

# Flies or Lures?

... and does it really matter?

JOHN GIERACH

WELL, IF IT'S A QUILL GORDON tied with stripped peacock herl, wood-duck wings and natural blue dun hackle, it's clearly a fly. If, on the other hand, it has a body of molded plastic with treble hooks screwed into it, it's hard to think of it as anything but a lure or, more properly, a plug. Fine, but there's a large gray area in between, an area that's been taking on a lot of shape and color in recent years as some fly tiers have started to stretch the traditional boundaries of the craft—to the breaking point in the minds of some. There is a renaissance of innovative new patterns, or a rash of peculiar ones, depending on how you feel about it.

The credit or blame lies partly with the many synthetics now available to fly tiers, materials that, by their very nature, suggest designs and shapes that are unattainable with fur and feathers alone. Then there are the fly tiers, a diverse group of tinkerers and ponderers who have historically refused to leave well enough alone. There's the growing suspicion in some circles that plug and spin casters may have something on us fly fishers in the areas of deep water and heavy current, not to mention lure-generated animation. Over the last few decades, fly fishing technology has also come up with things like sink-tip lines, shooting tapers and graphite and boron rods that have freed us from small hooks, shallow water and short casts. Recent interest in fly fishing for large- and smallmouth bass, panfish, northern pike, walleyes, muskies and others has also expanded the consciousness of some tiers. When fly fishers turned their collective attention to largemouth bass, for

instance, it wasn't long before Dave Whitlock came up with, among other things, the Eelworm Streamer—fly fishing's answer to the rubber worm.

Some of the Whitlock patterns may have raised a few eyebrows when they first came out, but they're considered pretty tame now. They're seen as flies—bass flies, but flies nonetheless. There are other tiers, however, who have gone on into the territory where fly tying meets lure making, again rattling the cages of some fly-fishing traditionalists.

## Innovators or Lure Makers?

OVER THE LAST FEW MONTHS I've had the chance to look at the work of four tiers whose creations have raised some questions among fly fishers: John Betts, Tim England, Hal Janssen and Sandy Pittendrigh. These gentlemen aren't the only innovative tiers working today, nor are they the only ones who have been accused of making lures instead of tying flies, but they represent the trend in general, as well as showing the direction it is taking. The one thing all these designs have in common is that they are intended to be fished on a fly rod.

Although John Betts has become somewhat notorious for using synthetic materials on trout flies, it's his Foam Divers that some anglers find difficult to classify. They come in several sizes and patterns—Wiggle-bugger, Crayfish, and Frog—but are all essentially the same, consisting of colored foam bodies with feathers at what you could roughly call the arm, leg and tail positions. The bodies are bent at about the same angle as a fetal stonefly

pattern (or a Lazy Ike) and sport clear-plastic diving bills. The bodies are tied on pieces of wire that are looped at the face to accept the leader and again at the rear where the single hook, camouflaged with marabou, dangles. The Betts Sculpin is more conventional. It has a body of spun and clipped, natural colored deer hair with a tail of mixed brown and white marabou. It does, however, have a diving bill at the nose.

These are striking patterns, exhibiting good workmanship and they have that buggy, dangly, slightly evil look that bass fishermen love. Their action is wiggly and seductive with the Long-Tailed Frogs looking the best, or at least the most outrageous, in the water. On a floating line, a fairly hard, steady pull makes the fly dive and wiggle, while a slow retrieve causes it to wobble along just under the surface.

On a sink-tip line the dives go deeper, and since the Darters are buoyant, they can be kept out of the weeds on the bottom, although I don't think you could call them perfectly weedless. John suggests a loose leader connection to insure freedom of action and I found that to be good advice. A tight knot definitely dampens the effect. The placement of the feathers is thoughtful. The marabou, and the long saddles on the Frogs, continue the action for a serpentine effect and don't seem to foul in the hook.

Tim England's patterns, also designed for the fly rod, look at first glance to be hard-bodied plugs. On closer inspection, you see that they're made of clipped deer hair so tightly packed that it has the con-



AUTHOR'S PHOTO

sistency of sanded cork. I've showed these to a number of tiers and the response has always been the same: Before any discussion begins as to whether they're flies or lures, there is a long moment of pure astonishment at the craftsmanship. Some of these things are signed with the initials T.E. written on the deer hair. The deer-hair work has to be seen to be believed.

There's a wide diversity in Tim's lures. There are jointed bodies and continuous bodies; some are tied on the shanks of hooks, while on others the hooks are trailing. Some have propellers. One even has a pair of counter-revolving, clear plastic blades that stabilize the lure and also add a transparent, ghostly quality to it in the water.

The coloring on some is the result of

the stacking of dyed deer hair, while on others the effect is augmented with marking pens. When the coloring aims at realism, it becomes startling. The Magic Minnow, a jointed baby rainbow, is accurate right down to a little black dot marking the position of the anal vent.

