

FFF Fly of the Month

DECEMBER, 1999 - THE MESSINGER FROG: An American favorite for over 70 years



Comments by Jim Abbs

Every year at this time I start thinking about all the fly fishing opportunities I passed up in the last season and commit myself to not missing such chances in the year ahead. Last fall, just before the holidays, I made just such a resolution to tie some old-fashioned deer hair bugs for big bass----to fish in 1999. The resolution was one that I kept and in doing so, I discovered the effectiveness of one of the truly old time favorites...the Messenger Frogs.

But why frogs? Dennis Galyardt, Warmwater Editor of the Flyfisher, makes the critical point when he notes that bass eat absolutely anything that swims, flies, crawls wiggles or walks. Of these, somehow frogs seem the more appetizing than worms, leeches, grasshoppers or mice, especially from a human perspective. However, because fly fishing appears to have developed as a way to present imitations of lightweight critters, most early flies for bass imitated insects. In fact, if you read the old master James Henshall, most early bass flies were variations of trout flies, only bigger and with more hackle and more hair.

Somehow, in the late 19th century... in America, fly fishers for bass started using deer hair to form the head, body and even legs of a frog fly imitations. The challenge was in creating a fly that looked like a frog and was light enough to be cast properly with a fly rod. It is not clear which came first, the clipped deer hair frog or the one made from balsa wood, but both survive to this day.

James Henshall is generally given credit for creating the first clipped deer hair frog-like bug, but clearly the most well known today are the Messenger Frogs. There are several variations on these patterns, with an infinite number of colors and shapes. In fact there are truly two generations of Messenger Frogs, tied by two generations of Joe Messingers. If you master their construction, I can tell you from experience, the summer of 2000 will be a time that you will connect to big bass on the top of the water. From my point of view, watching a aggressive critter with a mouth as big as my fist inhale my fly is all the excitement I need.

MATERIALS

Hook: Straight eye, Wide gap, like the Mustad 37187

Thread: Monocord, in Olive or green

Rump: Bunches of deer body hair, green on top, yellow below

Body: Stacked and spun green, yellow and white deer hair

Legs: Green and yellow bucktail, with the butt ends facing backward

Eyes: Plastic (hollow are available commercially, but original were solid and made by Messinger)

TYING INSTRUCTIONS

1. Spin green and yellow deer body hair over the 1/3 rear of the hook. Pack tightly and trim to a tapered shape to form the rump.
2. Select 2 bunches of bucktail (1 green and 1 yellow). Layer so green is on top and yellow on the bottom. Place the end of a heavy thread within the bunch of deer hair and tie the both the thread and the deer hair on the side and in front of the spun deer hair rump with the bucktail butts facing backward. The leg should extend beyond the rump by the length of the hook shank.
3. Insert a straight pin inside the leg and wrap a size D thread around the bucktail bunch, the thread and the straight pin to form a knee joint. Tie off the thread, bend the knee and cement the knee joint. Cut off the excess length of the straight pin. Repeat steps 2 and 3 for the other leg.
4. Trim the legs to provide a uniform leg ending
5. Spin deer hair for the front two-thirds of the body. Tie off, cement and trim the body to a full rounded shape.
6. Go catch some bass!

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