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Special Flies for Salt Water

Lou Tabory

AS ALL FRESHWATER BUFFS KNOW, TROUT are often very selective. When trout are rising to certain insects, the trout enthusiast must watch the pattern to be successful. Generally speaking, flies used for trout fishing are special patterns that imitate a certain insect. Some attractors are used in the pursuit of salmon — however, it has been my experience that a precise imitation is often needed to score regularly in sweet water.

In saltwater, the opposite is generally the case. Although there are hatches of many different kinds of baitfish and crustaceans, there are no insect hatches (at least that I know of) and most flies for the brine are attractors. Much of the time, saltwater species are not as selective as their freshwater cousins, and any three- to four-inch white streamer or bucktail will produce a strike. It's just a matter of matching the proper size to the juvenile baitfish on which the fish continually feed.

However, saltwater species can be very

selective when there are large quantities of one baitfish, or when there are hatches or gatherings of other sea creatures such as small sand worms, baby crabs, or shrimp. At such times the feeding pattern of the gamesters changes, and they will take nothing except an almost exact replica of what they are feeding on, becoming as selective as the brown trout.

During these hatches, which last only a few days to two weeks, fly fishing comes into its own. The fly rodder can easily imitate the sometimes very small sea creatures. Size and shape of fly become very important — the length, thickness and general appearance being major factors and color only secondary. The idea is to have the proper patterns in the right sizes. Even though the flies will be useful only for a few weeks of the year, these weeks will be unforgettable.

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Saltwater Flies . . .

a daytime and nighttime pattern. The daytime fly is just a small pink, green or orange bucktail tied very sparsely, 1-1/2" to 2" long, to look like a small sandworm (clamworm) which swims spirally through the water. There can be many variations to this fly because these worms seem to act differently in various areas. In the Long Island Sound they are primarily a nighttime food, disappearing once the sun rises. In Great Bay, N.H., the worms are found to move at about mid-morning on a high outgoing tide.

The night pattern is very different. It is tied like a Muddler Minnow, although the head is much larger because these flies should float well. I tie them black so I get a better silhouette as it drifts along the surface. The baby worm moves along the surface leaving a wake as it swims. The wake is the secret to success. If the angler uses a submerged fly, action is nil. However, using the Black Muddler, and casting it across current, then letting it just drift, will bring fantastic action. This works best on very calm water, of course, but I also have taken fish in a windy chop. Fishing both flies takes much skill. The flies must be worked on a dead drift, like nymphs. Although in true life the worms are mobile, they are helpless in a strong current. The fish hit mainly on the drift or just as the fly swings. Very seldom is a fish taken on an up-current retrieve.

This is where the long rodder will have most success, for the worms are hatching in estuaries and enter the open water through creeks and rivers at high tide. As the worms are swept out into the open water the gamefish feed vigorously on them.

For daylight fishing a sinking line is usually more effective, but it's best to have both along. Although I have had better fishing by getting under the worms in the daytime, I have had some success with floaters.

Floating line is by far the superior at night. The fish can be detected as they move water on the surface. Under most circumstances, fish will splash as they feed; while feeding on worms fish will "slurp" the surface, taking the creatures very gently. The floating fly-and-line combination is the trick. Casting across current and floating the Black Worm Fly along the surface will simulate the worm effectively. Work as short as possible, for the fish are hard to hook and long casts make hooking almost impossible. I have found it best to make a 30-40-foot cast, fish the fly through the drift, and cast back

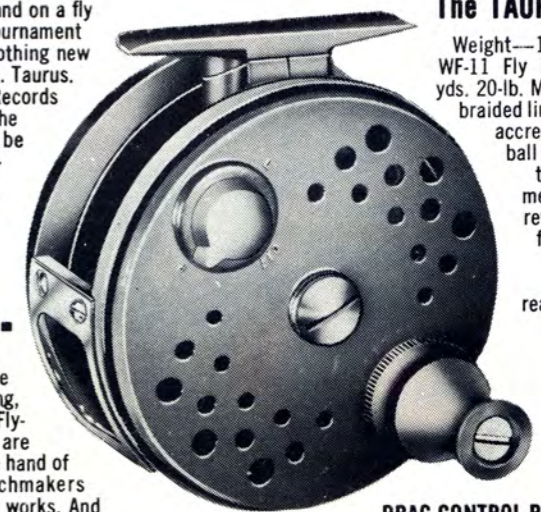
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Saltwater Flies . . .

across the current again. Do not even bother to retrieve the fly up-current when fishing the worm fly. It is best to concentrate on the drift.

Most fishing is done in shallow water. If wading, walk carefully up to the fish. When boat fishing, either drift, pole or paddle to the fish. Do *not* under any circumstances run the motor in breaking fish. You will put the fish down and probably end the action for the night.

Actually, the same fishing technique holds for fishing with crab and shrimp imitations. Juvenile crabs are prisoners of tidal flow. Even as they mature, crabs are dependent on the marsh to feed and spend much of their lives moving in and out of tidal flows.

Shrimp, too, frequently visit such areas to feed. Born in the open ocean, juvenile shrimp make their way along the bottom to the shallow, protected inshore areas. When conditions are right, the shrimp become easy prey to the gamesters. Shrimp are different in that they do not hatch out and disappear, but are residents of certain areas and much of the time are a standard bait food, taken by the fish in about the same manner as crabs and worms.

