

# The Choice of Flies

by

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To choose the six best books would be no more difficult than a like choice of flies. It would be hardly possible to get two flyfishermen, from the many thousands who cast, to agree on a choice of the six best flies. The most that could be hoped for would be that so short a list should contain one of their fancy. Indeed many anglers provide a varied list in their books, because season and locality require it. Bright or cloudy days often make it necessary to change both size and color, and a fly used with success in the morning is often no good at evening, although on the following evening it may be just the thing.

To minimize the difficulty and save time while in the water, a well-known angler has devised a plan to have ready-tied half a dozen leaders with a choice and varied assortment in both color and size — each set entirely different from all the others. The largest and most taking fly is placed as the end, or tail, fly. Should the upper fly be taken first, it is then removed to the end — the end fly being much easier to handle, especially with a large fish. Should the first cast of flies be unsuccessful, it is short work to take it off the line and replace it with another, duller in color, or brighter, as the case may be. By this means, he claims, possibly with truth, that less time is wasted and the quarry sooner brought to the basket. It certainly has advantages when fishing after dusk, with little light to see the fly or tie it on the leader.

Many anglers assert that for bass fishing one fly is sufficient, and some think a small spoon used with the fly gives better results. This would be especially so when a vari-colored fly like the Ferguson is used. It would seem that with two flies, tied forty inches apart and having as great a difference as possible in color and size, success would be more sure. It is by no means rare that two fish will take the flies at the same time. Often in playing one fish the other fly, being moved rapidly in the water, will be taken by another fish, out of pure jealousy. An instance of this kind was shown when the writer, fishing with a

live minnow on the end of the leader, and a fly tied three feet from the bait, a good-sized pickerel took the minnow. After being brought to the edge of the boat, he broke away, again to be returned, with a large bass on the fly — the pickerel on the bait — both being landed after considerable skill and careful work.

Very few will contest the fact that the Silver Doctor, both in form and beauty, is the queen of flies. No matter what its size, for bass, trout, or salmon, it holds its own as a taking fly, in any season or locality. In "Favorite Flies," Mrs. Marbury states that the majority of anglers place the Silver Doctor at the head of the list, especially for evening use. It did not originate in this country, but it has been heartily adopted and adapted to all waters by making it on all sizes of hooks. Its value for all game fish is undisputed.

As a bass fly, next to the Silver Doctor, the Ferguson is probably the most successful fly used. It is named after Major Ferguson, Fish Commissioner of Maryland, who endorsed this special pattern as the true one among a number of others slightly different, but all of the same name. It is a bold and bright-colored fly, the wing with long streaks of yellow, red and black showing brightly in the water, the green hackle softly blending with the black and bright-golden body.

The Matador was designed by William J. Cassard, of New York, and later named by C. F. Orvis. Its gay, rich dress, having wings of the black-barred feathers of the wood-duck, with a bold white streak running across the top, at once stamps it as an excellent bass fly.

The W. D. Cleveland, so named after a member of the "Texas Fishing Club," is somewhat similar to Dr. Henshall's Polka, having a gallina wing and red-and-black body. The black blot at the top and bottom of the wing is showy; otherwise this fly has a sober brown appearance, but with distinct and original markings.

The Cracker was designed by Dr. George Trowbridge, of New York, and was intended for the fishes of Florida,

being named after the "poor whites" of that State and Georgia. Like the Silver Doctor, it is a good all-around fly for different game fish. The luckiest models always contain a plentiful supply of red in wings and back, with yellow and blue mixed in, and with peacock feathers to blend with its blue body. The Cracker is a remarkably handsome fly, having the red hackle of a slightly darker shade than that of the wing. This fly is not so well known as its beauty warrants.

The Murray Hill, with bright body and wings, has a long red tail, black hackle and side feathers, and resembles to an astonishing degree a living moth. It has less color than the usual bass fly. Bass have an eye for bright and strong colors, with deep black well mixed in for contrast; in this they much resemble the salmon and other game fishes. It is beyond question that bright colors will attract from a greater distance. Could we be placed where fish generally lie, these brilliant butterfly fairies dancing on the top of the water would attract our attention, and had we the bass's pugnacious will, we, too, might tackle with avidity the man encased in so bright a robe.

