

Angling author Doug Swisher successfully finishes the fight with a beautiful brown deceived by a Woolly Bugger.

The Woolly Bugger

It jigs, breathes, pulsates—and drives fish wild. Everywhere.

BARRY BECK

SEVENTEEN YEARS HAVE PASSED since Russ Blessing introduced his Woolly Bugger to me. A *Tricorythodes* spinner fall was all but over when Russ pulled out a fly box and selected a well-chewed but still fishable streamer-type fly. It was a large Woolly Worm with a long maribou tail.

He cut back his leader to a 4X tippet, tied on the fly and directly ahead of his clinch knot, attached a size BB split shot. Satisfied that everything was in order, Russ looked up and asked, "Ever see a Woolly Bugger before?"

I strained to keep from laughing. "Woolly Bugger? What a name; it's really ugly."

"Even uglier when it's wet," Russ replied. Dropping his Bugger into the water at my feet, Russ twitched the rod tip up and down. The Bugger acted like a lead-head jig—its long maribou tail pulsating, its hackles breathing. It looked alive.

Russ explained how much he relied on the Woolly Bugger when the hatches were over and the fishing was off. "It makes a great searching fly; I use it on Oppossum Lake for the lake rainbows, and it works on bass, too."

"What does it imitate?" I asked. "A leech or bullhead, maybe a crayfish if it's tied in the right colors," Russ said. "At any rate, it works."

"Okay, so show me." And show me he did. For the next hour I watched Russ patiently work the Bugger along the stream bottom,

searching out likely areas and moving one fish after another.

I was convinced, and since that day on Pennsylvania's Little Lehigh, I've fished the Woolly Bugger across the United States and Canada and have caught practically every species of freshwater fish imaginable.

Equipment

WOOLLY BUGGERS ARE EFFECTIVE with any tackle that will properly cast a streamer. For trout fishing on small streams, I prefer a rod 6½ or 7 feet long that carries a WF4- or 5-weight line. On larger rivers and lakes, I like a rod 8 to 8½ feet long for 5- or 6-weight lines.

To properly swim the Bugger, I often use a 10-foot, 4X flat-butt leader on small water (marketed by Doug Swisher of Darby, Mont.). For larger rivers and lakes, I use leaders 14 to 15 feet long.

My fly lines always are brightly colored in weight-forward floating and sinking-tip tapers only.

The final necessary item is a container of split-shot in size B and BB.

Technique

THE MOST IMPORTANT TACTIC in fishing Woolly Buggers is the retrieve. Most anglers fish their streamers across current and retrieve with a six- or eight-inch strip. You can successfully fish the Bugger that way, but the most productive technique is to pump it back with a slow, patient retrieve.

AUTHOR'S PHOTOS

BARRY BECK is a fly-fishing teacher and shop owner who lives in Berwick, Pa.

Woolly Bugger . . .

This is where the split-shot comes in. By attaching a size B or BB split shot directly ahead of the fly, you can achieve an up-and-down jigging motion. Make an up-and-across cast, mend the line, and allow the Bugger to sink to a desired level. Then start a slow hand-over-hand retrieve accompanied by any up-and-down rod-tip motion. The hand retrieve should draw the Bugger forward three or four inches. In rhythm with this, lift the rod tip four or five inches and drop it back to the starting position. The lift moves the Bugger up and when the rod tip is dropped back, the weight of the split-shot will dive the Bugger.

The up-and-down motion allows the Woolly Bugger's tail to do its thing by "breathing" or pulsating—and driving fish wild.

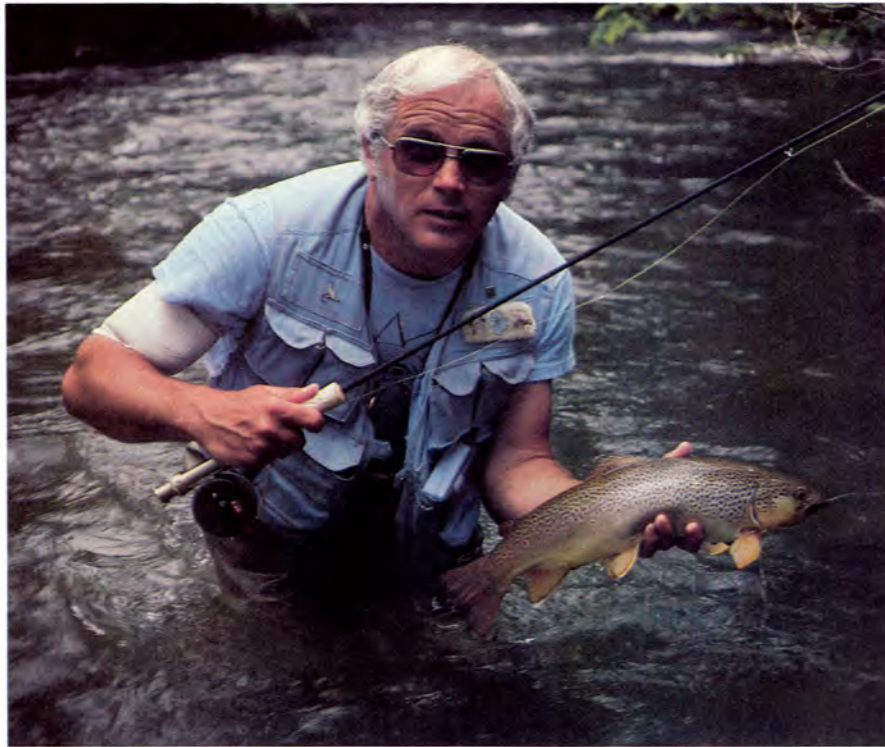
The split-shot ahead of the fly is not the most pleasant thing to cast. You must open up your casting loop and allow the weight of the fly and shot to carry your cast forward. I have a friend who calls this type of casting "dopping", and perhaps he is right. If your backcast is too low, or your front loop too tight, you may find the Bugger attached to your hat, vest or, at worst, yourself.

