



Using the proper tools and the author's tying tips can help you find your way around obstacles and improve your efficiency at the vise.

Tying Tips

TED LEESON

Ten helpful ways to make fly tying easier and more pleasurable

GIVEN THE ENORMOUS NUMBER and variety of fly dressings, one thing is certain: If you tie a lot of flies, you're going to see a lot of different problems. But if you tie a lot more flies, you'll probably solve those problems, eventually finding your way around innumerable little obstacles, streamlining your technique, developing shortcuts, and building a couple dozen "better mousetraps." Sometimes the most useful and interesting results from a session at the vise are not the flies but the innovations brought to their construction.

Every tier has his private discoveries and idiosyncratic procedures that make tying simpler, faster, and more efficient, and the flies themselves better. The following tips have been culled from my own tying and teaching and are by nature a miscellaneous lot. Some deal with better techniques, some with the use of materials, and others with improved fly quality. But the common denominator, I hope, is that in some way all of them increase the pleasure we take in our craft.

1 Thread Handling. Because a tying thread is composed of dozens of very thin filaments, it changes cross-sectional shape, depending upon how twisted it becomes. An untwisted length is flat, almost like floss; a tightly twisted length is thicker and rounder, like a cord. Controlling the thread's shape and twist according to the requirements of a given material or procedure is a basic and important element of tying.

A spooled thread in a bobbin twists during tying—one twist for every wrap around the hook. For a right-handed tier, thread can be untwisted by spinning the bobbin counterclockwise, as viewed from above. (Think of unscrewing a screw.) Observe where the thread meets the bottom of the hook shank; as it untwists, it will form a flat "ribbon" at this juncture, which is your key to stop the bobbin.

The flattened thread is best for binding most materials to the hook, as it distributes thread pressure evenly along the material and the hook shank, thereby maximizing holding power while minimizing bulk. (A twisted thread applies a "point pressure" that can slip or even cut feather or hair fibers.) Dubbing, particularly with stiff materials, is easier on a flat thread. And operations requiring a smooth finish—materials applied under a tinsel body, for instance, or the final wrappings on the head of a streamer—are easier with a flat thread.

A twisted thread has its uses, too, and the twist can be increased by spinning the bobbin clockwise (though excessive twist will greatly weaken the thread). Twisted threads are useful in building up bulk quickly—wrapping heads of larger flies, or making a smooth taper from lead-wire wraps down to the hook shank. Some distribution wrapping techniques

(see below) also employ a twisted thread.

2 Dry-fly Tails. I've always been an advocate of the type of dry-fly split tail favored by Vince Marinaro in his *A Modern Dry Fly Code*—less for the sake of realism than for the spread "ponton" effect, which helps a fly float right-side-up and improves stability. But the prevailing method of tying these tails—with a little ball of dubbing between separate bunches of hackle barbs—involves too much material handling and too many procedures to be really practical for me. So I use a "fan" style of tailing that achieves roughly the same effect but more simply.

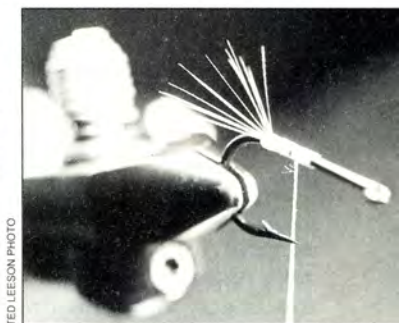
With the thread at the tail position, spin the bobbin to twist the thread tightly. Then take two or three wraps directly on top of one another, with the object of building up a narrow but distinct "button" of thread at the tail position. In your left hand, take a bunch of hackle fibers by the tips and hold them not directly on top of the hook shank but slightly off-center toward the tier. (If you sight down the hook shank, bend to eye, the hackle barbs would be at the two o'clock position.)

With the thread still tightly twisted, take one wrap over the hackle fibers as close as possible to (but not on top of) the thread button. As the thread passes over the top of the hook shank, apply pressure and release the hackle fibers so that they are drawn and distributed evenly over the top of the button. The thread should pull the hackle barbs over the button to make a "fan" shape, and the hackle barbs should elevate slightly.

