

# Confessions of a Lazy Fly-Tyer

John Byron

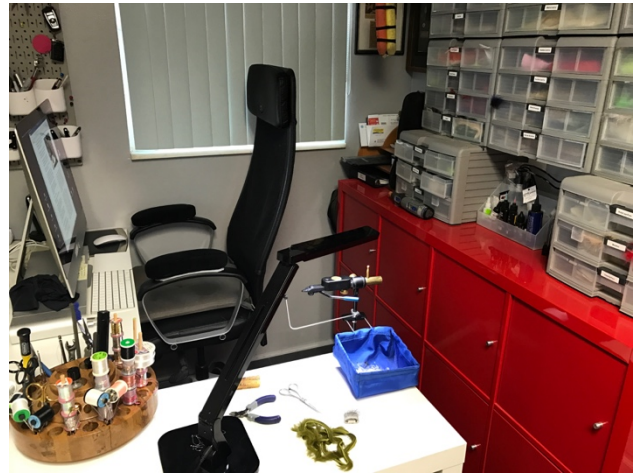
I've been tying flies since the Truman Administration. Rainbows, brookies, browns, cutthroats. Steelhead. Bream and crappies and bass. Tarpon, reds, bonefish, snook, seatrout. Size 3/0 for tarpon. 28s for some really picky rainbows feeding on midges at Lake Hannah east of Seattle. Lots of flies and I love to tie them.

I admire the truly skilled, deeply talented fly-tying artists in our ranks. They make beauty on a hook. Good on 'em. But me? Life's too short for all that and so I've evolved into what may be the world's laziest fly-tyer. Here're some things I think I've learned:

- Biggest lesson ever: *the fish don't care!* Windings so close to the eye it's hard to poke a 6/0 leader through it? The fish don't care. One wing a bit long? The fish don't care. Bit of a gap on the body winding? The fish don't care. Tie flies for fish, not window dressing. Shape, color, texture, size, flotation/sink-rate: these matter. But how perfectly and precisely the fly is tied, not so much. The fish don't care.
- But make damned sure it's not gonna unwind! Whip finish? Always. Use half-hitches freely — if you don't know what to tie onto the hook next, throw a half-hitch while you're thinking. Head cement or HardAsNails, on the head and maybe too at the tail and where the beadchain eyes are tied on. And acrylic. It's magic, that goop you set with the U/V light. The test of a well-tied fly: it gets more and more and more frazzled and worn down by fish without ever unwinding.
- Exact copies ain't. Until the Good Lord evolves for us a new insect with a hook hanging below its tail, none of us can truly emulate the creature we're trying to imitate. Impressionistic flies beat the best imitation every time. Buggy-ness matters.
- Two things really count. Hooks. And thread. Cheap hooks are an abomination. Until the chemically sharpened hook came along, that's all there was, regardless of cost: cheap hooks. But now there's no excuse for tying on anything that's less than scary-sharp stab-you-every-time-if-you're-not-careful-ouch.
- Finding the right thread takes time. When you do, quit looking. I'm partial to Danville's Waxes Flymaster plus 210 denier for most saltwater, but also like Uni's BigFly for tarpon. Settle on the best thread (for you) that you can find and use it always.
- Black and white may be all you need for thread. Yes, sometimes a tan or a hot pink or the perfect green is useful. But for most flies most of the time, black or white is just fine. Because...
- Sharpies are your friend. You can use a Sharpie to bend the colors of thread and most other materials and turn blah monochrome into banded fish-like bodies and tails. 24 colors for under \$12.
- Modern materials are wonderful! Face it: at one time, *every* material was modern. But the growth of fly tying as an industry has brought an explosion of new materials, many superior to 'the natural' and usually at far less cost. Credit Wapsi and Enrico Puglisi and Steve Farrar and a bunch more for making the choices harder but the results so much better. And easier. Embrace the new technology.
- And that includes the modern substitutes for dubbing. Dubbing is a pain in the ass. Antron yarn works just fine for trout. Fuzzy chenilles and the big array of brushes available do well for saltwater. Dubbing. Bah.
- But! But amongst all this new material, there's no substitute for good grizzly hackle! Grizzly necks are the jewelry of fly tying — for dries, a nice neck can cut into your child's college fund. But there's no substitute. (If I was tying a lot of dries these days, I'd probably make the same silly assertion for ginger hackles too.)

