TROUT

SECRET OF THE NEVERSINK SKATER



Leonard Kamsler Photo

This distinctive and strikingly effective dry fly was invented by one of the most hallowed personages of American trout fishing. Now, after 40 years, Outdoor Life for the first time publishes the secret of how it's tied

By VINCE MARINARO

This story began in a physician's waiting room, which is really a strange way for a fishing story to begin. It is also the story of a well-kept fly-tying secret that goes back many years.

All of it started some 40 years ago when Charlie Fox was waiting impatiently in a doctor's office for his turn to be treated. On a table in the waiting room was the usual display of magazines, intended no doubt to divert the thoughts of the patients to something other than their ailments. There was one plushy-looking sports magazine which Charlie chose to examine, idly leafing through pages that revealed a lot of coverage about yachts, horses, polo, and sundry matters in which Charlie had not the slightest interest, until his attention was caught and held by an elaborate piece titled "Butterfly Fishing" by Edward Ringwood Hewitt.

The late Mr. Hewitt (1866-1956) was a famous personality who dominated the fishing scene for many years. He had many talents that he expressed very well as engineer, inventor, author, fish culturist, aviation pioneer, and in numerous other endeavors. His most appealing quality—to me, anyway—was his remarkably boyish enthusiasm for trout fish-

Above: a Neversink Skater afloat, its knife-edged hackle barely piercing the surface of the water. The blur at bottom of photo is leader tippet, which was out of focus

ing, and it never flagged, even in his very old age. He was not a really complicated person but always somewhat blunt and direct in his approach to everything. Like the rugged old-time physicians who would taste a patient's urine to find out if there was diabetes, Mr. Hewitt went so far as to eat ants to see if he could discover why the trout liked them!

The magazine piece that Mr. Hewitt wrote intrigued Charlie so much that when he was called for his turn to see the doctor he put aside the magazine very reluctantly, unfinished with his reading. After his treatment Charlie hurried back to the magazine and finished reading the butterfly piece, in which Mr. Hewitt described a new kind of fishing that was allegedly inspired by the presence of fluttering butterflies over his water on the Neversink River in New York's Catskills. The butterflies created an excited response from the trout, for which he had designed a special kind of fly. Frankly, I have never seen a rise of trout to a "hatch" of butterflies in all of my many years of trout fishing, but I can accept this as the source of Mr. Hewitt's inspiration anyway.

Fascinated by what he had read, Charlie promptly got off a letter to Mr. Hewitt requesting and offering to purchase some of the special flies described as Neversink Skaters. Within a short time Charlie received a small supply of the skaters and knew upon examining them that they were very different from the usual spidery type of fly with which the skater is often confused. The materials used in construction are exactly the same, but the treatment of the hackle and the resultant effect are entirely unlike the usual spider. The most unique feature about the skater—obvious to all of us who saw them—was the way the hackle fibers came together at the tips, forming a knifelike edge all around the perimeter of the fly like two saucers brought together, with hollow sides facing one another. Without this remarkable feature it is not a skater and will not perform as such.

Shortly after receiving these unusual flies Charlie took them along on a fishing trip to Fisherman's Paradise on Spring Creek near Bellefonte, Pennsylvania. This was the showplace of the Pennsylvania Fish Commission where visitors were permitted to flyfish, with limited kill, over many large trout that were well fed and therefore not easy to tempt with anything.

The results of that first experience with the skater were phenomenal even though Charlie was unfamiliar with the proper methods of using the fly. During the course of that eventful day he "jumped" and hooked and lost dozens of trout, some of them really big fish that he described as battlewagons. He created so much excitement that he acquired an admiring and intensely interested gallery that followed him about until he had lost all but one of those fantastic skaters. Charlie used the big skater as an attractor and came away from that experience convinced that the skater was the greatest fish-finder in the world.

Later, with that one remaining fly in his possession, Charlie went to Penn's Creek to fish the fine green-drake hatch that this big limestone stream displays annually. This huge mayfly is not easy to imitate. There are many designs and patterns of artificials invented by fishermen for this hatch, some of which Charlie used that day without much success. Then he brought out that one remaining skater. Here again he enjoyed instant success, but this time he used the big skater not as an attractor but as a specific imitation for the green drake.

