

Fly-tying – winter therapy for Island fishermen

A weekly class at the Rod & Gun Club teaches the craft of fly-tying to fishermen of all levels.

By **Barry Stringfellow** - February 28, 2018

It's a rainy Monday night. Not quite cold enough to snow, but cold enough to make it feel that spring is still light years away.

But in the friendly confines of the Martha's Vineyard Rod & Gun Club, a dozen men are tying flies to prepare for the 2018 fishing season, with visions of stripers dancing in their heads.

With their vises, scissors, thread, and all manner of materials — including fur, feathers, tinsel, fake suede, and fake eyes — these knitting circles of outdoorsmen gather each Monday to share their knowledge.

As they work, topics of discussion range from an epic night in Lobsterville last June, the latest craft beer discovery, and the colors on the “deceiver” that landed that big bone at the Gut.

Fly fishing has a language all its own.

To be a good fly-tyer, you have to be adept with your whip finisher, zonkers, and hackles. Hackles are feathers or fur that make up the body of the fly. All manner of fowl are bred to produce hackles for fly fishing.

A “deceiver” is hackle, crossed with body braid and some tinsel, with bucktail over the top.

The lingua franca is just one of the many mysteries of the ancient craft, first written about in “The Compleat Angler,” published in 1652.

As a lifelong plugger and bait thrower, I've always been fly-curious. But I've been reluctant to spend my limited fishing time adding a new frustration to my life. Truth be told, fly fishing has always intimidated me.

There's also the danger of falling down the rabbit hole — when fly fishing becomes an obsession, and fishermen leave jobs and relationships for piscatorial pursuits. I've seen it happen.

But when a friend told me about the fly-tying class sponsored by the Rod & Gun Club, and overseen by Cooper “Coop” Gilkes, it seemed, at the very least, like good clean fun, and a nice way to spend a winter's Monday night.

For a sawbuck donation to the Rod & Gun Club, the experienced share trade secrets, and Coop will share his wealth of knowledge with anyone at any skill level.

Pushing me one step closer to the rabbit hole, Coop assured me that it's not too late for the middle-aged plugger. “If you ever wanted to learn, now's the time,” he said.

The Monday night classes begin at 7 pm and go until whenever. They'll probably run until the end of March, but if there's still interest, they'll run until whenever.

Coop ties thousands of flies every year to stock his store for the coming season, and for his own use.

“This is like therapy for me,” he said, deftly putting the final touches on a bunny fly. “I don't know how my wife puts up with it. It's a good thing she's away. I've been tying like crazy. Our living room right now is



completely trashed.”

Coop started his own apprenticeship when he was 11 years old. “I was over at Big Bridge, and there was a gentleman there fly fishing, and he was hammering them. And I said, ‘I gotta learn how to do that,’” he said. “He took me under his wing, gave me a few lessons, and boy, that was it. The winters are long here, so the fly-tying was a bonus.”

Fly-tying is an art. The fisherman is limited only by his or her imagination and skill level.

“With fly-tying you’re forever experimenting. Forever,” Coop said. “Your mind is always working; ‘How can I change this a little bit, how can I come up with something different?’ Some of the things these guys come up with are incredible. One that looks just like a crab, some that swim just like a fish, they’re always coming up with new stuff.”

Many of those gathered got their start in Coop’s class. “I can remember that guy over there coming here with his dad when he was a little kid,” Coop said, pointing to a grown man in his 30s. “It blows my mind how some of these kids have picked it up. It’s unbelievable.”

In the beginning

To get started, you need a small rotary vise, bobbin, thread, scissors, and a whip finisher — a pen-size handle attached to a wire bent in the shape of Delaware that somehow ties the finishing knot on the thread. It’s about a \$100 investment to get the basics, but as is the case with any kind of fishing, you can spend a week’s pay in a heartbeat if you’re so inclined.

My first attempt was a bunny fly — a strip of zonker, lashed to a No. 1 hook with red thread from the bobbin, knotted by the whip finisher, a drop of epoxy, and two tiny fake eyes.

For a beginner, just the act of lashing requires a tutorial — how much thread to use, the amount of pressure to use on different parts of the hook. After several misfires, I got the zonker to lay just right. “Now you got it. Add some flash and you’re in business,” Coop said, referring to the iridescent thread that adds sparkle to the presentation.

The bunny fly is a must for every Island fly fisherman, according to Coop. All of the big four — stripers, blues, albies, and bonito — will hit a bunny fly.

When I ask his other favorites, he says it depends on a long list of factors, including the time of year, the location on the Island, shore or boat ...

“From shore, for stripers, I like the floating sand eel and the squid fly,” he said. “For albies, my favorites are the whorefly and surf candy. The first push of bass comes with the hatch of the cinder worms. It’s just the small ones, but catching them on a fly is a lot of fun. It won’t be long now.”

By the end of the night, spring didn’t seem so far away.

I left the Rod & Gun Club with the first flies I’ve ever tied — a white bunny fly and a sand eel.

Next, Coop will teach me how to cast them.

Taking me one step closer to the rabbit hole.

Anglers, note: Next week, class will be on Tuesday night, March 6, to accommodate the monthly meeting of

the MV Surfcasters Association.