- Substitute freely. If you've been tying longer than a few weeks, you've got materials and colors and sizes enough for three people. So use what you have rather seeking out the exact item the pattern just has to have. Finding the precise barred ginger hackle from a virgin jungle fowl fed only on organic seed might suit some prissy pattern perfectly ... but you've got something pretty darned close. Use it.
- Keep some beeswax around. You may not be waxing thread like in the good old days, but it's nice to be able to make your fingers tacky for winding a small hackle and it's still the best dubbing wax ... if you can't wean yourself from that bad habit.
- Get the best tools. Your time and the cost of tying are enough important to not waste time with crappy tools. You need:
  - The right size vise sturdy enough that it never wobbles and good enough that it holds perfectly the size hooks you tie.
  - Really good scissors. Dr. Slick's are great. Enrico's are even better.
  - The best lamp you can find. I've got a fancy 30-LED bar light that does all but make coffee. \$60, and it throws its light from about 8 inches above the vise. With bright fluorescents for general lighting.
  - A couple pairs of small pliers. Dikes for cutting tough stuff and snipping off beadchain eyes etc. Small needlenose for crimping stuff.
  - Tweezers. Any kind.
  - Maybe a magnet-on-a-stick, for all those hooks you drop.
  - A brush of some sort to comb out fiber tails and wings and fluffing buggy bodies. I like Enrico's finger brush (I park it on my magnet stick).
  - Hackle pliers? There *are* no good hackle pliers — all are the spawn of the devil. Use your fingers. Learn to love a rotary vise.
  - A bunch of bobbins. Cheap is fine.
  - And a threader for those bobbins (though a crimped mono loop works fine too).

- Get organized. Cabelas had the best tool organizer I've ever seen and I was lucky enough to get one of the last they had. Wood, lazy-susan design, nearly a hundred holes to park stuff in vertically. Indispensable. And no longer available. But many items nearly as good can be found, tying desks of exotic design, carousels to hang flash on, hook bins and rotating thread racks and a big bunch of other things to keep the clutter down. You should have as many organizing gadgets as you need. But no more.



- Get drawers. I've got a wall of them, 30 total in three stacks, all labeled, with a lower cabinet to put the big stuff in and to hide my organizers when I'm not tying. The setup works perfectly. Plastic drawers are so easily available that there's no excuse for either clutter or confusion. Amazon has an incredible array. The Container Store is where I got mine.
- Take care of your eyes. It's called presbyopia, the font seems smaller and your arms too short. Happens to all with age, the inability to focus at closer distances. Like the distance between your nose and that size 20 Quill Gordon you're tying. Easy fix. Get some cheaters. Any drug store. But there's a bit of science to bring aboard, the mathematical relationship between the power (2.0X etc.) of your reading glasses and focal length. I tie fairly close to the vise and so have found that 3.5X is right for me. YMMV, but no one should have trouble

seeing in sharp focus the details of what they're tying.

- And save your marriage. Get a good hand vacuum and maybe one of those powered brooms.

These days I'm tying saltwater flies exclusively, from size 6 up to 3/0. In keeping with this theme of taking always the easy path, a couple thoughts on saltwater:

- Dr. Aaron Adams — one of our true experts in marine biology for fishing — has the right approach: if you can choose a pattern that's easy and quick to tie, that's the one you want ... even if there's a more traditional tie. He has some good videos on Vimeo to show you what he means.



- Love beadchain eyes. Hate lead eyes (it's like casting with a loaded .22). But if you do use beadchain, file the holes in the eyes smooth after you get them anchored (I use a Dremel zip zip).
- Love zonkers, rabbit for smaller and Finnish raccoon for the big tarpon butterflies.
- Rubber legs sure do beat all the fancier ways of making crab and shrimp flies look like crabs and shrimp.
- Yak hair (SynYak or the real stuff) beats bucktail. So do the 500 or so different kinds of bulk fiber that cover one wall of your favorite fly tying emporium.
- EP's 1/2" wooly-critter brush beats the best dubbing. Buggy stuff.
- Personal theory here, or phobia: I think that weed guards and eyes on a stalk can get in the way of setting the hook.
- Tying saltwater flies makes one really appreciate a sturdy vice with no flaws, tough thread, and and the best hooks you can find.
- Gotta chose between small hook or bigger, go bigger.

And that's it, my guide to creative laziness when tying flies. If you're an artist, do your art. If you're a fisherman, relax: no one's grading the flies you tie.

Except the fish.

And they don't care.

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