I have no doubt that the big fly was really imitating the huge fluttery wings of the green drake, oftentimes twitching and rocking in a manner that must be very enticing to the trout. There can't be any other reason for the skater's appeal to the trout, since it has no body or tail or anything but that big, thin circle of hackle fiber.

Fired up by these experiences and wanting more of this kind of fishing, Charlie set about to get a new supply of this astonishing fly. There was that one remaining fly, which he showed to a professional tyer, and one other in the possession of a friend and amateur flytyer who had pounced on it when Charlie impatiently discarded it after breaking the hook against the rod while casting. The sorely needed supply of flies did not materialize from these two expected sources. Both men reported their frustration and failure to achieve the unique knife-edge design of the skater.

In his extremity Charlie again appealed to Mr. Hewitt for more flies, not only for himself but for others who had become greatly interested in the skater.

It was apparent to everyone that Mr. Hewitt was not going to reveal the tying secret to anyone. He ignored any broad hints and even direct questioning about the tying method. It was also evident that everyone would have to depend on Mr. Hewitt for supplies that were not always available. On one occasion, in response to an order for flies, he referred mysteriously to "my man" who would furnish more flies. We never found out who "my man" was, and we could only speculate on his existence and his role in the production of the now-much-desired skater.

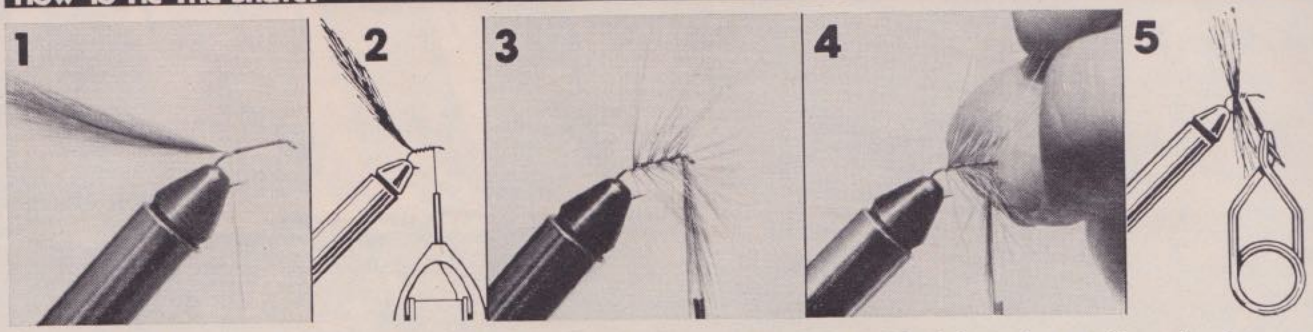
Finally, in desperation, Charlie took a new batch of flies that he had received and began to parcel them out, two at a time, to flytying friends and professionals, some of whom were very famous.

At this point, for the first time, I became directly involved in the case of the mysterious skater, for it turned out to be a real detective type of thing. I got my two flies and did what everyone else did, carefully dissecting the fly with a razor blade and examining carefully every visible element of construction. All of us, amateur and professional alike, found the same thing—and found nothing. It was plain to everyone that the fly was tied with two large hackles, cupped together, dull sides facing one another. That much was easy to see even without dissection.

