

# Ten Tying Tips

DAVE WHITLOCK

**A**MATEUR FLY TYING HAS INCREASED steadily in popularity for two decades and is now more popular than ever before.

Tying your own flies has almost become the rule rather than the exception with most fly fishers these days because it is such a terrific compliment to fly fishing. If you have the ability needed to fly fish, then you certainly have the ability to tie productive fishing flies, and fly tying easily doubles your pleasure and satisfaction with the sport. Perhaps you have been told it's difficult to learn or master fly tying, but with good tools, the right tying materials and a qualified instructor, most folks can accomplish the basics in just one evening.

Every student at the L.L. Bean introductory fly-fishing school is required to learn how to tie productive flies in just *two hours*. I insist it is a simple and easy procedure and then prove it to them, much to their utter amazement and personal delight.

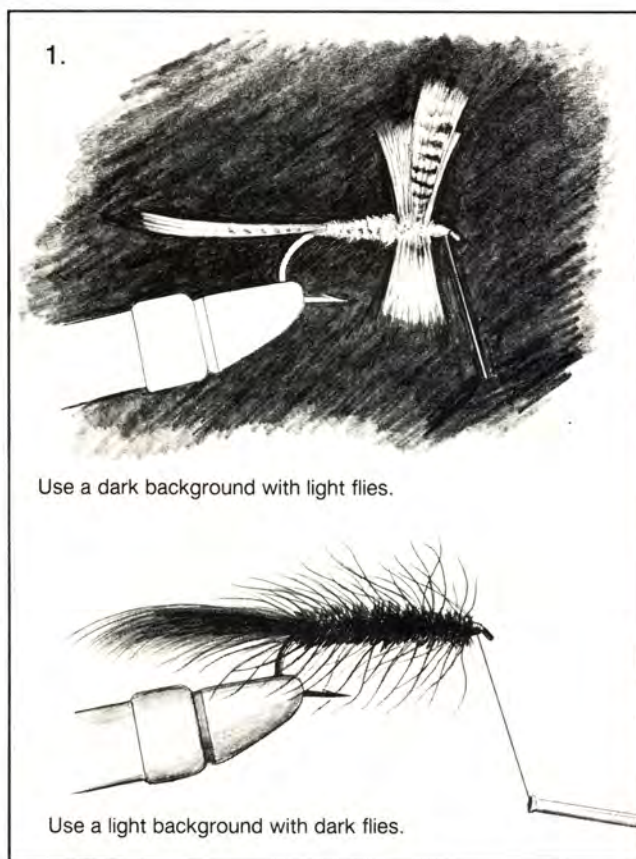
The key to this quick personal success with any tying student is a clear explanation of the mechanics of the technique and showing them which tying tools and materials to use. Whenever I demonstrate tying to a person or group their reaction is usually: "Is that how it's done? Why that is really simple." Tying *is* simple. Once you admit that it becomes easy, fun and relaxing to do, which is the goal of any sport or hobby.

Here are ten of my favorite tips and techniques that will make any tier more skillful and effective.

**1. Tying area comfort and visibility.** You need an uncluttered, flat, level table or desk surface on which your vise can be mounted or clamped. Pick a comfortable chair, with good lumbar support, that elevates you so your arms are above the tying surface.

Have one or more good light sources directly over the vise and another over your master hand's shoulder (right shoulder for right-handers, left shoulder for left-handers). The lighting can be natural sunlight or electric. For the table's surface and background use a plain, non-reflective cardboard or fabric material. Light gray or soft,

