



In The Beginning – Part II

So you want to learn to tie flies?

By Slapout Mike



A Professional Fly Tier Dazzling the Crowd

Once the new comer gets hooked on fly fishing, they quickly find out that flies, just like lures and bait cost money. Unfortunately, depending on where you are fishing and your skill level, the average fly fisherman can actually consume a dozen or more flies per outing. Trees, wind knotted leaders, rocks, weeds, big fish and such can separate your fly from your leader more than you would think. Big flies such as bass bugs, streamers and big woolly buggers can cost upwards of \$2-3 each. Once a \$3 bass bug is dangling 20 feet up in a tree its actual value to you is \$0—it's gone forever. The general reaction to this by new fly fisherman is the desire to learn to tie flies, to mitigate the cost of inevitably losing flies to rocks, fish, trees and such on the water.

Fly tying is an enjoyable, rewarding skill. Fly tying was the activity that brought me into fly fishing. There is much to be said about catching a fish on a fly you tied yourself. As well, when you tie your own flies, you

are free to tie and fish any pattern you like. You are free to experiment and improve on existing patterns. You are free to stock up on your favorite patterns during cold winter days. You are free to create and try your own designs. And finally, you can tie flies of a quality and durability probably not available in commercial flies. That said, and by no means do I want to discourage anyone from tying their own flies, but indeed too, it costs money. And most definitely, in the short run, tying your own flies will collectively cost you more money than buying flies.

How do I start for a reasonable amount of money?

Fly Tying requires three things—equipment, materials and skill. Unlike fly casting, basic fly tying skills are relatively easy to learn and literature on the subject is readily available. On the other hand, selecting fly tying equipment can be just as daunting as selecting fly fishing equipment. There are all sorts of basic and specialized tools that range in quality and price from junk to expensive, but very functional production equipment. The beginning fly tier has a lot to choose from and there are no easy answers. Materials generally compose the largest collective investment any fly tier makes. There's an extraordinary variety of materials available, and like equipment, run the whole gamut of quality and price. So here are my tips for getting started economically, but with a high probability that you will learn not only how to tie flies, but will enjoy fly tying for the rest of your life.





How Do I Learn Tie and Develop My Fly Tying Skills?

Unlike fly casting, fly tying is indeed something you can learn from a book. There are really only a few basics and a lot of fine points depending on what kind of flies you are tying. First and foremost, you are binding materials to the shank of a hook and securing them there. The pattern you are tying and the materials you are using (determined by the pattern) may vary, but the basic process is the same. Secure a hook in a vise, secure and wrap thread on the hook shank, begin securing material in the correct order proportion and size on the hook, and finally secure the thread and finish at the hook eye. Any good fly tying book can show you these steps and how to perform them. Additionally, fly tying classes or instruction is generally available through local fly shops and fly tying demonstrations are usually a part of any fly fishing trade show. Two books that I've found very useful in this regard are:

Production Fly Tying by A. K. Best, (1989) and *Complete Photo Guide to Fly Tying-300 Tips, Techniques and Methods* by C. Boyd Pfeiffer (2005).

Production Fly Tying is one of those books by a professional fly tier that really provides insight into some essential fly tying techniques and I find myself referring to it often when attempting a new pattern. Pfeiffer's book is typical of the new genre of well illustrated fly tying technique books. The *Complete Photo Guide to Fly Tying* comes highly recommended for the beginning or experience fly tier.



Tying Techniques Can Be Learned From Books and Illustrations

Fly tying is a skill that's easily learned, but benefits from a lot of practice. In my experience that practice is best served by tying and perfecting your skills on only a few patterns. Say, for sake of argument, that since you fish mostly in the Southeast for bass and bream that you chose to tie only: Woolly Buggers (or Woolly Worms), Clouser Deep Minnows, Deer Hair Bugs, Foam Poppers and Damsel Nymphs. You would not only have a great selection of flies to fish with, for the most part you'd be using most of the basic techniques and materials needed to tie just about any pattern. The natural tendency for most new tiers is to try and tie lots of different patterns. This is why I discourage you new tiers from buying merely pattern books—too much temptation. Too many pattern choices usually results in more material requirements that drive up the cost. New tiers then mistakenly chose to skimp on equipment and material quality—something that should be avoided. **Tip:** *When starting out, learn to tie just a few patterns really well and only then broaden your pattern, technique and thus materials horizon.*

Acquiring Your Initial Fly Tying Equipment.



What Vise Do I Chose?