With practice, you can spread a 90-degree fantail and post it up with one wrap of thread. If the tail is not quite right after one wrap, take another loose wrap, then preen the fibers into position, clip the butts, and bind them.

Here is an alternate method: Take one loose wrap over the tail fibers a little ahead of the button, to trap them against the hook shank. Then take a second, tight wrap of twisted thread between the button and the first thread wrap; this wrap will distribute and elevate the fibers.

3 Cut-wing Parachutes. Everyone has a pet fly style, and mine is the cut-wing parachute. For precise silhouette, good flotation, durability, and effectiveness, I think they're unsurpassed. But many tiers shy away from the design, regarding it as



Fan style of tail

too finicky to tie. Trying to wind a hackle around the thin wing butts can indeed be difficult, as it easily distorts the wings or twists them out of alignment.

A few tricks make it easier, though. First, parachute flies take less hackle; so in preparing the hackle feather, strip it well up the quill, using the portion of feather nearest the tip, where the quill is thin and flexible and less prone to twist the wings.

Second, and perhaps more important, is wing preparation. After the cut or burned wings are tied in and posted up, take three or four *tight* horizontal wraps around the wing butts and up the quill a short distance. This will twist the wings severely, so don't worry. After the last wrap, pass the tying thread under the hook shank, and take three or four more tight wraps in the *opposite direction*, adjusting tension so that the wings are pulled back into alignment. Secure the thread around the hook shank.

This tight wrap/counterwrap arrangement functions a little like two springs that work to hold the wings straight. Relatively small amounts of torque that come from winding the hackle are easily counteracted by the force of the butt wrappings.

4 Dubbing. The floatability of dubbed dry-fly bodies can be improved by spinning the fur with a bit of paste-type floatant rather than wax. Apply a thin film of floatant to your thumb and forefinger, and spin the dubbing material as usual, replenishing paste as needed. Once it dries, the body will resist water absorption better than a fly doped with floatant in the conventional fashion.

5 Preparing Deer Hair. Like most things I've learned, I stumbled across this one quite by accident. Doubtless other tiers have discovered this same technique, but I've never seen it mentioned anywhere.

One of the great annoyances of using deer hair is stripping the usable hair from the fine underfur—a problem compounded when the underfur is nearly as long as the body hair. I've

seen innumerable methods employing dubbing needles, scissor points, even small brushes and combs. They all share one common feature—they don't work well. This method is simpler:

Hold a clump of deer or elk hair by the very tips, and cut it from the hide. Roll the tips gently between your thumb and forefinger to fan the hair just

slightly. Bring the clump about an inch from your mouth and blow directly into the hair butts toward the tip. Wave the bunch of hair gently so the air column penetrates it everywhere. The air will push the fine underfur toward the tip. Then transfer the clump to your other hand, holding it now by the butts, and stroke the fine underfur out the tip end.

Provided the clump of hair is not overly large, this method cleans completely, wastes no material, requires no tools, and takes about five seconds.

6 Oversize Hooks. Using oversize hooks was standard practice in the days of gut leaders and early nylon when 4X was really about the finest practical tippet. This limitation in tippet diameter hampered the use of flies in the very small sizes that are routinely used today with fine, strong monofilament.

Tiers used to dress a small fly on a larger hook, tying, for example, a #18 or even #20 imitation on a #16 hook. It is still a useful approach today, particularly if you have difficulty dressing small hooks or if you have problems hooking or holding fish on the narrow gaps of tiny flies.

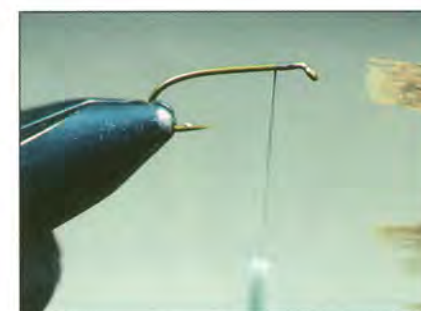
It's worth pointing out that one hook maker, Tiemco, has addressed this idea in its model 500U hooks. This 2X-short, up-eye hook is ideal for tiny dry flies. Though you can regard this hook as 2X-short-shank, you can also consider it as a 2X-large-gap. That is, a hook with a #20 shank has roughly a #16 gap—proportions that allow more finger clearance at the vise and better hooking onstream.