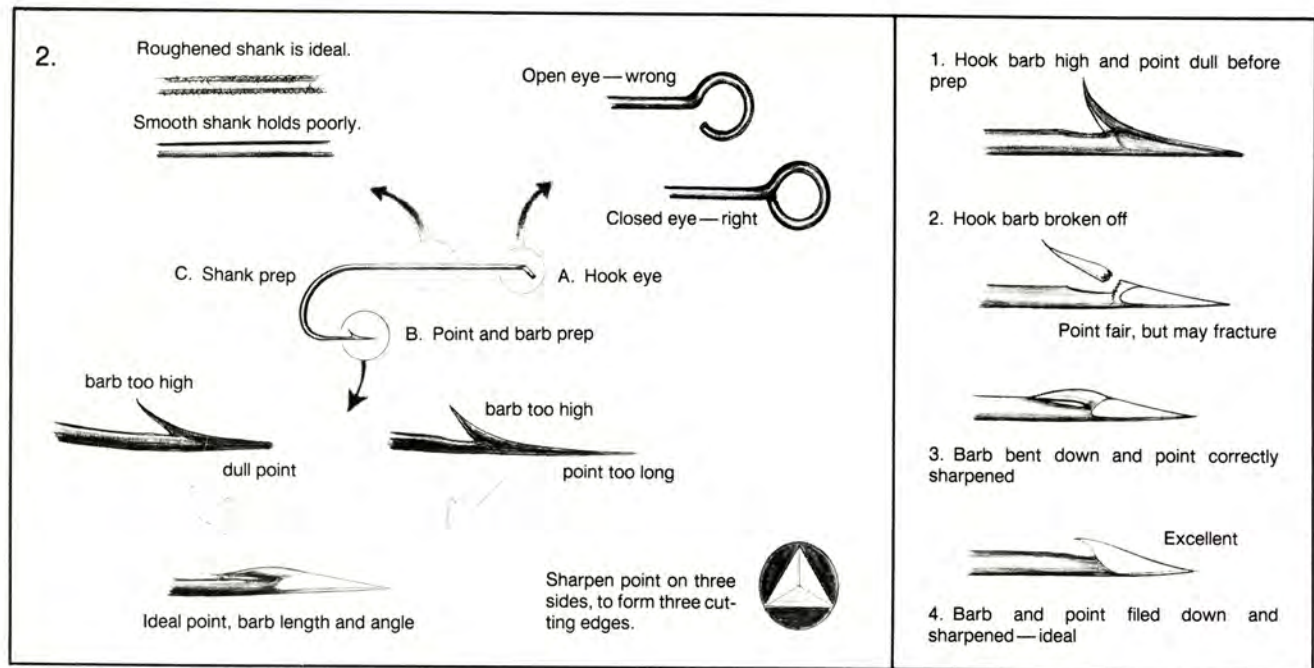
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light-colored pastels work best to enhance the visibility and contrast of most fly patterns. I use two backgrounds, one light and the other dark, depending on the color of pattern I am tying. I use the dark one for light-colored flies and the light-colored one for darker flies. You can also do wonders by adjusting tying light angles to enhance visibility and contrast.

**2. Hook preparation and vise positioning.** Before you begin tying, inspect the hook for defects, particularly at the eye and barb/point areas. Every hook should be properly prepared *before* the fly is tied . . . *not afterwards*. If



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the eye is not completed closed, used a pair of pliers and your vise jaws to force it carefully together. Some open hooks may need the heat of a simple butane lighter flame to make them close without breaking.

The point may be dull, imperfect or too long. With a bit of honing and filing, the shape of most points can be improved and made very sharp. Just insert it upside down in the vise jaws and sharpen it. A diamond-dust fingernail file or hook sharpening hone is best for hook sizes #12 to #24. Use a 40- or 60-cut flat file for larger hooks. I prefer a triangular (three-edge) point for hooks #3/0 to #8, but use a short needle point for size 10 or smaller.

When the hook point is really sharp, it should stick firmly in your thumbnail when dragged across the surface of the fingernail.

If you want your fly to also be barbless, it is best to bend down or file away the barb even before you sharpen the hook. I prefer lowering the barb to breaking it off. Breaking it may also fracture the point spear. The very best tool for this is your vise. Place the hook's point and barb just inside jaws and apply a slow, gentle pressure to lower or flatten the barb with little or no risk of breaking the point or barb. This is also the best tool to offset a hook. Use your vise to bend the point out of line.

