

Valley Angler

Fly Tying Season Has Begun

by Bill Thompson

It must be old age or that cooler temperatures have more of an effect on me than they used to. I did have a chance to fish last week and I passed it up. I made up some kind of excuse that I had a lot of stuff to get done at the shop and couldn't take the time off. Truth is things are a little on the slow side these days and I might have been able to have sneaked out. However this is the time of year when we write our spring orders for the shop and some of the companies have some early due dates. Since I am not getting any older it must have been the cool weather.

It has been a while since I have missed a fall season on the Merrymeeting River. By all accounts this was a good year too. A little extra rain this year brought the river up and the salmon took advantage of it and came in with some pretty good numbers before the season closed. There seemed to be quite a few large fish as well.

Aside from the fact that I have had to keep my nose to the grindstone and take care of business the fly tying bench has also been calling to me. There is never a time of year that I stop tying, but the intensity does pick up in the fall and continues to grow all winter.

In the winter months we change the shop around a little in order to accommodate the larger fly tying table. We always keep a small table with the vice set up and somebody is always tying a few flies. As soon as the season draws to a close we move the fly bins up a little to the front of the store and bring out the big table. It's kinda funny because in the fall I can't wait to get the big table in place, but in the spring I am just as eager to see it put away.

Interestingly enough there seems to be less fly fishers tying their own flies these days. I can't say that I have noticed the trend, if there is indeed one, but a couple of my suppliers say that their sales are off. I did an interview a few weeks ago with the owners of the Danville Chenille Company and they say that their sales have been off for over a year. The Danville company is located in Danville right here in good old New Hampshire. They have been manufacturing fly tying thread and chenille since the early 1940's.

If this is true I can't imagine why. Perhaps one of the greatest thrills of fly fishing is catching a fish on a fly that you have tied yourself. Fly tying fly fishers have a great advantage over those who do not. Perhaps the number one reason would be the cost savings. The average cost of a fly is probably somewhere around two dollars. A fly tier can reduce the cost to a few cents. A word of caution though, most tiers become so enamored with the craft that they soon amass a collection of fly tying materials worth thousands of dollars and there is no end to the stuff that they still lack. I always say that the worst case scenario is that they end up owing a fly shop.

A fly tier has a huge advantage in that he or she is always able to tie the hot fly when the local fly shop has sold out. By the same token tiers have the ability to create the unusual fly and match a local hatch when the fly shop may not have a fly that represents that particular occurrence. Some fly tiers carry a small portable kit with them allowing them the ability to tie on the stream bank. As a result they are never in the position of not having the correct pattern.

There is also a certain amount of creativity that comes along with fly tying. Whereas most of us achieve a certain amount of competence and are able to turn out a reasonable product some tiers go way beyond and become true artists in every scene of the word. The average tier ties flies to catch fish, however there are some tiers who create flies that are indeed art. Art museums have even exhibited collections from some of these tiers. There are tiers that devote themselves to creating flies that are so realistic that you would swear you are looking at a real insect rather than an imitation made from bits of fur and feathers tied on a hook. Some tiers that specialize in Atlantic Salmon flies are able to use color as well as the most accomplished painter.

A few tiers even manage to create a cottage industry of sorts supplying other fly fishermen and shops. This is, without doubt, becoming rarer as time goes by. There are very few that are able make the transition from hobbyist to professional. It is certainly a lot of fun to set down and tie a few flies for personal use or for a friend, but to have to set at a table all day long turning out the sane fly, time after time, is quite another thing. There are those who are able to do it and some even manage to make a living at it. Trust me it is not as easy as it looks.

One last reason to learn to tie is that it teaches you what to look for in a quality tied fly. Even if you never intend to tie all of your own flies it is a good thing to take a lesson from someone so that you know what goes into a fly. You also come away with the knowledge as to why flies are priced the way they are. Tie a couple of Muddler Minnows and you will soon find out that \$1.95 is a heck of a bargain.

Now that the big fly tying table is set up there is always room for an additional tier or two. We are always happy to help you out with a tying problem. As of a week ago we have started up our Saturday morning tying sessions. For the last six years a group of us have been getting together every Saturday at the North Country Angler, starting around ten in the morning and ending up around noon. The fur and the feathers fly and conversation is always lively. Tiers of all abilities are welcome and it is a great way to learn. If you don't have tools or materials, not to worry, we have everything you will need at no charge. And the coffee is free too.

See you on the river.