Nevertheless, the same effect can be accomplished by using a small dressing on any hook one or two sizes larger.

7 Small Flies. Small flies (#20 and smaller) present two separate but related categories of difficulties. The first category is manual—simply developing the dexterity needed to handle small amounts of materials in tight spaces. The problems of dexterity, however, can be compounded by the second category—the materials themselves. While many tiers use midge jaws, tiny bobbins and hackle pliers, and other small tools to match the proportions of a small fly, many neglect to choose materials that are similarly scaled down.

Precise silhouettes and uncluttered dressings on small flies generally require smaller materials and fine-textured materials. Dubbing fur, for example, should not only be fine to start with, but cleaned of all remnants of thicker guard hairs and fibers. For wings or wet/nymph hackle, try feathers from smaller birds such as quail, woodcock, dove, or starling, which have plumage of a size and texture proportionate to smaller imitations. A segment of goose quill is much too coarse for a wing case on a #20 nymph. Instead, try using a goose biot in gray, black, or brown. These give a good appearance, are easy to tie, and can be sized to the nymph.

In short, when adjusting tools and techniques for dressing smaller flies, don't overlook scaling down materials as well.



Step 1



Step 2



Step 3



Step 4



Step 5

1. Attach the thread. 2. Push a clump of hackle barbs butt-end first into the hook-eye end of the shank. 3. Bind down the butts. 4. Dress the fly as usual. 5. Stand the hackles up soft-hackle style, secure them underneath for a beard hackle, or secure them to the side for creeper style nymph legs.

8 Wet/Nymph Hackle. Because of its soft texture and lifelike mottling, gamebird hackle, particularly grouse, is prized for tying wet flies and nymphs. But such necks are small, and it is easy to deplete the commonly used sizes. The following method makes use of hackles that are too large for conventional winding.

Attach the thread to the hook at the wing position. Choose a hackle feather and preen it to even the barb tips, then strip the desired number from the stem. Push the clump of hackle barbs butt-end first into the hook-eye end of the shank so that the fibers surround the shank. The distance that the barbs extend past the eye should be equal to the length of the finished hackle. Adjust the clump of hackle to the desired length, and bind down the butts. Dress the fly as usual; the bound butts will eventually be hidden beneath the body material.

When the tying sequence calls for hackle, stroke the barbs toward the bend of the hook while maintaining their distribution around the shank. A few wraps in front of the barbs will stand them up "soft-hackle" style. A wrap over the butts will lay them down in the more conventional wet-fly manner. Or as you stroke the hackle back, you can pull all the barbs underneath the shank for a beard hackle. You can also pull a clump to either side for "creeper" style nymph legs.

In addition to its versatility, this reverse-tie method permits a small neat head on the fly.

9 Tying Marabou. Marabou and other soft materials like philoplume and some synthetic hairs make effective streamer wings and tails. But their fluffiness can make them unruly—sticking to the tying thread, building static electricity, finding their way under wraps of tinsel or hackle.

You can bring the material under control, though. Once you've selected a clump to tie in, dampen it with moistened thumb and forefinger. This will "paste" together the marabou barbs and make them easier to handle. (Do not moisten the material at the tie-in point.) The method is especially useful if you're "piggybacking" material, tying one bunch directly over another, either to add material or create color bands. The dampened materials stay out of your way and let you gauge both their quantity and placement.

10 Material Bobbins. Materials can be conserved and tying made more efficient if you use one of the most overlooked tools available to the tier—a material bobbin. The conventional method of using a cut length of material like tinsel or floss has a couple of drawbacks. Using lengths of material is wasteful, because you must cut more than you need and discard the excess, and as the length of material gets short, it becomes hard to handle.

Spooled materials like tinsel and floss can be put into a material bobbin—one with a wide tube and flared ends. (Unspooled materials like lead wire or chenille can be wound onto empty thread spools.) The bobbin reduces waste and keeps materials nicely under control when tying. It can be held back out of the tying field with an ordinary spring material clip, or it can simply be left hanging. Whenever you have more than one bobbin hanging, however, make sure one is lower than the other. It helps to prevent them from knocking together and twisting. Once you get accustomed to it, two-bobbin tying is simple.

TED LEESON, a freelance writer and Oregon State University English teacher, lives in Corvallis, Oregon.