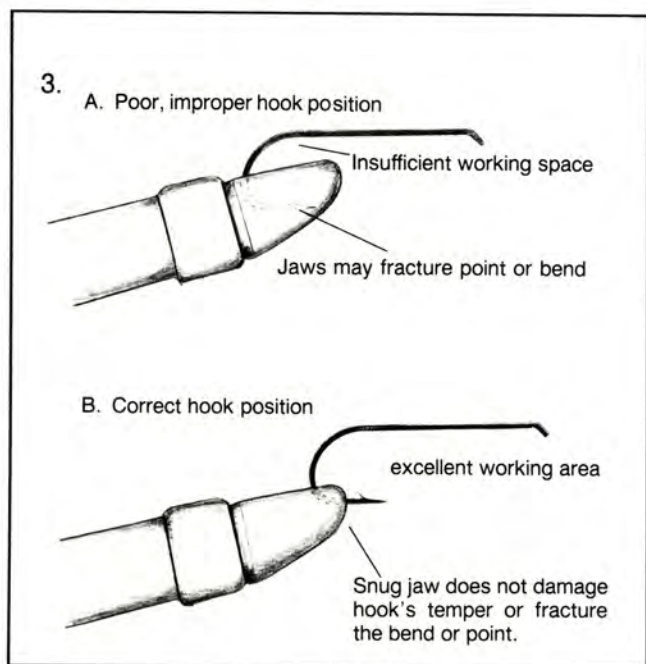
Closing the hook's eye, bending down or filing down the barb and honing the point needle sharp before the fly is tied, when you are well equipped, not rushed, and can perform the operations on a bare hook, is the most economical and efficient way to prep your hook for fishing.

In addition to the eye, barb, and point preparation, I sometimes also roughen or forge or flatten the hook's shank to help prevent certain materials and thread twisting on the shank.

**3. Hook position and vise tension.** Whether your vise has a single universal-size jaw or has several interchange-

able sets of jaws, correct hook placement and jaw tension is extremely important to the quality of the fly being tied.

I recommend that the hook be placed high and forward in the vise with the point/barb (spear) area of the hook exposed. This gives you the absolute maximum working space for the tying job. If you enclose the barb and point area in the vise jaws, which is done by many tiers, you run a good chance of fracturing or dulling the tempered point with jaw contact pressure. *[Keeping the point and barb exposed also gives the tier good points of reference for certain fly dimensions. For instance, the position on the shank just opposite the barb marks the end of the fly body for many standard nymph and dry-fly patterns.]* THE EDITORS]



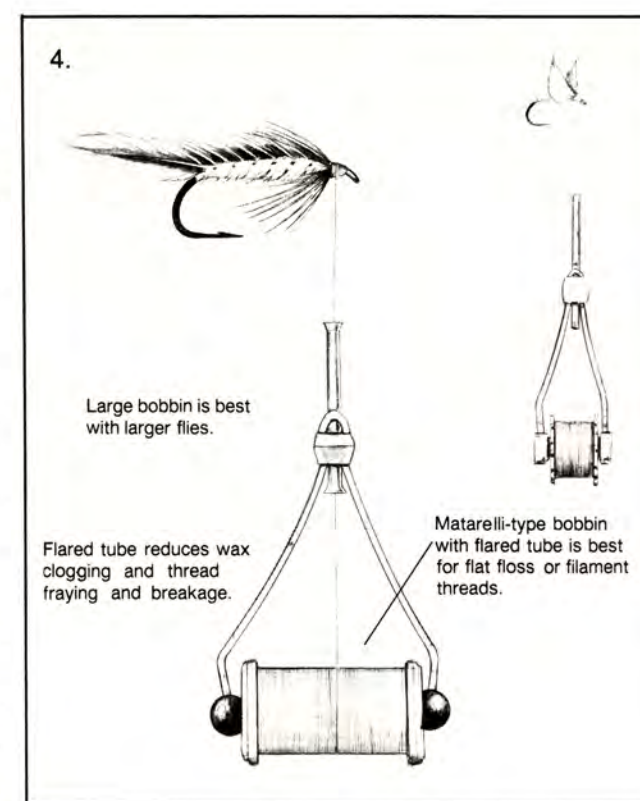
Put *only* enough tension on the hook with your vise jaws to hold it in position when the thread is being wrapped. If you can move the hook up or down with a heavy finger pressure, that is the perfect amount of tension. Most tiers use excessive jaw tension. Excessive tension may "crystallize" the hook's metal structure and render it as brittle as glass. Hook point or bend breakage is certain if this happens, usually the first contact the point makes with an object such as a fish's jaw, a stone, or a tree limb. I have also seen many perfectly good hooks broken from excessive jaw tension during tying operations.