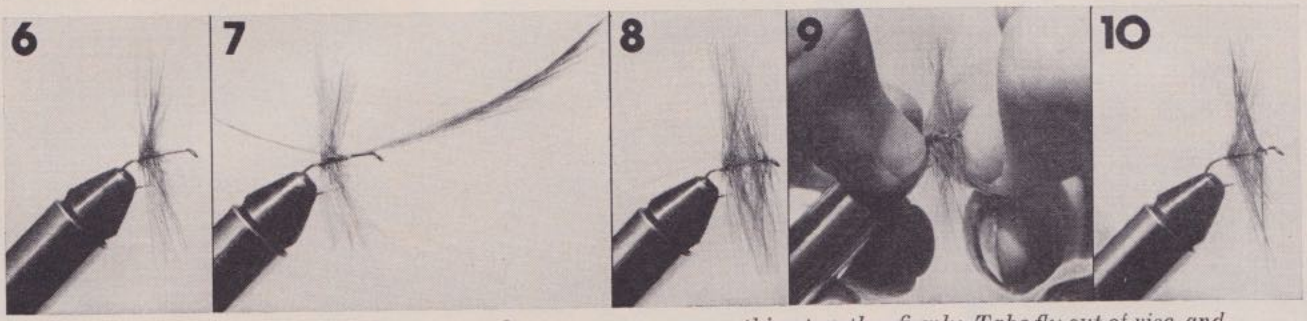
I had cut my skater apart over a sheet of white paper, and I left the debris lying there undisturbed for some days, frequently returning to examine the remains for some clue. Eventually I saw a detail that seemed out of the ordinary. It was the white tying silk. It was too clean *(continued on page 134)*

• *Vince Marinaro is author of A Modern Dry-Fly Code (Crown), considered a classic book on trout. A new book, In the Ring of the Rise, is due for publication in July*

How To Tie The Skater

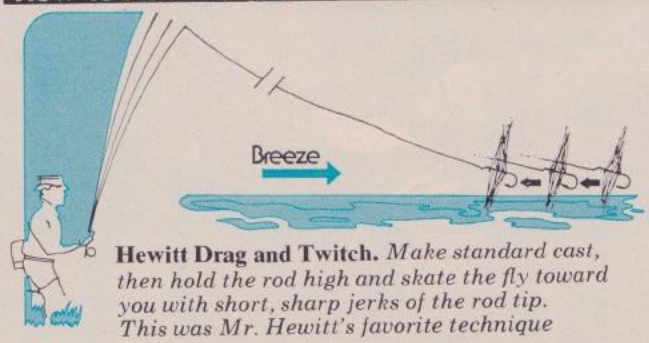


1. *Choose two long-fibered stiff feathers from the edge of a hackle neck (skater should have a diameter of at least two inches); any color will do. Wax only one inch at end of tying thread to help anchor it to hook shank. Use weighted bobbin. Tie one hackle onto hook, concave side up, as shown. Half-hitch.* **2.** *Bend feather sharply toward eye. Wrap thread in wide-open turns up to eye, and let it hang there.* **3.** *Grasp tip of hackle with heavy hackle pliers, and wind in wide-open turns over thread to eye. Let it hang there.* **4.** *Pinch neck of hook with nails of thumb and middle finger, and gently push everything back to bend of hook.* **5.** *Repeat procedure—open turns of thread and hackle, and push back—until half an inch of feather is left. Tie off.*

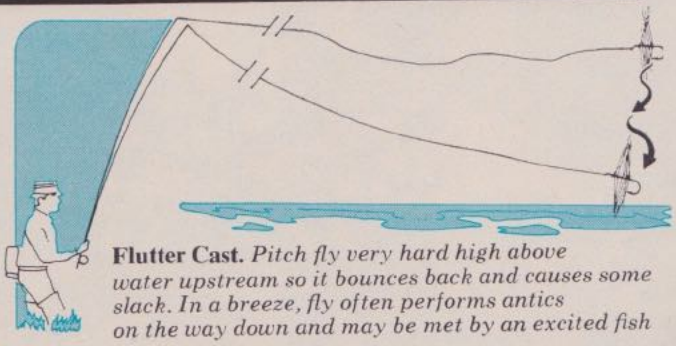


6. *Fly should now look like this.* **7.** *Tie in second hackle very close to tie-off of first hackle, concave side up, as shown.* **8.** *Bend feather up and repeat same open-wrap, push-back procedure as with first hackle. Tie off.* **9.** *Pinch hook at neck and at bend, and push everything together firmly. Take fly out of vise, and push together some more in several places around hook shank to even-up hackle around the perimeter.* **10.** *Add drop of rod varnish—not lacquer—on thread at head and rear. The finished fly should look like this*

