I might need for the upcoming season. If I've landed 180 trout on a #16 Adams, for example, I might think in terms of tying eighteen of them for the next season, which I'd probably round up to a solid two-dozen to make sure I have enough. If I have a dozen new ones left over from the past season in my storage box, I might drop the number required down a bit and call it good. I do this for every fly I've caught trout with for the season, and that gives me my winter's tying outline. It may sound like too much of a calculated science, but if one ties 300-400 flies a season, it is incredibly helpful to have some idea of how to proceed. Depending on the particular fisherman, a more arbitrary approach may suffice as well. The main thing is to get a few flies tied and catch your trout on them.



Robert Traver, the great Michigan fly fisherman and author, tied no flies at all. He wrote that he had "ten thumbs" and simply could not tie flies adequately, though he had a very calculated approach to what he needed and was very specific in his orders to his fly tier. I have friends who prefer to buy all of their flies for similar reasons. In my case, it is much less expensive for me to tie my own, and landing trout on flies I've tied myself adds so much to my fly fishing experience I wouldn't have it any other way, at least so long as I'm able to do it.

If you want to catch trout on a dry fly in the **Driftless Region**, the first fly you must master, in my opinion, is the most famous dry fly in the world, the **Adams**, which I've pictured just above. My preference is for traditional patterns and I tend to use natural materials rather than synthetics; the **Adams** is a perfect fly for this approach. Different tiers have different approaches, but since I don't tie commercially I'm free to do whatever I like, and I like natural materials. I guess it sort of fits in well with split-cane rods, weird hats and being married to the same girl for thirty-three years. Among many other flies, I tie my **Adams** flies for each season in sizes #10 through #24. I also tie them in three different colors of dubbing, the rest of the fly being identical to the standard tie. Those colors are the standard **gray**, a dark **brown** and a soft **yellow**. These three

colors in the appropriate sizes will cover a bewildering array of dry fly hatches in our three-state **Driftless Region**, not to speak of waters beyond. It might be a way for you to initially simplify your approach to dry fly fishing in Northeast Iowa, and you can build upon that knowledge as the seasons progress with different flies for different circumstances. John Gierach once wrote about a time in which he figured out that he could catch trout on something **different** than an **Adams**! Rest be assured, however, he caught a boatload of trout on the **Adams** before that happened, and I'll bet you a dollar he still does.



Thomas McGuane, in his outstanding fly fishing book *The Longest Silence: A Life In Fishing*, says this concerning flies that when fished well, catch well: “The Adams is a perfect example; purportedly tied to imitate a fluttering caddis, it is so full of Catskill-style mayfly traits and general earthiness as to be an outstanding choice for the dry-fly fisherman who relies on casting and streamcraft instead of encyclopedic fly boxes. And in its downwinged version, it’s not a bad caddis.” Very well stated indeed. The only thing I’d add to that is that it’s not a bad caddis imitation in the upwinged version, either. McGuane is referencing the fact that the original **Adams** pattern was designed as a caddis imitation and was later modified into the classic mayfly pattern we now know and tie. Even with the standard upwing “upright and divided” wing set and a mayfly tail, it still does wonders during a sudden caddis hatch, and you don’t even have to change flies! Of course a caddisfly doesn’t have a tail, but some fishermen think the **Adams** tail acts as an emerging caddisfly’s trailing shuck. I’ll go along with that.

Another handy basic fly to keep in mind is the **Griffith Gnat**. It is an extremely simple fly to tie, with just a peacock herl body and palmered grizzly hackle; I usually tie them in sizes #16 through #24 to cover all the bases. The writer Dave Hughes says that one of the reasons the **Griffith Gnat** is so effective is that it can represent either crippled mayflies, aborted mayflies or mayfly spinners. I find it often works well late on summer evenings when one might expect to see a good spinner fall. It’s a good idea to have a nice selection of this very simple fly on hand. An older and slightly more complex version of the same fly is the **Bivisible**, which also works most effectively.



A final simple fly one might certainly keep in mind is the standard **Elk Hair Caddis**. Fly tying manuals illustrate a number of color patterns to try, using the same standard tying procedure for each version. My favorite sizes for the **Driftless Region** are a #14 and #16, and for this fly I normally don’t get much more complicated than that. In recent seasons I have taken to tying a **Little Black Caddis** version of the **Elk Hair**, and I do tie some of these in sizes #18 and #20. This version can be quite effective in March and early April when the **Little Black Caddis** comes off alongside our early **Blue Wing Olive** hatches. Other standard **Elk Hair Caddis** patterns work well later in the spring and on through the summer months. Some of our streams tend to drive off extensive summer caddis hatches and it’s good to have a nice selection of caddis patterns in the fly boxes as well.



After all this discussion concerning fly tying organizational skills, I now must admit it's time for an "**emergency**" tying session! Last winter it seems as though I somehow forgot to tie a dozen #12 **Stimulators** I'm going to need for South Dakota streams in early June. I'll let you know how they worked out!

The Vintage Of River Is Unending

*Grape-heavy woods ripen darkening
The sweetness.*

*Tight with golden light
The hills have been gathered.*

*Granite weight of sun.
Tread of burning days.*

*Unending river
Swells from the press
To gladden men.*

Ted Hughes, from River



*"Red" Canoe
Iowa Driftless Chapter
Trout Unlimited*



©2008 by Jeffery Skeate. This article may be reproduced, distributed, or disseminated only with the express written permission of the author