I keep the hook a bit looser than most tiers might tolerate, but for good reason. I vary the shank's angle up or down from time to time to give me a better tying angle, a better view of the fly, or to make cementing easier.

A rotating jaw vise gives the additional advantage of being able to adjust the hook position, angle and tension. By being able to rotate the hook into different planes you can tie materials on much more efficiently and maintain a better material balance on each side of the hook shank.

**4. Tying thread and bobbin.** Of equal importance to the hook and vise is the thread and bobbin. Thread is the material that holds and fixes (ties) most other materials in place on the hook. Flat filament, lightly waxed threads of nylon, Kevlar™, and silk are superior to twisted or braided threads. Pick a size and strength that matches the fly's size, no one size works best for all hook sizes. The flat floss type of thread, because it is thin and flat, ties much smaller, neater flies than round or twist thread of the same size.

In the general tying operation thread does two things. First, it wraps, torques, or pushes the material you are tying to the hook in the direction of the thread wraps. Second, when tension is applied it tightens down on the



materials, pressing them against the hook along with the materials under it.

That sounds simple, but it took me 20 years to understand. These two thread effects account for more than half the problems tiers have in putting materials on the hook properly and neatly.

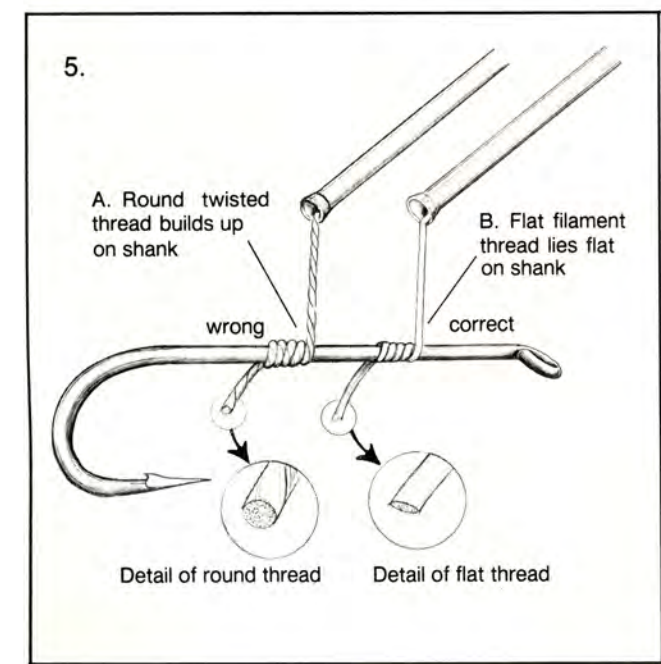
If you want to spin or roll a material around the hook's shank, hold it loosely and wrap it tightly with thread. If you want to tie material onto a precise location at any angle on the hook shank, then hold it firmly at that point and angle and wrap the thread loosely around the hook once, twice, three times and *then tighten* the wraps. Skilled tiers used hundreds of subtle variations of these torque/tightening procedures to position and fix all materials to the hook. In my opinion these are the two key facts to know about basic and advanced fly tying.

Wrap materials down with a firm but not super-tight thread tension and use just as few wraps as possible. Excessive tension and dozens of wraps over the material is counter productive. The hallmark of any expertly tied fly is economical use and placement of the tying thread.

A small, neatly placed drop of penetrating, flexible fly cement at the point of initial thread wraps, where materials are tied down, is far more effective than many extra tight thread wraps.

Flat floss-type thread generally works best if you do not allow it to twist. Each wrap you make around the hook puts one 360-degree twist in the thread . . . so intermittently stop and let the thread and bobbin hang and untwist. If you need a tight, round thread for some operation, simply spin the bobbin a few dozen revolutions to create a rounded thread from the flat floss-type.