To the thoughtless casual observer a fly is just a bundle of feathers jumbled together anyhow — without meaning. By no means is it so. The great and standard flies have been evolved, designed, sometimes after many years of thoughtful study of both nature and habits of the fishes, and the inventor of such a fly as, for instance, the Silver Doctor, unquestionably has conferred a world-wide benefit for all time. Such a fly is born but once in a long time — like a Shakespeare or a Dante. But all anglers are of one mind in this: that a limited variety of the designs to pick from are as various as the flowers that bloom. Practical fly fishers of many years' standing, like the late William C. Harris, Dr. Henshall and others, have repeatedly stated that in their experience they soon discarded all but a few patterns. Dr. Henshall has complete faith in his own creations, and with reason, too; though his inventions are less brightly colored than those of

others, and, in the writer's opinion, have too thick bodies – at least in some instances. In only one of the five flies is red used, and that only for the body and hackle. On the other hand, Mr. Harris was a staunch believer in red and green, but the difference in success may be apparent only in the locality fished – whether west or east. But all agree in the oft-repeated rule that for dark days and evenings light flies are always taken best.

One of the greatest advantages is having confidence in a fly, for it goes a long way toward making it a success. A fisherman will almost invariably kill the greatest number of fish with the fly he uses most. He persists so long that from sheer anger a game fish rises to his lure, and, be it said, the artificial fly, when playing on the water, is more like the natural fly than the average observer would imagine; the many varieties winging their flight on or near the water, with wings cocked or flat, have been imitated with remarkable fidelity. The duns, drakes, spinners, beetles, ants and browns – all insects in their natural state providing abundant food by night or day – being so difficult of capture, ingenious man provides substitutes that will stay on the hook and keep their form and color, in or on the water, till worn out, to be replaced by new ones.

It is not to be inferred that the writer advises against trying any new patterns that are invented; experience will at once tell whether a new fly will be likely to surpass those now in use, and it is quite possible that the greatest fly is yet to be made by some genius – a fly that will take at all times, in all places, and all kinds of fish. Such a fly would make the designed world-renowned among a host of admiring brother anglers. One has a secret thought that perhaps fishing would be then too easy, and the delightful hope, the fisherman's guide, would be gone forever.

But it is a noticeable fact that the great majority of bass fishermen use live bait – frogs, minnows, helgramites, crawfish and eels. They imagine that a better-filled creel results from the use of live bait; yet fly-fishing is immeasurably superior in every way. It is cleaner, less cruel to bait and quarry, cheaper and easier in many ways. Who has not traveled some distance to find his bait short just as the fish are beginning to bite, or at times find his bait dead and therefore useless? And how often it happens that bait costs much more than the fish are worth. Who cares to wade through a stream with a can of minnows dangling in the water, with nerves on edge every minute, as he expects their escape or loss? Frogs are especially "cute" in getting away either by forcing the lid off the can, or jumping in all directions when the angler has only one hand at liberty; and, worse still, how often will they crawl around a large stone or rock, from which no amount of pulling and tugging moves them, till, weary of trying, a sudden, last, desperate jerk parts the leader from the line?

These and many other ills come not to the fly-caster. He calmly takes his book of flies, lying snugly in his pocket, and soon replaces or adjusts a new cast, right in mid-stream, and freely begins anew his pleasant pastime. It is quite true that bass are not always in the humor to take a fly – the same may be said of salmon and trout – but the ardent fly-caster usually has patience in his make-up to wait till the fish will rise to his feathery lure, and this often happens sooner than is expected, if some coaxing is brought into play.

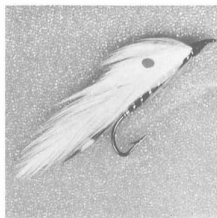
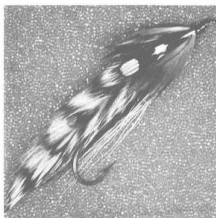
No ingenious American has yet attempted – at least to the writer's knowledge – to make flies by machinery; so that all are tied by hand, and well-made flies are necessarily costly. All the makers, especially well-known and trustworthy houses, can supply and will

furnish the very best if paid for the extra care in tying. No comparison can possibly be made between the ten-cent bass fly of the bargain stores and those made by such firms as Abbey & Imbrie, Mills, and Charles F. Orvis, the latter firm having made the sheet of colored flies for this volume. The original patterns are copied exactly, and each firm has its own choice set of patterns, besides the standard kind.

Experienced anglers often say that bass will jump at anything when they are in the humor; but the trouble is that they are rarely in the humor to jump at any old rag that is cast before them, and the only way to put them in a humor to be always jumping is to show them the most attractive flies. A fly that will rise a fish often is a good fly.