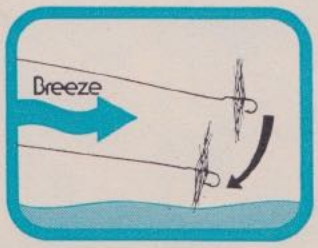
How To Fish The Skater



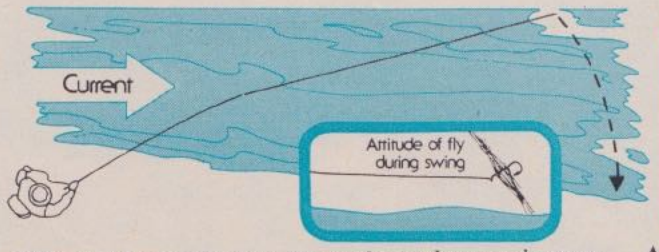
Hewitt Drag and Twitch. *Make standard cast, then hold the rod high and skate the fly toward you with short, sharp jerks of the rod tip. This was Mr. Hewitt's favorite technique*



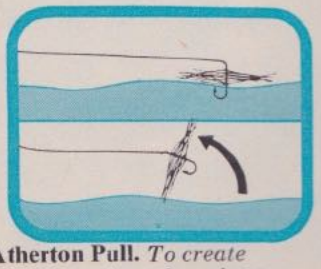
Flutter Cast. *Pitch fly very hard high above water upstream so it bounces back and causes some slack. In a breeze, fly often performs antics on the way down and may be met by an excited fish*



Dapping. *With a stiff breeze at your back, use a fairly short line, hold rod high, then slowly lower and raise rod repeatedly so fly dances on and off water*

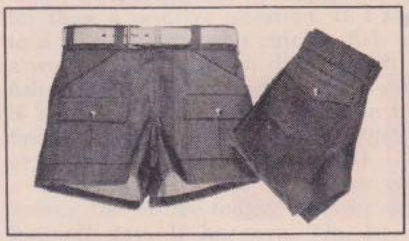


Diagonal Swing. *Make a diagonal cast down and across stream toward the far bank. After skater lands on the water, hold rod high and let the fly drag. As it swings around toward your side, jerk the rod tip backward once or twice to try to make the fly jump*



Atherton Pull. *To create deadly motion when skater falls on its back, elevate the fly by lifting rod tip or drawing on line*

Rugged Denim Shorts



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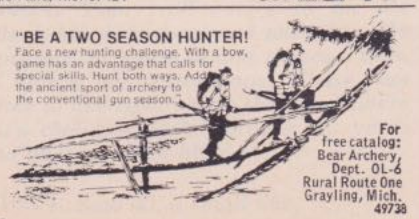

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stripped. Eight years ago it was $160 for a johnboat.

"You know, this sport has millionaires, and then there are some who hock their shotgun to enter the tournament. The influence now is in the bass boats and tackle, line and technique. When you buy a rod and reel, the influence comes from this room.

Powell had another drink, his face red, his eyes gleaming and yet snaking around the room as if searching for a hole in the lily pads to cast to. See those guys over there? See them looking over here? Know what they're saying? They're saying, 'Shut your mouth!' But I'll tell you anyway. You know what you're really competing against? Not the other competitors. You're competing against the cotton-pickin' fish. That's it!"

The appeal of bass-fishing contests goes far beyond their competitive aspects. It's those depthfinders and fish locators and a bassin' rig in the hole. Rev it up, and the bow thrusts skyward. The boat is on the pad, the stomach sucks in, and the tri-hull rises out of the hole, over the hump, and on the plane, moving out at 50 m.p.h. At the end of the day there might be a big check. Between those times there's a battle plan to work out against those bass. It's a social jamboree. It's a bass happening. And with all due respect to traditional anglers, it's where many young bass fishermen feel at home.