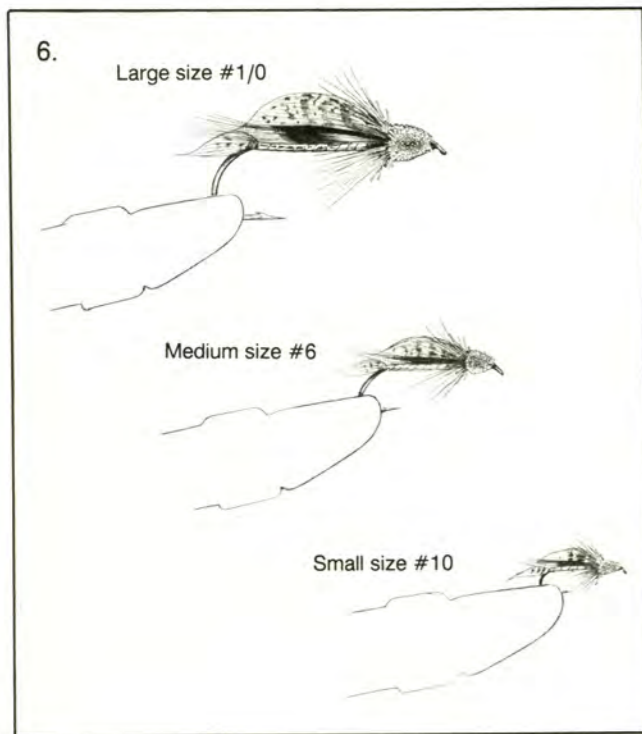
I prefer a simple Matarelli-type bobbin for all my



## Tying Tips . . .

tying. It is light, small, and efficient. This design, with a flared tube end, greatly reduces the tier's bug-a-boo of thread breakage, fraying and clogging from wax build-up. For best results, use smaller bobbins for smaller thread and flies. Try to keep the thread distance between the bobbin's barrel and the hook as short as possible (one to six inches) for the most precise and efficient thread handling.

**5. Fly sizes and proportions.** Flies may vary from 1/8" to 8" in size. Larger sizes are always easier to tie and master the proportions. Regardless if you are tying your first fly, the first of a kind, or your first fly of the day, begin with a larger size hook. The macro approach to tying makes the task much, much easier. Your eye and hand coordination warms to the job much quicker, improving as you gain the confidence and skill to move on to smaller, more demanding sizes.



There is a natural artistic variation within each of us, that is why my signature looks different from yours. But if we are both using the same tying material and tools to tie a common pattern, we can much more closely duplicate the fly if we *measure* the proportions and *strictly* observe them.

Measure carefully with a millimeter ruler each part of the fly sample or fly illustration. *Do not trust your eye for measurement.* Follow those measurements exactly and you will be amazed how your flies resemble the original. Fail to take measurements and you will be forever frustrated if you want to adhere to any "designer" patterns. Your eye can play tricks on you, but careful measurements do not lie, so use the measurements as your guide.

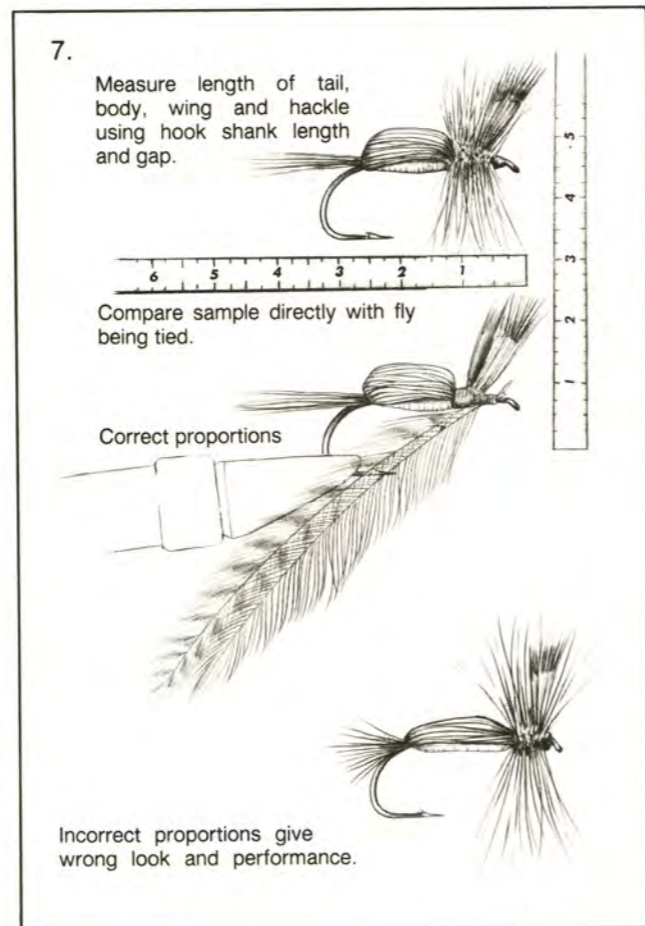
Start out tying large and know the proportions exactly for the surest road to easy tying success.