The plug-like appearance of these flies is no accident. Tim told me he started out by making copies of his favorite plugs in deer hair so they could be fished on a fly rod. They aren't exact copies, but in some cases there are noticeable similarities. The Magic Minnow looks a little like the old Jointed Pikie and Tim's June Bug is reminiscent of a Jitterbug. The actions vary as much as the designs, but all have some animation.

Hal Janssen's Fry Flies also have a cer-

tain plug-like quality. They have hard bodies of mylar tubing over underbodies of cardboard, or balsa wood on the floating flies. The bodies are painted realistically and coated with rod-wrapping epoxy. These little fish patterns have a convincing, flashy, translucent, scaly quality that's enhanced by the short, sparse marabou tails. The Olive-back Shad has a small diving bill.

These flies looked a little static in the bath tub, but out in the sunlight, in flowing water, they came off as very realistic. The diving bill adds a little action to the Shad, but all the flies flash from side to side when retrieved with the quick jerks of darting fry.

Hal also included a pair of interesting dragonfly nymphs. They have the eyeballs



Betts's Foam Diver crayfish



Janssen's Fry Flies



Pittendrigh's Wiggle Scoop



Betts's Foam Diver frog



Pittendrigh's Bank Robbers



England's June Bug



England's Magic Minnow



England's deer-bair patterns



Janssen's hard-bodied dragonfly nymph

AUTHOR'S PHOTOS

and feather legs of more traditional ties, but the bodies are made of shaped, painted balsa wood. They can be fished on the surface or on a short leader on a sinking line. In front of the sink-tip they have tantalizing action, diving when the line is retrieved and then floating back towards the surface with a wobbling motion. The paint jobs are meticulous and life-like.

Sandy Pittendrigh's patterns are of two types. The Bankrobbers are mildly strange, but are still, I think, clearly flies. They are more or less standard nymph patterns with the shanks bent in such a way that the hooks ride up in the water, making them largely weedless and rockless. This effect is achieved—here's the strange part—by attaching the leader not to the eye of the hook but to the body of the fly right at the hook. It looks a little odd, but then I don't recall reading anywhere that a fly must be tied to the leader at the eye. I'd just always assumed . . .

The Bankrobbers include stonefly nymphs and a good looking crayfish made almost entirely of leather that looks and feels convincing in the water. He also pointed out that any large, weighted nymph can be turned into a Bankrobber by simply bending the hook and tying the leader on in the middle.

His Wiggle Scoops and Roadkill Streamers are something else again. The Wiggle Scoop consists of a rabbit-fur Zonker strip fastened to a long-shanked hook with a little hackle at the front, a brass diving bill and a barrel swivel. As you'd expect, it's a deep running, lively lure that will go to the bottom even in heavy current.

The Roadkill Streamers—a wonderful name—are long rabbit-fur strips, up to eight-inches long, with monofilament threaded through the skin, a short-shanked hook attached near the tail and a silver propeller ahead of two brass beads

at the head. Imagine an eight-inch length of rabbit skin with no hook shank to get in its way and you'll have an idea of the action.

### What Are They?

THE QUESTION REMAINS whether these things are flies or lures. I showed the whole collection to several fishing acquaintances to see if a general opinion might develop. One gentleman took a look at the Roadkill Streamer and said, "Man, this ain't a fly or a lure, this is bait."

Emotional outbursts aside, I got a variety of reactions. They were all flies except the ones with diving bills; the ones that were painted weren't flies; the Foam Darters weren't flies because the hooks dangled from the bodies; Hal Janssen's minnows weren't flies because they were hard; Tim England's patterns weren't flies because they didn't look like flies.

On a recent fishing trip to Montana, I asked Gary LaFontaine for his thoughts on the differences between a fly and a lure. We had a long talk about it that made the miles we had to drive go faster, but we fell short of resolving the problem. Gary suggested that castability should be taken into account and the old story came up about the famous casting champion who duct-taped a banana to a fly line and delivered it to a distance of thirty yards, just to prove a point. We never did come to a firm conclusion, but Gary said he would draw the line at fishing with fruits and vegetables.

By the way, all patterns I've looked at here are castable on fly rods as light as 6-weights, with the exception of the larger Foam Darters which, being more wind resistant, require a heavier line. They are, however, no harder to cast than a medium-sized bass bug.

For the sake of comparison, I found that I could also cast a good-sized Rapala, a large Jitterbug, and a pike-sized Dardevil with my 9-weight bass outfit, although the treble hooks gave me some problems. How do bait casters tie those things on without hooking themselves?

### Going by the Book

THE OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY defines "fly" as, among other things, ". . . a fish-hook dressed with feathers, silk, etc., so as to imitate some insect." Webster's *New World* agrees almost word for word. *McClane's Standard Fishing Encyclopedia* expands the definition to include copies of ". . . insects, minnows, crustaceans, and similar natural foods eaten by fish . . ." Legal definitions tend to focus on construction, a "fly" being something where at least some of the materials are "tied to, or wound about, the hook."