Like just about any craft that requires skill to produce a finished product, the skilled craftsman depends on quality equipment to make the job easier. In fly tying, four such tools must perform well for the fly tier to succeed at producing quality flies—the vise, hackle pliers, a thread bobbin and scissors. Should anyone of these tools function improperly, then the ability to tie quality flies is diminished. The vise must hold a wide variety of hook sizes and designs securely and allow sufficient room to manipulate materials. There are vises on the market that don't meet these criteria. Hackle pliers must hold hackle tips securely without damage. The thread bobbin must dispense thread with the correct tension while not fraying or breaking it. Finally, scissors must make





clean, sharp, delicate cuts. When you are learning to tie flies, inferior equipment is generally one of the biggest reasons you get discouraged and quit. When you make the initial decision to tie flies, allocate the largest part of your budget to quality equipment. Avoid the tendency to buy the “Complete Fly Tying Kit.” Not only will you find it contains inferior equipment, but it will include inferior and unneeded materials. You don’t need to spend \$400 on a new high-end vise, but spending \$40 on a low-end vise will doom your fly tying future. Quality fly tying equipment retains its quality and for the most part can be obtained second-hand at reasonable prices. Ebay is a great source for used fly tying equipment. Inferior equipment is junk when you buy it and gets junkie as you use it. Avoid it.

Materials—What and how much?

Once you have equipment in-hand, you are going to find that materials—hooks, thread, feathers, fur and synthetics make up your largest overall, long-term expense. The inclination is to buy a wide variety of materials so you can tie a lot of different patterns. Unfortunately when you add up the total cost, you begin to skimp on quality to cut costs. You buy the cheaper fur or feathers, cheaper hooks and such thinking that will save you money. In the short term it does, but long term it doesn’t. For example, you need material to tie a #6 Olive Woolly Bugger. You need a hook, olive marabou, flash, olive thread, olive chenille and olive hackle. Pricing that out on the cheap—Mustad #6 9672 \$14.95/100, Strung Marabou \$2 per ¼ ounce, Krystal Flash \$3.95/pack, olive nylon thread \$1.00/spool, olive common chenille \$1.95/card, olive strung saddle \$4.95 per ¼ ounce for a total \$29 investment. Assuming you produce 75 buggers with this material, that’s \$.40 per fly (forgetting sunk equipment costs). You can produce Woolly Buggers with the above but you can produce better Woolly Buggers with this material: TMC 200R #6 \$16.50/100, Long Marabou \$4.75 per ¼ ounce, Krystal Flash \$3.95/pack, olive 3/0 Uni-thread \$1.50/spool, olive antron chenille \$1.95/card, Whiting Olive Bugger Pack. \$11.95 (ties up to 75 buggers)--a total investment of \$40 or \$0.54 per fly. In some cases cheaper materials are not necessarily



Material Costs Can Add Up Rapidly

of poor quality, but in many cases they are. The Mustad hooks mentioned above are very suitable for good quality Woolly Buggers, but the TMC hooks are sharper and in my opinion, generally better quality hooks. On the other hand, the cheaper hackle and marabou mentioned above will not perform the way the premium stuff does. Weak hackle will break easily during tying and cause untold frustration. Flies tied with poor hackle and marabou just won’t last as long on the water. Although it is difficult to quantify with any precision, if you consume 10 poor quality buggers

per day you’ve spent \$4.00. In that same day, maybe you would have consumed only four buggers made with quality materials because they just don’t fall apart as fast—a \$2.16 cost. Which is the better overall investment? My first message then is quality. Buy and use quality materials anytime you can.

The second message is about quantity. The larger the variety of patterns you plan to tie, the more material will cost you. You can’t tie black Woolly Buggers with olive chenille, marabou or hackle. By restricting your initial tying to a few types and colors of patterns, you can significantly reduce your initial overall material costs, one of which is often overlooked--whatever you buy has to be stored in an organized way. Organic materials—feathers, fur, etc. have to be protected from mold and insect infestations. It costs money to protect your material investment long-term because you can’t just leave lying around in just any ole box. Pick a few patterns, sizes and colors you want to focus on. Obtain quality material to tie them and perfect your basic tying skills on these patterns. Only after you are confident that investments in additional





materials for new patterns are worth it should you expand your materials store. **Tip:** *Don't underestimate the impact of material quality in fly tying. It affects the quality of flies you tie, your ability to tie them and the overall cost of acquiring and maintaining them. Limiting your initial material investments is important.*

If you want to learn to tie flies:

Make sure you understand your motivations and commitment. Any honest evaluation by the amateur fly tier will confirm you don't really save money by tying flies. However, there are benefits—it is fun once you learn how and you can feel proud of catching fish with the flies you tie. It is also, if you are so inclined a very relaxing and enjoyable craft. I tie way more flies than I'll ever fish because I just enjoy tying them. Pay close attention to equipment quality and don't go overboard on materials in the beginning. If you really learn to enjoy fly tying, you'll have a lifetime to accumulate them. Good luck and post a picture of your first fly!



Another Woolly Worm For The Box