**6. Vision aids.** The key to good fly-tying dexterity, no matter how large your hands, is good vision. No matter what your age, sight capability, or experience, good lighting and magnification will significantly improve your tying speed and skill.

Many problems encountered by tiers are the result of not being able to see precisely what is occurring at arm's length from them. Try using 1 1/2-, 2-, 2 1/2- or 3-power half lenses, prescription or non-prescription reading/magnifying glasses and you will be amazed at what you see and what happens to your tying speed and skill. These half-lens reading glasses also allow easy over-the-frame viewing of objects farther away from the vise.

Keep the light sources from shining in your eyes. Light should fall on the fly from above and over the shoulder. I prefer cool daylight fluorescent lamps. They give you a cool, natural light that is best for your eyes and for color recognition.

Good sight, good light and the proper hand tools will enhance anyone's dexterity to a skill level far in excess of what is required to tie flies.



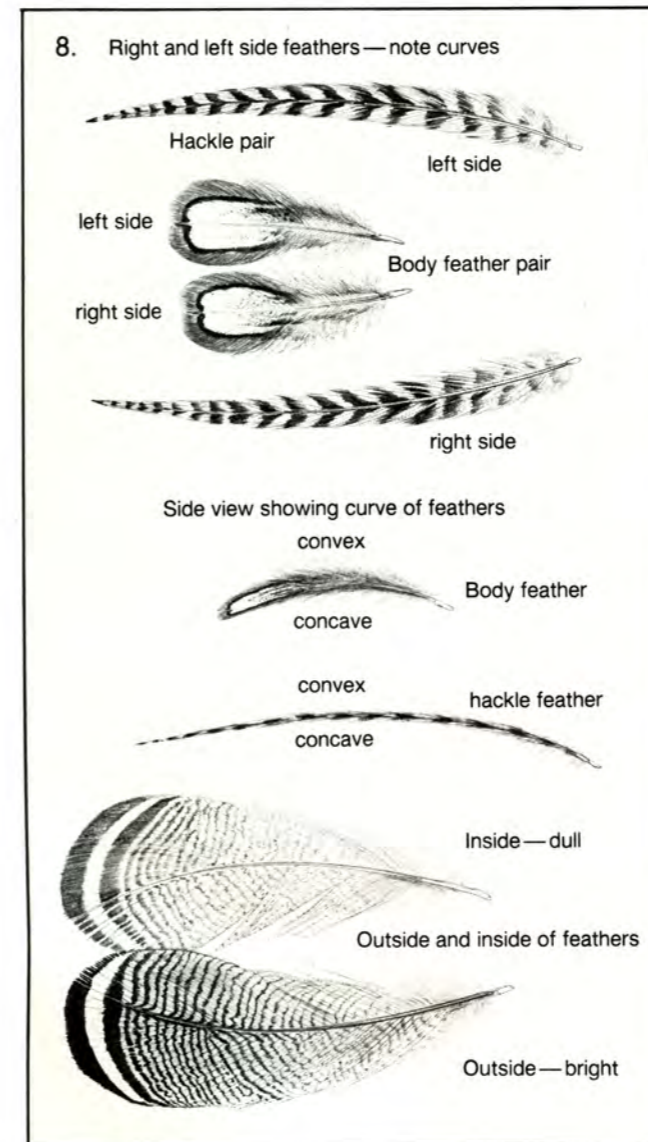
**7. Fitting feathers.** Any bird feather has two sides, front and back or convex and concave, a tip, a butt, and a stem that curves slightly to the right or left, depending on which side of the bird it comes from.