I mentioned using weight-forward floating and sinking-tip lines but purposely excluded full-sinking lines. At least part of the fly line must float to achieve the jiglike action that I keep stressing. I usually fish with a full-floating line, but in deep water a sinking-tip usually does the trick. Remember, I use a 10- to 15-foot leader and this, with the weight of the shot, will sink quickly to the bottom and help to swim the Bugger naturally.

Highly visible fly-line colors such as yellow, chartreuse and sunrise, are an advantage to my fishing because I usually fish the Woolly Bugger dead drift along the stream bottom before starting a retrieve on the swing. Often good fish take the Bugger on the drift, so I use the end of my line as a strike indicator. If the line stops or shoots forward, I strike accordingly. I recommend a weight-forward line because I do very little false casting with the Woolly Bugger. I rely on the weight-forward's ability to shoot for distance and accuracy.

Stream Strategy

WHEN FISHING A BUGGER through a pool, I prefer to start at the head, fishing short at first to cover the water directly in front of me. Far too many anglers are in a hurry to cast to the other side when there may be a good fish lying at their feet. Start with a short cast quartering upstream and give the Bugger enough time to sink. Pay attention to the floating-line tip. On the swing, start the hand-over-hand retrieve and rod-tip motion. Keep the rod tip low and to the right of a right-hand swing and the opposite for a left-hand swing to absorb the shock of a strike.



Above, Swisher shows the beautiful markings of a brown taken on one of the Woolly Buggers he tied on the fender of his Land Rover, right.

If the rod tip is pointed at the fly when a fish takes, it often will break off. After three or four short casts, extend the cast to mid-stream, and then, if necessary, wade into position to properly cover the far bank. Pay extra attention to undercut banks that provide cover and security for big fish. Cast the Bugger tight against the bank, make a short mend to sink the fly and then retrieve. If a pool is shallow enough to wade, stay in mid-stream and work both banks. Make short casts first, then extend them to the right and left banks. I prefer to cover the water around me and then move downstream about five steps and start over. Cast, mend, retrieve and search—let the Woolly Bugger do the rest.

Low-light times of day are, by far, the best for larger fish on the Bugger. Fish the first two or three hours of daylight and the two hours before and after dark. The Bugger is an excellent choice for a night fly. I can remember a brace of 20-inch plus browns taken on the Bugger on the West Branch of the Delaware River in the darkness of a July night.

The West

THE WOOLLY BUGGER WAS SLOW to catch on in the East, but through the efforts of author-angler Doug Swisher, it hit the West with a bang. Through his schools and articles, Doug convinced western anglers of the Woolly Bugger's potential as a western fly. Today many western guides and fly shops

recommend it as a top fly for the big fish of the Big Horn River. I've used it successfully on the Madison River's deep channels between weedbeds.

Whenever I think of the west, I think of Bob Jacklin, owner of Jacklin's Fly Shop in West Yellowstone, Mont. He is a very opinionated fisherman and a traditionalist. When I first gave him a Woolly Bugger, he was more than skeptical. But after a float trip on the lower Madison, the fly proved itself, and now a number of bins in Bob's shop are well stocked with Woolly Buggers for sale.

