

FFF Fly of the Month

Foam flies for warmwater: Back to your roots

June 1999



Comments by Jim Abbs

If you live in a part of the world blessed with warmwater lakes and pond, consider yourself very fortunate. As long as there is open water, sunfish, bluegills, crappie and other panfish can be tricked to taking one kind of a fly or another. This kind of fishing is not crowded, often is found minutes from home, and these tough little fish are not hypersensitive to the advance of human development. Even in the mostly coldwater west, many cities and towns maintain some warmwater ponds, lakes or little impoundments, mostly because they serve so many different anglers so well.

Another reason warmwater fishing is so popular is that most of us started out fishing these kinds of waters. An old-time Minnesota steelhead, trout and salmon fly fisher makes the point better than I can:

"One of the most memorable moments this past summer was angling for sunfish on a northern Wisconsin lake. On a light fly rod sunfish are surprisingly feisty and I lost count of the number of fish landed that morning, but it was a delightful change of pace. Ignoring simpler fly fishing pleasures is a mistake we often make. After all I started fishing with a stick and a string on a dock in a little pond. It doesn't hurt to get to back to one's roots. "

The other relaxing part of fishing in warmwater is creating new flies to imitate the thousands of little critters that make up these fertile ecosystems. One of the most popular and inexpensive materials for these kinds of flies is closed-cell foam. Spiders, ants, beetles, inch worms, bumble bees, polywogs, and even dragon flies are very easy to tie with foam (if you can get the rubber legs right) and with some attention to proportion and "bugginess" they can be deadly effective. The original foam bugs--called sponge flies---were constructed of open cell foam and the water had to be squeezed out of them every few casts to keep them floating. That original foam was pretty soft stuff and as a consequence what you could do with it also was sort of limited.

However today we have a large variety of so-called closed-cell foam materials that float forever, can be colored (or even painted), are easy to shape in great detail and work very well not only on panfish and bass, but also are used for many trout patterns. In the spirit of relaxed summer fishing on your little pond of choice, the Fly of the Month for June, 1999 is a simple foam creation, with a few dozen variations in size, shape, coloration and style that make it into beetles, inch-worms, ants, stoneflies and many other creatures that are deadly on warmwater and coldwater fish.

Hook: Dry fly hook, sizes 6-14, depending upon the size of warmwater fish you are pursuing; for bluegill sizes 10-14 are good (I prefer a size 12 hook, tied with a #10 size body, so to discourage little panfish--they can't get it in their mouths!) and if you want to open up the possibility of catching either a panfish or maybe a bass, go to # 8 or even #6.

Legs: Rubber leg material (round or strips from rubber sheets in many colors), waxed tying thread, Krystal Flash. These three kinds of legs can be used together or by themselves. The Krystal Flash (in my experience) seems to reduce the floatation of the fly, so use it sparingly---just a couple strands for effect. Some foam patterns also use saddle hackle in addition to or instead of rubber or thread legs. Rubber legs that are segmented (with a dashes) are available, and some even now have a glitter material embedded. You can segment the legs yourself with a permanent marker.

Body: Foam is available from a variety of sources, like some packing material or sport helmet padding. The closed-cell foam does not absorb water and generally floats better. There are a number of colors available, particularly black, white and yellow. A good alternative is to choose white and color it with a permanent marker. Indeed, two-color patterns (like bumble bee stripes of yellow and black) are often more effective than solid colors. A touch of red near the front of the fly seems also to add to the effectiveness---this is consistent with the patches of red sometimes used near the head of streamer patterns.

TYING STEPS:

1. Cut the foam in a shape to imitate the insect you are trying to match. Tapering it toward the hook eye, with a more abrupt taper toward the bend of the hook is a common approach, but by no means the only one. Take a look at some of the insects on your pond or lake; A beetle has a different body shape than an ant or spider.
2. Wrap the thread along the entire length of the hook shank and back to the bend. I recommend placing a drop of super glue at the point where you wish to tie in the back part of the foam body.

This stuff makes your fly more durable and also keeps the body and hook in their proper orientation.

3. Tie in the foam body, with the front of the body pointing off the back of the hook, upside down. Place a couple of drops of super glue or tying cement (the flexible kind is best for foam) on the thread-wrapped hook shank and fold the foam body down on the shank.
4. Wrap several winds of thread around the foam body, creating a so-called waist for the fly. The position of that waist, and your whether you want two or more segments is dependent upon the insect you are trying to imitate. A beetle may have no waist at all, just a head. Make sure you place the body so it is sitting properly and rigidly on top of the hook shank. If the body rotates on the hook shank, the hook bend and point will be out of position (lying flat against the bottom of the body, for example) making it difficult to get hook ups.
5. Take leg material, cut to lengths about 2 times the body length and lay it along side the foam body. Tie in at one more points of segmentation on both sides. Adjust the spread of the legs by wrapping in front or in back of each. This will take some messing around until you get the hang of it; often after you have tied a few foam flies, such adjustments are not necessary.
6. Wrap the thread forward, tying down the head, or alternatively leaving a tip of the foam for the head. Put drop of flexible tying cement at the head and at the segmentation points. If you want to make this fly easier to see, glue a small piece of white or colored foam on top.
7. Experiment with colors, shapes, leg configurations to get the most effect pattern for your local waters. Have fun catching fish and creating new bugs!

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You can direct any questions or comments to FOM at flyofthemonth@fedflyfishers.org