Confessions of a Reluctant Fly Tier

STEVEN RINELLA



AL HASSALL ILLUSTRATION

WINTER OCCURS IN STAGES in western Montana, and one begins to think of these stages sort of like seasons within a season. Stage one, or early winter, is an event that everyone looks forward to; my friends and I spend hours speculating when the snows will fall and how much we'll get. By mid-winter the novelty of the cold and snow has rubbed off and the alleys around town are layered with frozen mud and packed snow. This is the late summer of winter. People get creative on the weekends; maybe I'll try to fish through the ice or drive to another town just for the sake of it.

By late winter, though, say February and March, the situation has totally deteriorated. When I go outside I can't shake the feeling that emaciated squirrels are sizing me up as prey. Everything about life feels old and tired, and I pace around my home fidgeting with things until the whole place is fidgeted out. It's the time of year when people hatch hastily constructed resolutions and self-improvement plots. The one that seizes me every year is the notion that I'm going to sit down and tie a summer's worth of flies.

I never take to this mission quickly. I'm generally not a procrastinator, but tying a couple hundred flies is not like bellying up to a sink full of dishes; it's something that needs to be eased into. I do the fun and easy parts first, like shoot a squirrel or two, tack the hides out on a board, and try to find that pheasant's tail that I put in the garage after plucking the original owner. I'll lace a bag of bead heads onto nymph hooks, sort out some boxes of materials, organize a little, and try to get all my dubbing in one general location. Then maybe I'll brush up my skills by tying a Muffin Mother, a fly I invented at my girlfriend's request but have never used, that is made solely with hair from her dog, Gimlet. Then I'll look through some tying books and admire the photos of classic Atlantic salmon flies, then I just sort of run out of steam and decide that I'll really get going on it tomorrow.

A week later everything's just as I left it, except the squirrel hides are nice and dry and their meat has been turned into makeshift hasenpfeffer and eaten.

I know for a fact that I am not alone in my predicament. If you asked ten fishermen in the fall if they were going to stock up on flies over the winter,

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nine would say yes and then eight of those would report in the spring that they did not tie as many as they had vowed. It's kind of like trying to stockpile some cash; it never quite adds up like you figure it will.

So I come up with different strategies to keep myself going. One year I decided that I'd tie a dozen flies a day, switching from nymphs to drys halfway through the winter. Interestingly, that same winter I was on a kick where I was supposed to drink a quart of water a day. Neither of those plans lasted a week.

My girlfriend likes to tie flies, and she's handy at it, so last year I tried putting the task to her. I told her that we should tie loads of flies over the winter and she agreed. Then we went out of the country for a month, came home and had to move into a new home, got way behind in work and had to catch up. And then it was spring and all we had to show for the winter were twenty Pheasant Tails, a handful of Elk-hair Caddis, and a beautiful Muffin Mother that we hooked into the fireplace mantel.

The one winter that I did tie a couple hundred flies turned out to be a total waste of time and material. My brother and I were both laid off for the winter and out of school, so we made plans to spend a month fishing in Mexico. Our plans were a little hazy and we couldn't rule anything out, so we tied a handful each of every imaginable pattern for bonefish, permit, tarpon, barracuda, snook, reef fish, mutton snapper, and jack crevalle, along with many multipurpose poppers and streamers and mysterious-looking balls of feather and hair.

I have a vivid recollection of those flies because most of them are still lying in fly boxes down in my basement. When we got to our selected area in Mexico, we discovered a few patterns that bested the others and spent most nights huddled in a palm grove dismantling our beautiful and useless snook flies in order to construct spin-offs of one simple Crazy Charlie that was tearing up the bonefish.

But in my home waters I do know exactly what I need to tie, so I can't lean on that experience to justify my laziness. The guilt about not tying is relieved only when it gets warm enough that the shelf ice breaks up on the river but not so warm that it triggers the spring floods. Then I have to sit down and tie some flies or else I'll have to buy some and that is one thing I cannot do. I'm like Fonzie on *Happy Days* when he has to admit he's wrong and physically can't get past the "W" sound of that word, except for me the unspeakable sentence is "I'd like to buy some of your flies."



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So come spring I'm back in my element, tying flies the night before a trip or, usually, that morning. It feels good to be wrapping and snipping with a new feeling of urgency. They're a little ugly and rushed looking, but they'll work fine and they're coming off quick. After all, I already have all the beads strung on the hooks and my pheasant's tail was anxious for its reincarnation.

There's something about pulling a fly off the vise that you know will be in the water within an hour. When you lose it later that day up in a tree branch, it doesn't bother you at all, because you made it specifically for that day and never expected it to last until the next. It was an ephemeral fly.

As I blow on the head cement to accelerate the drying, I've got an eye out the window for my buddy's car. He's late, and I bet it's because he's home throwing some final wraps on just enough flies to get him through the day. If I don't have enough, I figure that I can borrow from him, and he's probably figuring the same thing about me. We're both wrong.

As I stick the hooks to the foam in my box, ten or so flies in just a couple patterns and sizes, they look so good and orderly that I can't help imagining the box if it was filled. What a sight that would be. The thought inspires me and then my ten flies seem lonely and incomplete, a little band of explorers doomed in a desert of fly box.

My buddy's car pulls in and I close the box and think of the future, that upcoming winter when I'm going to tie all those flies. I'll tie spinners and emergers and duns, lots of nymphs and scuds, a box full of nothing but bead heads, some stuff for char and grayling that I'll use at my brother's place up in Alaska, and maybe a box of steelhead flies for the Christmas holiday when I go see Mom and Dad back in Michigan. I'll buy my materials wholesale. I'll probably tie twenty flies a day; no sense in going crazy and getting overworked.

STEVEN RINELLA is a freelance writer who has written for *American Heritage, Outside,* and many other publications. He lives in Missoula, Montana.

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