• *Peter Miller, 45, writes, hunts, and fishes in that order from his home in Waterbury, Vermont. He also is one of America's leading outdoor photographers, whose pictures appear regularly in national magazines; he is a former Life Magazine staffer. Miller is co-author, with whitetail hunter Larry Benoit, of the book "How to Bag the Biggest Buck of Your Life." He traveled to Currituck Sound in October of last year to fish with and interview the country's top contest bass fishermen.*

SECRET OF THE NEVERSINK SKATER *(continued from page 76)*

looking—too slippery and unstained by the usual waxing—and there was a great deal of it. Furthermore, the number of turns of hackle appeared to match the number of turns of silk. And then like the burst of a flashbulb the solution became clear. I sat down and promptly tied a batch of skaters and handed them to the delighted Charlie.

Now I was faced with a dilemma. I wanted my friends to have the skater, but I did not want to spoil Mr. Hewitt's fun. I knew that he did not wish to reveal the tying method, and I wanted to respect that wish. It was his invention and his privilege to withhold it. We were good friends, and I wanted to keep it that way.

Eventually I revealed the tying technique to a few friends and extracted a solemn promise from each of them that he would not reveal it to anyone as long as Mr. Hewitt lived. Only one man violated that compact, and I never trusted him again.

There is a sequel to this story that I must tell. Mr. Hewitt was unaware of these developments. On his next visit to our Fly-Fisher's annual dinner some of our fellows formed a conspiracy to have a little fun with him. After the dinner when there was much talk and visiting with one another, a large delegation led by the conspirators approached Mr. Hewitt and bluntly asked him how to tie the Neversink Skater. Mr. Hewitt promptly swallowed the bait and launched into a detailed account about looping the hackle back and forth in a Figure 8 movement until all of the fibers stood out in all directions. Then he described how he squirted the fly with a syringe loaded with some kind of liquid that caused all of the fiber tips to come together at the perimeter.

Everyone knew, of course, that he was pulling our legs, and at the conclusion of his account there was a tremendous roar of laughter which startled him. Then someone handed him a boxful of my skaters and said, "Like this?" Mr. Hewitt examined the flies very carefully, then looked up in wonderment and asked, "Where did you get them?" Someone pointed to me and said, "Vince tied them."

Truly, I was embarrassed and a bit apprehensive. But Mr. Hewitt merely looked at me, smiled, and made no further comment.

I would like to emphasize that spiders and skaters are not the same fly. There are some anglers and even fishing writers, particularly those who are very familiar with spiders but not with skaters, who identify them as one and the same and use the terms interchangeably. It is rare to meet anyone, even in my area, who has even seen a skater. The spiders, and variants too, have a much greater water-gripping surface because of the wider spread of the hackle at the perimeter of the fly, unlike the true knife-edged skater with its minimal contact with the water. The skater is an acrobatic fly.

With a supply of skaters now assured, there was ample opportunity to experiment with and extend the use of this fly. It turned out to be an extremely versatile artificial. In those days our trout fishing was regrettably limited, by law, to the end of July. For me it was a vexing affair because I knew there was some fine fishing to be had in mid and late season, as we know and enjoy today. The only alternatives were the really good bass fishing in the many fine warmwater rivers in my area and, later, the fall salmon fishing in the Maritime Provinces of Canada, neither of which I would have chosen in place of trout fishing. As a consequence I did a considerable amount of bass-bugging and light-lure plugcasting. Eventually I abandoned bass-bugging because of the dreadful labor and coarseness connected with the method, though I wished that I could have continued

(continued on page 143)

(continued from page 134)

with the fly rod, which I prefer.

At some point in this early experience with the skater I began to think of it as a bass fly and sometimes used it as such with spectacular results. What appealed to me especially was that I did not need to use the heavy, ungraceful tackle necessary to deliver the cumbersome bass bugs. Light trout rods in the 7½-to-eight-foot class weighing 3½ to four ounces were perfectly adequate for pitching the fly and handling the bass, which seldom exceeded four pounds.

I did not go overboard in using the skater for bass for quite some time because there was one serious deficiency. I found that it was very difficult to hook a bass with the little No. 16 hook recommended by Mr. Hewitt. It was very difficult to hook trout as well. The construction of the skater is such that a thick concentration of the stiffest part of the fibers acts as a guard to the point of the hook. I experimented with many different models and sizes of hooks. Eventually I settled on a No. 14 Mustad regular shank, Model 94840. It turned out to be a very good performer for trout fishing and fairly good for bass fishing, especially if the point is slightly reversed or bent out to the side.