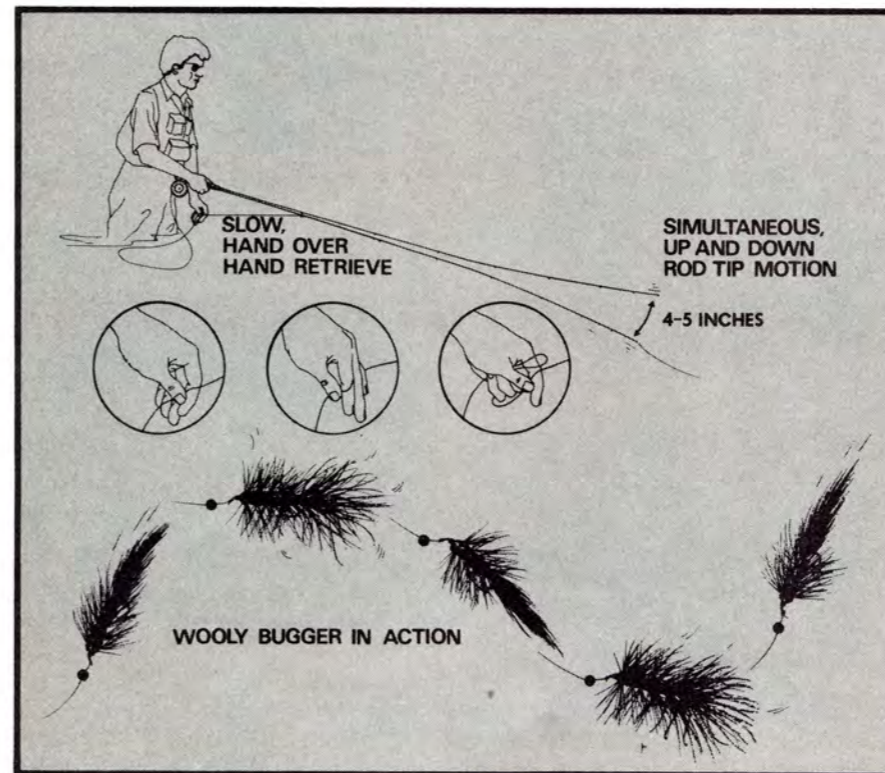
The most productive method of fishing the Bugger from a drift boat is for the angler to position himself in the bow and to use a short line, casting to the bank's edge. Your guide maneuvers the boat in close and controls the drift speed to give you ample time to probe the bank's cover with your Bugger. This technique is usually best used in the daytime hours. But come dusk, the guide probably will tell you to start extending your cast out into the open water for cruising fish.

Still Water

FOR MORE THAN A WEEK, every evening I watched a large brown trout cruising the spring pond and sipping insects off the surface. The banks were overgrown with brush and small beds of watercress stretched out into the pond. On my knees, I watched the fish cruise by, sometimes so close I could count the red spots on his side. Each evening I offered the fish a variety of flies—Letort



AUTHOR'S PHOTO



BARBARA LEWIS ILLUSTRATION

Crickets, hoppers, ants, beetles, midges and small floating nymphs were all refused. I switched from 5X to 6X and then 7X tippets to no avail.

In desperation, I set my alarm for an early morning departure, hoping that dawn would change my luck. Arriving at the pond, I crawled into casting position. A slight mist lay over the pond and I could barely see the 80 feet across to the far bank. All was still; no sign of the big fish. I waited and waited, 10 minutes turned into 30 minutes and still nothing.

As the sun started rising, my knees ached from crouching so long. Apparently the big fish was on the bottom, so why not try a cress bug? On second thought, why not a Woolly Bugger? I opened my Bugger box (it contains only Woolly Buggers of various sizes and colors) and selected a #8 olive-and-black and attached it to a 4X tippet. The split shot carried the Bugger to the edge of the largest cressbed in the pond. I waited for the fly to sink and then started the hand-and-rod-tip retrieve. Nothing happened. Dejected after 12 or more casts, I was prepared to leave. It was time to get to work.

One more cast. There was a small bed of cress to my right where a spring run emptied into the pond. The water was shallow there and I had ignored it. My last cast dropped the Bugger next to the cress bed. I never got to the retrieve. As the Bugger sank, the line shot forward. I set the hook and the water exploded as the big brown shot to the surface. Five minutes later, the fish, all 23½ inches of it, lay spent at my feet. As I carefully released it and as he slowly retreated into the pond's depths, I looked at the bedraggled Woolly Bugger and said a silent thank-you.

Universal Fly

THE WOOLLY BUGGER is an all-purpose fly. On bass rivers such as Pennsylvania's Susquehanna, I use the same tactics I've described for trout streams and rivers. The jig-like retrieve is irresistible to both smallmouth and largemouth bass.

In the heat of a summer afternoon, I concentrate my efforts on deeper channels and runs using an extra-slow retrieve to make the Bugger bump bottom. As evening approaches, I fish the flats and shore areas for cruising fish.

In bass ponds and lakes, I pay particular attention to shorelines in the early morning and late afternoon hours. I look for beds of lily pads and carefully work the edges.