The International Game Fish Association (IGFA) is a little more helpful. Their rules for fly-fishing records state that a "conventional" fly can be dressed on a single or double hook or two singles in tandem, though the eyes of the two hooks can't be more than six inches apart. Treble hooks aren't allowed. The rules go on, "The lure must be a recognized type of artificial fly, which includes streamer, bucktail, tube fly, wet fly, dry fly, nymph, popper and bug." And further, "The fact that a lure can be cast with a fly rod is not evidence in itself that it fits the definition of a fly."

But what is the definition of a fly? I called Elwood Harry at the IGFA headquarters in Fort Lauderdale to see what he had to say on the matter. Harry told me that the question of definition has been raised periodically when potential world record fish have been submitted that were caught on things that deviated in one way

or another from what is "traditionally" considered to be a fly. When a fly is questionable, it goes before a committee. Determinations are made on a case-by-case basis.

The committee's criteria? Well, the fact that you can cast something on a fly rod (like a banana) doesn't make that thing a fly, but if you can't cast it on a fly rod, false cast it, that is, it is clearly not a fly.

Construction is also considered. When I described some of the, uh, devices mentioned here, Mr. Harry said that detached or dangling hooks and scoops or diving bills would definitely raise questions. "Things like that start seriously departing from traditional flies," he said.

Some potential fly-rod records have been rejected by the IGFA because in the I.G.F.A.'s best opinion the lures couldn't be considered flies. Some records that were granted have been questioned by tradition-minded fly fishers. The Association has not been able to write a firm definition of a fly that everyone agrees with and Mr. Harry suggested that I shouldn't try it either, unless I enjoyed angry mail.

### The Twilight Zone

BETTS, ENGLAND, JANSSEN AND PITTEDRIGH all seem unconcerned about the matter of definition. John Betts has

said that his Foam Darters are ". . . a practical and effective bridge into the world of spinning and baitcasting." Sandy Pittendrigh says that patterns like his Roadkill and Wiggle Scoop are "whatever you think they are," adding, "If it feels good between you and the universe, it can't be all that bad." England and Janssen simply refer to their patterns as flies. If there's a consensus, it seems to be that the term "fly rod lure" doesn't give anyone too much of a problem.

Of course, fly rod lures cover a lot of ground. There's all kinds of hardware and out and out plugs on the market that are intended to be used on a fly rod but that do not even approach being flies in any reasonable way.

There are also some genuine borderline cases, like the Fly Rod Hula Popper. In case you've never seen one, a Fly Rod Hula Popper has the hard body of a traditional bass popper (glued to a single hook) with a rubber "hula skirt" tail. Many fly rodders customize Hula Poppers by removing the rubber skirt and replacing it with feather tails and wound hackle, a procedure that makes the lure a bit easier to cast and that may also amount to a sex change operation, turning it from a lure into a fly. As it comes from the factory,

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## Flies or Lures . . .

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the Hula Popper may well be a lure, since it has no fur or feathers on it and none of the materials are "tied to, or wound about, the hook." On the other hand, it was designed expressly for the fly rod and has long been a working favorite of warm-water fly fishers. The word "tradition" keeps coming up.

It was Dick Kotis of the Fred Arbogast Company, makers of the Fly Rod Hula Popper, who told me about all the anglers who modify the thing. I previously believed that I'd come up with the idea all by myself. When I asked him if it was a fly or a lure, he said, "I really can't answer that," which is fair enough. Between the lines there I thought I also saw something like, "and does it really matter?"

### Who Cares?

THAT MAY BE the better question. If you catch what may be a fly-rod record fish using a thing with a diving bill on it, the IGFA might give you some trouble. If you happen to be fishing the same thing in "flies only" water and get tapped on the shoulder by a warden who's been having a bad day, you could have some problems there too, but it ultimately becomes a matter of tradition and convention on the one hand and personal preference on the other. Traditions can be established and conventions can change. As for personal preference: Have your tastes changed any in the last ten years? Mine have.

It's really very simple. You first have to decide if the distinction between a fly and, let's say, a fly rod lure, is an important one. If it is, you just decide what you think a fly is to your own satisfaction and fish only with things that fit, though you might want to follow the lead of the IGFA and make your decisions on a case by case basis.

Here's one for you: If you want to land a longnose gar on a fly rod, you attach a length of frayed nylon rope to your leader. No hook, just a hunk of rope. The fish's teeth get tangled in the braid and the fish can be landed. Is that a fly or not? Does a fly have to have a hook? Would two turns of light ginger hackle help?

You decide, but don't expect anyone to agree with you.

For more information on these flies or lures contact:

John Betts  
1452 South Elizabeth  
Denver, CO 80210  
Tim England  
904 East Stuart  
Fort Collins, CO 80525  
Hal Janssen Company  
P.O. Box 11491  
Santa Rosa, CA 95406  
Sandy Pittendrigh  
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