

How I Became a Fly-Fisherman and Fly-Tier

by Art Michaels

During the summer of 1968 while I was a college student, I often visited a heavily fished bass lake. One of my favorite tactics was to work a weedless spoon adorned with a pork-rind trailer in coves covered with lily pads. I would cast the spoon far into the thick stuff, let the lure sit on top of the lily pads for a moment, and then slowly drag it toward me, dropping the lure into holes in the lily pad stands.

After a month of fishing this way, snags took all of my big spoons, so I began to use smaller pork-rind trailers, which I sliced from larger pieces, and smaller spoons. The idea of fishing smaller-sized offerings was new to me because I had been accustomed to using medium-sized to large-sized lures.

I began to fool more fish consistently with littler lures and more delicate presentations. I became intrigued with the smaller-is-better idea, and to take the idea further, I borrowed an old fly rod from a neighbor. I gained enough know-how to be effective with the fly rod by imitating the casting movements of more proficient fly-rod anglers I had observed.

I bought a few bass poppers, and one morning just after dawn I rowed my boat into a cove. I rigged the 8-foot fiberglass fly rod and its reel of 7-weight level line with a 7- or 8-foot leader of 6-pound-test monofilament that I had cut from my spinning reel. Onto the leader I tied a yellow rubber-legged, feathery bass popper. Even though I slapped the popper several times on the water in beginners' false casts, I was able to heave it some 30 feet to the middle of an opening in the lily pads. I let the popper rest motionless for a moment, just as I'd worked the spoons and pork-rind trailers.

As soon as I twitched the popper, the water bulged and splashed, the popper disappeared, and I struck. The line drew tight with strong pulsations. Something big in the depths then dragged the popper toward the nearest cover. The pulsations diminished under the weight of a forest of lily pads. I winched a pile of green leaves and stems to the boat, and when I dug my hand into the twiny tangle, I grabbed the lip of a 4-pound largemouth bass, the biggest I had ever taken from that waterway.

After releasing the fish and preening the bass popper, I cast again near the first spot. I promptly hooked another largemouth, a 2.5-pounder.



I had discovered a fishing secret: Small lures and delicate presentations can fool more fish than larger lures and more trumpeted approaches.

Later that summer I went to a swift, wide stream in the area where it entered a small, deep reservoir. Pursuing the smaller-is-better idea, I had hoped to catch trout on my first few hand-tied flies, something I hadn't done before. To reach the stream, I tramped through an area thick with vegetation, where all the bushes were covered with Japanese beetles. I grabbed some and tossed them onto the swift, dark stream flow, and af-

ter a short drift, the beetles disappeared in quick, small splashes.

I didn't even rig the fly rod. I rushed home, sat down at my makeshift kitchen-table fly-tying bench and created a Japanese beetle imitation: On a size 12 dry-fly hook I fashioned a piece of closed-cell foam divided in the middle with black rod-winding thread. I tied off the thread with half-hitches. Then I stripped peacock herl, and between my thumb and forefinger blended the herl with head cement. I dabbed and smeared this mixture all over the two body segments.

I returned to the stream with a few of my Japanese Beetles. I was so eager to try them, I didn't allow enough time for the head cement to dry completely. Nevertheless, I knotted one to the leader and launched it upstream and across, again slapping the fly on false casts. My Japanese Beetle drifted only a few feet before it disappeared in a bubbly splash. Astonished, I was fast to a fish, a trout fooled by my hand-tied imitation, caught on a fly rod, bumbling false casts and all.

I didn't realize that slapping a terrestrial imitation on the surface might have attracted strikes. Nevertheless, in about an hour that afternoon I caught and released seven brown trout, each of which measured 16 inches.

In becoming a fly-fisherman and fly-tier, I did not have the advantage of a mentor's example and guidance. Even so, during that summer a series of small angling successes guided my way. I was much too excited about hauling in monsters to be discouraged by clumsy novice fly creations and inept casting. The fun of catching big fish led the way, and along this path the flies improved and I corrected those slapping false casts. □