Know these physical characteristics and use their natural shapes to design each fly to be the best working and

best-looking imitation possible. Match natural curves and shapes of feather pairs for imitation of insect wings, legs, antennae, or body and fin shapes of minnows.

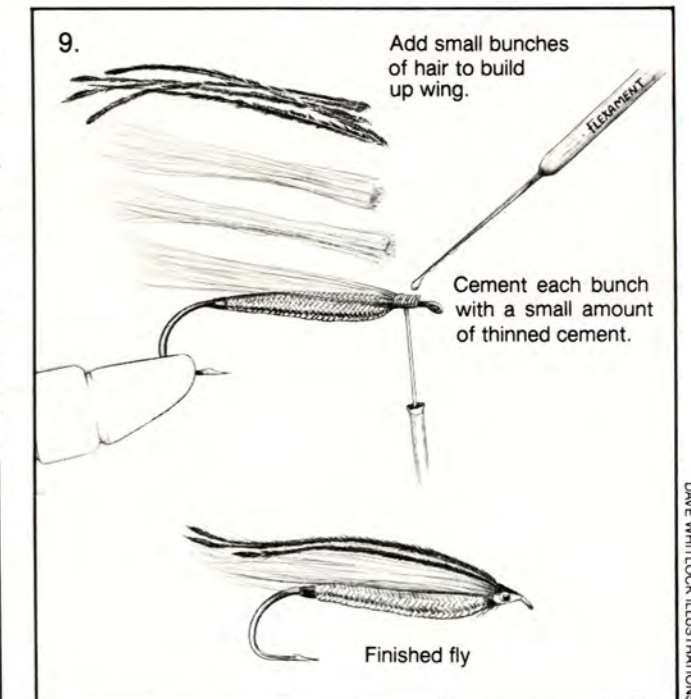
If a feather, or pair of feathers, is badly bent or messed out of shape, simply soak the feather in hot water, put it in the correct shape and allow it to dry between paper, cardboard, or glass sheets. When dry, the feather will retain that shape and can easily be tied to suit your needs. If feathers are slightly out of shape, place them above a steam jet for a few seconds and then allow them to dry. A simple hair dryer is an excellent tool to blow-dry wet feathers quickly.

**8. Hair and hair-like feathers.** Securing bunches of hair cut from a hide or feather fibers trimmed from their stems to the hook with thread is difficult because the center hairs or fibers of the bunch can slip on the outer ones when they get wet and pull out. This causes failure of the entire fly. I avoid this by wrapping on only a few hairs or fibers of the bunch at a time and also applying a small amount of thin, flexible fly cement after making the initial binding thread wraps. The thread wraps force



the cement into the hair or fiber bundle to make a strong, waterproof, secure bonding contact with the hook shank.

If very fuzzy rabbit hair or marabou feather tips keep getting in your way or react to static electricity, wet them with water or saliva to stop the nuisance.



**9. Locking and wrapping stemmed feathers.** Feather stems tied to the hook shank by either the tip or butt often pull out or break off when too much winding or pulling pressure is applied. I avoid this miserable misfortune by never stripping the stem bare of fibers. This gives the stem base a better slip-free grip to thread and hook. To avoid breaking a brittle stem, particularly if the stem is tied in at the butt, carefully crush the stem with smooth-jawed, needle-nose pliers where it is to be tied onto the hook shank. This is done before it is tied to the shank. It allows the stiff stem to flex and bend without kinking or breaking.

It is better to tie in short, thick-stemmed, soft bird hackle feathers tip first. This allows the best part to be wrapped on the hook without building up the heavy bulk of the lower stem.