In the daytime, flies are fished deep unless surface action is detected. At dawn and dusk a small popper will sometimes stir up action. Worked very slowly, the popper will simulate a shrimp or one of the other creatures struggling on the surface.

At night, in areas where shrimp are abundant, fish can be detected by a "pop" as they feed at the surface. The sound is

The Special Collection: Three sandworm patterns (lower left), three shrimp (center) and three crabs (note silicone body).



like a paper cup being slammed down mouth-first onto the surface of the water and can be heard at great distances on a calm night. The shrimp fly, like the crab and worm, should be fished right on the surface at night. The most effective way is to cast across current and dead drift the fly. Most strikes will occur just as the fly swings and turns up-current.

The crabs are also abundant all year long and seem to hatch out in the summer. The juvenile crabs I've seen are about the size of a dime and float right on the surface. At the time I witnessed the hatch, large fish were feeding on these small crabs like trout nymphing on the surface. Thick, dark backs rose up from the bottom and took the tiny bait with almost no disturbance at all. Not only do the gamesters enjoy the small crabs; they also feed on larger crabs throughout the entire year. I have often found crab, up to three inches across the shell, in fish I have cleaned.

The most predictable hatch is the worm which occurs in early June in the Long Island Sound. The same hatch also occurs in the Great Bay, N.H. about the 4th of July, indicating that hatches must occur along the entire coast from Connecticut to Maine between these times. There must also be hatches below Connecticut with which I am not familiar. After the first major hatch, which may last on and off for two weeks in some areas, there are other hatches throughout the summer. However, they are for much shorter periods of time. Even the first major hatch seems to be a number of hatches coming off together, because they will be thick for a few days, taper off, and then come on strong again.

Shrimp are most abundant in the spring, moving in from the ocean to the shallow

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areas where they spend the summer. Crabs, like the shrimp, move inshore during the spring and offer early season food for these gamesters. Both are fed upon by bass and weakfish throughout the entire year. At certain short periods of time during the hatch or when the bait is merging together, they change the feeding pattern of the gamefish. This is not as drastic a change as with the worm hatch because shrimp and crabs are not as concentrated as the worms. However, I believe there must certainly be areas in the mid-Atlantic where shrimp are concentrated as they are in the Gulf of Mexico, even though I'm not familiar with them. My experience with shrimp and crab is mainly as a fill-in when nothing else is around. Nevertheless, both are important in the food chain and both demand attention by the long rodder.

Tying These Patterns

Tying saltwater specials does not require the same skill as tying nymphs or very small flies. The most important fea-

tures are size and shape. If the flies are a little sloppy, it won't make a bit of difference. The flies I have been discussing are tied on hook sizes ranging from #6 to 3/0; for the most part #4 and #2 will cover all but the exceptions. The large crabs are tied on 3/0 hooks, and for the very small crabs and shrimp I use #6. The Worm Flies are tied on #4 and #2; the same goes for the Shrimp Fly unless the large shrimp are around. I use stainless steel for all my flies. They hold a point better and if my flies get wet, they will not rust.

As I mentioned earlier, the Worm Fly is tied two ways. The daytime fly is a small sparse bucktail tied on a #4 hook. Calftail, bucktail or imitation bucktail will all work well in colors of pink, green or light orange. The nighttime fly is a little more complex. The wing is black bucktail with a grizzley hackle for a shoulder. The head is spun black deer-body hair clipped short. The fly has the appearance of a chunky muddler. Both flies have no body although I am sure a body would not hurt. The size of this fly is about 1-1/2 to 2" long by 3/8" thick. Actually, the black muddler could cover many different situations and has become one of my favorite night flies.

Shrimp flies can be very simple or complex depending on what the angler wants to tie. Some shrimp flies actually look just like a shrimp in your hand. If the angler has the time, they are fun to make and look great! Nonetheless, a bunchy brown, pink, yellow or white bucktail will turn the trick most of the time. The important factor is size and shape. Shrimp are stumpy with fuzzy edges to make them fat and buggy looking. Most shrimp are a half-inch to about two-inches long.

Crabs can be tied in two ways — either spun deer-body hair cut to the shape of a crab or made with silicone bathroom sealer. The silicone crabs, tied with deer hair on both ends of a hook for the legs, take on the color of deer hair and look very much like the real thing. The shell is formed on the hook with a small amount of the silicone sealer and worked into shape with the fingers. Wetting the fingers before shaping will prevent sticky fingers.

Used only for short periods of time, special flies are not the rule but rather the exception in saltwater fly fishing. At these times, however, the long rodder can take full advantage of his capabilities for presenting small artificials and become King of the Beach. ■

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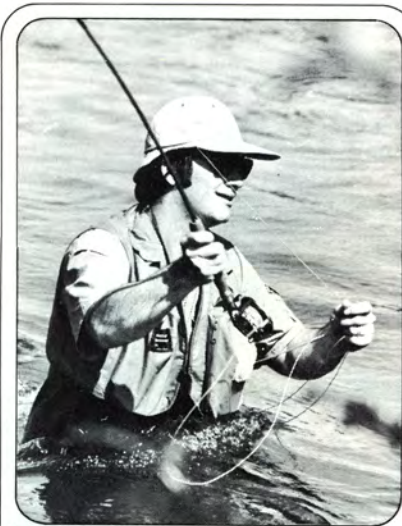


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