

Your Fishing Field Guide

Big Poppers

by Carl Haensel

One of the things I enjoy most about fishing is the opportunity to learn from other anglers. One of these opportunities led me to start fishing truly “big” poppers. I had offered an acquaintance of mine the chance to fish for smallmouth bass if he came to town, and one June day he called to let me know that he would be taking advantage of my offer.

He’s an ardent dry-fly angler when it comes to trout, so it shouldn’t have surprised me when he refused to fish anything but poppers for smallmouth bass. What did surprise me was the size of the poppers. Hand-tied from blocks of hard, closed-cell foam, these flies were light, but they were huge. They were even bigger than the poppers that I usually reserve for largemouth bass.

Normally I fish for anything that bites, because I much prefer to have a fish on the end of my line than not. These flies kept most of the small fish from biting, but the size of the fish that did bite impressed me. Smallmouth bass from around 16 inches to over 20 inches would take a swipe at the big flies, and more often than not, we’d hook them. Smaller fish would still occasionally strike the monster poppers.

I’ve taken the time to play with popper patterns often since then. Though I came up with some strange creations, the average popper that has worked well has not deviated too much from that original example.

The greatest challenges in tying these flies are finding the foam and securing the foam to the hook. If you can’t find the foam at a fly shop, visit a discount shoe store. The foam used in these flies is the same as that used in some inexpensive sandals!



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Shape the foam with a utility razor. To secure the foam to the hook, use a hot needle or bodkin to make a hole in your shaped foam head. Then wrap the hook with coarse thread for a base to help attach the foam. A common hook to use is a Mustad 37187 or equivalent. Coat the hook with a gel-based cyanoacrylate glue, and quickly set it in place. Sand the fly’s rough edges with sandpaper for a cleaner-looking fly.

Before you head out on the water for a big trip, try your

new flies in a swimming pool or at the local pond. With some experimentation, you will find which shape and angle of the head produces a consistent, large “gurgle” when stripped.

Over time, it seems that large poppers consistently outperform smaller models in high or off-color water. Even when a river is considered “blown out,” I’ve caught some large bass working poppers close to islands or the shore. If the river you normally fish is high enough so that the shoreline brush is slightly underwa-

ter but you still have a foot or more of visibility under the water, these poppers may work especially well.

Slowly edge downstream, casting tight to the brush. Hitting the trees and water at the same time may even elicit a strike. After casting, drop your rod tip tight to the water and give the popper a few short, sharp strips out from shore. Alternate your stripping patterns to give the bass different presentations. In high water, it is rarely necessary to fish the cast farther than 5 or 10 feet from the bank. This technique may never account for a large number of bass, but it certainly has the possibility of putting large fish in the boat. ☐