**10. Fly cements.** The quality and durability of any fly can be significantly improved with the proper, judicious use of waterproof fly cement. The best all-round types are those that penetrate quickly, do not discolor, dry within 10 minutes and remain flexible. Latex or vinyl base cements have these desirable characteristics. When applying such cements, always put them on the material and thread section before the thread wraps completely cover the material so the cement both soaks and bonds the materials and thread before it dries. Use small amounts so that cement will not wick up the material or transfer to other materials you want to keep exposed to

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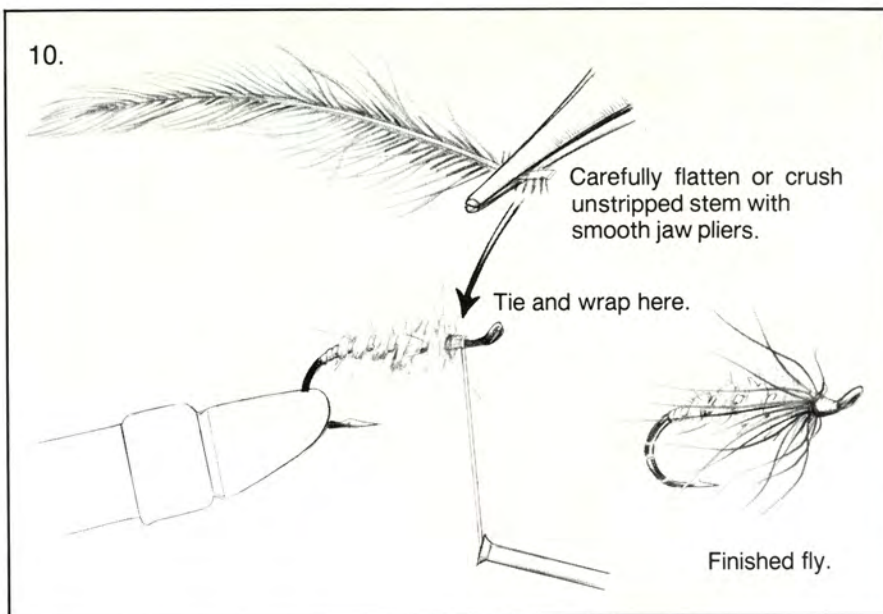
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the water. This is always a case of more is *not* better. I also angle the hook down or up in the vise, depending on which direction I want the thin cement to move on the material and thread wraps.


Fly tying is a skill that has a limitless array of techniques you can be taught or discover yourself. Nothing beats watching over the shoulder and/or being instructed by a competent fly-tying instructor. The new tying videos are almost as effective if they are carefully filmed from the tier's vantage point, just as you would see the operation if you were at the vise tying the fly. That is almost as good as being in the instructor's head.

What makes tying so easy in the hands of the expert is that the experts have mastered so many subtle moves or techniques. Watch every little move they make and ask questions. Try as soon as possible to duplicate the demo or instructions and go back, if possible, and watch in review.

I am convinced that there is nothing I do in tying a fly that you can't



do if you have the same materials, tools, and the right instructions. Fly tying is not difficult, just complicated by many combinations of subtle but simple methods. Tiers today, because of good books, good instructions, and

the best ever selection of materials, tools, and seeing aids can learn in a year what it took many of us back in the '40s and '50s twenty years to learn. These are truly the good news days of fly tying. 

## Seasonable . . .

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I immediately read all the local newspapers, looking for fish news. Frank Mundus had wrestled in a gigantic shark the week before; bushels of "jumbo porgies" were being hauled in every day; the "gorilla blues" had not hit the beaches but were expected hourly. "Gorilla." Ah, the happy, garish extravagance of fish-talk! I checked the tide charts, readied my gear, and went to the four or five tackle shops between Sag Harbor and Montauk, to get the best local advice on these monsters.

I have been few places in this world where I could not find a little serious fly-fishing talk. In Paris, in London, in San Francisco, let alone Roscoe or West Yellowstone or Manchester, Vermont, one need only mention "a number twenty-two Trico" under one's breath and half the room grows quiet and listens. If you are planning a fly-fishing trip to East Hampton, bring along a fly-fishing friend or a cassette, for no one within thirty miles of the place has heard of fly fishing. At least I could not find such a person. I mentioned the Trico a few times quietly and raised no one; I shouted; I tried to buy some snapper flies in one shop and was asked if I meant sand fleas. Most had never heard of a fly; those who had, thought I was a lunatic, and surely not a good candidate to buy a dozen \$6 Striper Swipers

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