Step 1

Step 2

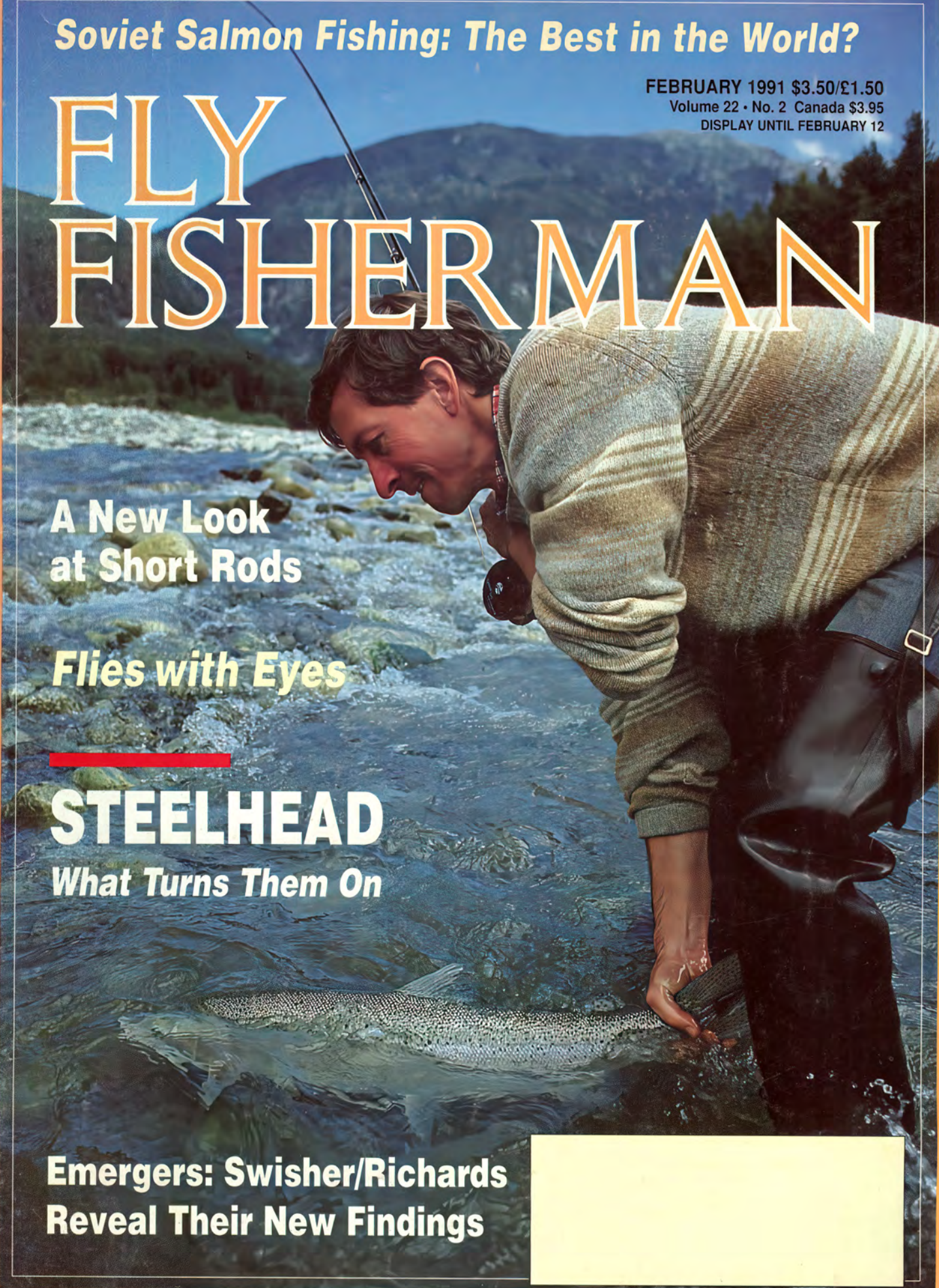
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FLY FISHERMAN

A man in a striped sweater and waders is shown from the waist down, standing in a river. He is holding a fishing rod and looking down at a large steelhead trout that is lying on the rocks in the water. The background shows a mountain range under a blue sky.

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