Northern pike and chain pickerel take Woolly Buggers dressed in yellow or red-and-yellow combinations fished over weedbeds with a fast hand-strip retrieve. I've had to resort to heavier tackle for pike fishing, 8½- to 9-foot graphite rods for 8-weight lines will turn over larger #1/0 and #1 Woolly Buggers,

Woolly Bugger . . .

the sizes I prefer for rivers such as Canada's St. Lawrence.

ON HUNTER'S LAKE (a trout lake owned and maintained by the Pennsylvania Fish Commission) I shot the Bugger up along the shore line and worked it back. The next cast I made five to six feet to the right of my first cast, and the next another five to six feet to the right of my second. Finally, I cast toward the center of the lake.

After four such casts I walked up the shoreline and started over again. My stream diary tells me that after three hours of fishing, I hooked and landed the following: one 14-inch bullhead catfish; three perch, one nine inches and two 11 inches; one 16-inch largemouth and seven stocked rainbows from 13 to 17 inches—all on a #10 black-and-olive Woolly Bugger.

An all-white Woolly Bugger tied on a #10 long-shank hook (Mustad 79580) is deadly for bluegills and crappies. I resort to a smaller B split-shot for bluegills, using the same approach I've described for Hunter's Lake but occasionally changing the speed of the retrieve. Bluegills eagerly follow the Bugger on a fast retrieve, but actually take it on a slower retrieve.

For fishing in lily pads and weedbeds, the Bugger can be tied and fished effectively on #1/0 and #2/0 weedless hooks. Look for holes in the lily pads and cast to them. Give the fly time to sink, start your retrieve, and hold on.

For bass fishermen who prefer to fish on top after dark, an all-black Woolly Bugger tied with extra-stiff saddle hackle and fished on the surface without weight will entice big fish.

Colors, Patterns, and Sizes

WITHOUT A DOUBT, the combination of black and olive (black-maribou tail with black saddle palmered over an olive chenille body) is by far the most productive combination for trout and bass. This was Russ Blessing's original dressing and is still my favorite.

For eastern trout fishing, I use Buggers tied on Mustad #79580 hooks in #8, #10 and #12. In the West a #6 or #8 is about right for such rivers as the Big Horn and the Yellowstone. At times, an all-white Woolly Bugger or an all-black will move fish. To simulate crayfish, use a brown maribou tail with a grizzly saddle hackle dyed brown palmered over a beige chenille body on size #6 or #8 hook. Bump the pattern slowly along the bottom.

If there is any secret to the Woolly Bugger's success besides the jig-like retrieve, it's the length of the maribou tail and the type of saddle hackle used. The maribou tail should be as long as the hook shank and full. When wet, the tail will shrink in size and a sparsely-dressed tail will not produce enough lifelike action. Saddle hackles from a #2 Metz saddle work best. They have just enough web to be a bit soft, which makes the hackles pul-

sate when retrieved. A Metz saddle is also long enough to properly cover the entire length of a 4X long hook.

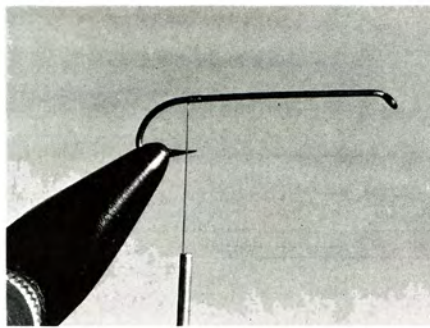
For bluegills and crappies, the all-white Bugger is still the best but color combinations of white and yellow, white and red, and white and black also work.

Tying Procedure

HOOK: Mustad 79580 (4X long, TDE)
Trout sizes: #6, #8, #10; Bass: #4, #6, #8; Bluegills: #10, #12.
THREAD: Monocord or 4/0 nylon.
TAIL: Marabou clump.
HACKLE: Saddle, palmered.
BODY: Chenille.

After placing the hook in the vise, attach your tying thread on the hook at the rear of the shank. Select a good, full maribou plume and secure it on the end of the hook shank using the shank's length as a gauge for plume length. Next, tie in the tip of a saddle hackle at the rear of the hook and then tie in a length of chenille for the body. Wind the tying thread forward to cover the hook shank. Tie off at the eye. Attach your hackle pliers to the extended butt of the saddle hackle and palmer it forward, tying it off at the eye. Whip finish your head and the Woolly Bugger is complete.

I've tried weighting just the front of the hook shank with fuse wire to eliminate the awkwardness of casting a split shot but with poor results. The split-shot works best for the jig-like action.



1. Attach your thread at the rear of the hook shank.



2. Secure a full marabou plume, the length of the shank.



3. Tie in the tip of a saddle hackle and a length of chenille for the body.



4. Wind the chenille forward to the eye.



5. Tie off the chenille and clip away excess.



6. Palmer the hackle forward, tie-off and trim. Whip finish the head.

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