In the order given: No. 1 has a gray wing with red rib shoulder, warm gray hackle with a green body, red tail to match the shoulder, and deep black head. No. 2 is a brilliant yellow hackle, body and wings, with shoulder of red, black head and tail. No. 3 is decidedly different from the Orvis Silver Doctor, having a bright blue hackle, black head, with wings a mixture of grays, without the golden pheasant's feathers, the absence of the latter taking away much of its beauty in appearance, yet seeming to lessen none of its effectiveness as a taking fly. No. 4 has the brown hackle, thick and bushy, green head and body of peacock's hurl, with a short, stumpy red tail. I like this fly, and made in any size – small preferred – it would do great service for trout. No. 5 has a deep black wing, hackle, head and tail, with a bright golden body and cream-colored spotted shoulder; it is a most effective looking fly, but did not take as I expected on trial. No. 6 is the regulation white and red, with yellow head and wooly body.

A new pattern rising rapidly in favor, the Babcock, used always as a second



The Maine landlocked streamer fly was in use in its simplest form beginning about 1900. By the 1930's Carrie Stevens had produced a very sophisticated flat winged assembly that was entirely different in design than any of these fashioned previously.

The flies pictured above were tied in the Stevens' style and have no name. Carrie Stevens' secret was in the choice of and assembly of her materials. Properly tied, they will have a flutter at the tail quite similar to a minnow. Dressed by A. S. H.

fly – that nearest the rod – has bright yellow wings, in striking contrast to the black head and hackle which is carried on by a streak of black up the yellow wing. With its body of scarlet, with twisted gold thread and its black tail, it is both a gracefully built and a strikingly handsome fly. I used it with a Silver Doctor as end fly, and on this cast of flies landed fish.

These flies, with the six Orvis flies pictured on the plate, were specially tested by the writer in swift-running, cold water of the Bearkill, a few miles above its junction with the Delaware, and while, of course, this was not conclusive, it was found that the Silver Doctor, by both makers, was far ahead in the number of rises and of fish caught, in the morning or the evening, on dull or bright days. When I changed back to this successful lure it seemed to be as enticing to trout as to bass, the brown as well as the *fontinalis*, or brook trout, while the ever voracious chub, that rises to any fly, took particular liking to this fly. One large fish weighing over three pounds, after a gamy resistance, was brought to the net, and on extracting the hook he disgorged a good-sized mouse or young rat that, no doubt, in swimming across the stream, had just fallen a victim. The brown palmer, used as a second or upper fly, hooked a number of fish. Another case, made up of the Grizzly King and Lord Baltimore, was not so effective, but attracted attention, the fish rising, but returning without taking the fly.

I am inclined to agree with Mr. Harris that bass flies as sold by the dealers are far too large for running water, and are better suited for the deep, dark-colored water of the lakes. The rule is not infallible – that big flies catch the large fish; but after dusk the large fly is more serviceable in that both angler and fish see it more easily.

Later I carefully trimmed part of the flies with my scissors, reducing the wings and tail nearly one-third, the change being a decided improvement in the Ferguson, Cracker and Silver Doctor of the Orvis flies, and the Silver Doctor, Parmechence Belle and Grizzly King of the Abbey & Imbrie flies. While casting for bass in what is known as a bass pool, I landed a splendid brown trout, on the Cracker, before reducing its size; but at twilight, and on three different occasions, I hooked a fine bass on the trimmed Ferguson in this same pool. Twice he got away while out of the water, and once he rubbed the hook off by nosing a rock in the swirl of swift water. I tried him many times after, and on every occasion he would leap out of the water once, but never a second time.

In short, after most careful study of this particular kind of water and locality I am firmly convinced that any fish – bass, trout, or even salmon – will, nine times out of ten, go for the fly that has a shining metallic body, either of silver or of gold, the former preferred; and that this is the explanation why the Silver Doctor is so universally pronounced a favorite fly. My choice would be, out

of a dozen flies, ten with silver or gold bodies and a varied assortment of wings and hackles, no matter what fish be the quarry. In fresh or salt water the same rule would apply, and size is more important than color. It is only in the latter part of the season that large-sized natural flies are on the wing. In swift-running water the bass is harder to land and has in his favor all the chances of getting away. With movements so quick, he is gone in a flash. Many times, like lightning, he rises to meet the fly, even before it touches the water, so that the angler must be very alert to get ahead, if the bass is to be hooked at all. To the fly fisherman there is no more inspiring sight than a fair-sized bass, leaping out of the foaming, rapid water; in a second, head up; with fly in his lips, shaking his whole body in anger and fright; slipping down again, to tear off upstream; the reel singing a lively tune. We ask ourselves every time: "Will he get away?"

from *The Commissioner's Report*  
Indiana  
1905 - 1906



#### LIFE'S DARKEST MOMENTS...

This original Webster cartoon has been given to the Museum by Mr. D. C. (Duckie) Corkran. It is now on permanent display in our exhibit rooms.