The poorest hooker of all hook models is the so-called short-shank spider hook. I still carry a vivid picture in my mind of a huge Atlantic salmon that refused every one of my offerings, wet and dry, until I put on a big skater tied on a short-shank No. 8 hook and twitched it over his nose. He rose and engulfed the skater with all the confidence in the world, but when I struck, there was only a brief resistance, and then the fly came out. I had the same experience with trout and bass.

My constant searching for the ideal bass and salmon hook finally ended when I tried the Wilson Dry-Fly Salmon Hook. It is extremely light, strong, and a very good hooker. I have been using it successfully in size 12 and sometimes as large as size 8.

The skater undoubtedly performs best in the original size 16 recommended by Mr. Hewitt. It will skate and jump and teeter on fiber tips much better than it will with heavier hooks, but fewer fish are hooked.

My own neighboring rivers such as the broad Susquehanna, the Juniata, and the Conodoguinet are ideal skater waters because they are shallow and easily waded and the bass-holding pockets and ledges are easily spotted. When I go there I carry only the big skater for my fishing. But sometimes I think of those days long ago when I spent many hours on the lakes in the Midwest. I wish I'd had the skater then, to try on those enormous fields of lily pads underneath which the bass lurked and stalked their prey. I suspect that the fishing would have been superb.

My experience with the skater on Atlantic salmon is very limited, but Charlie Fox has used it extensively since many years ago when he discovered two of the Hewitt skaters accidentally included in his salmon-fly kit. A sticky heat wave had engulfed the usually cool North Country in September, raising the water temperature to well over 60°. The lethargic salmon would not rise to any offering. On impulse Charlie tied on one of the skaters and began to fish it over the sluggish salmon.The results were electrifying. Those big fish came to life and began to leap and slash at the fly with wild abandon, oftentimes darting about and wriggling with great excitement. Other times they leaped over the fly and either drowned it or took it on the way down. Many of them were hooked, but unfortunately the skaters were tied on No. 16 light-wire hooks that straightened out every time they caught in the jaw of a salmon. Charlie did not land a single fish, but he continued to fish with the skater because it produced the only entertainment available.

Some years ago a party of three from my area made a fishing trip to Montana. All of them were familiar with the skater and took along an adequate supply to try in the fabled

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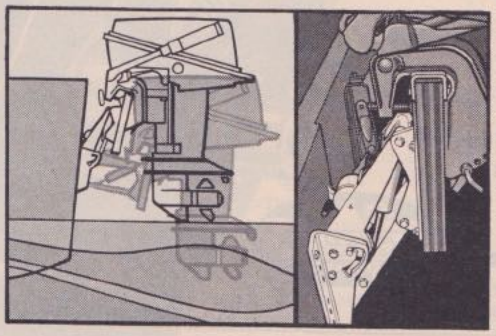

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waters of the West. All of them knew the late Joe Brooks, former fishing editor of OUTDOOR LIFE, and because they knew he would be there they had arranged to meet with him and fish together. The fishing they did and the catches they made were nothing less than sensational, all of it with the skaters. Joe was enormously impressed by what he saw and did with some borrowed skaters. He was so enthusiastic about the fly and used it so much everywhere he went that he began to order them 15 dozen at a time from a local tyer to whom I had revealed the secret.

The big skater eventually got to Europe when Mr. Hewitt took the fly to England and fished it effectively on the sacrosanct waters of the chalk-streams (before the shocked and unbelieving gaze of Lunn, the famous riverkeeper), where it is unthinkable to fish anything but a specific imitation that is "squeaky" dry, decently small, of good ancestry, and socially acceptable to those aristocratic trout.

Perhaps the most devoted user of the spider type of fly, including the variants, was the late John Atherton, artist and avid fisherman who authored "The Fly and The Fish" in which he wrote far more about spider types than any other writer I know. His chapter 18 is concerned entirely with Mr. Hewitt and his invention and use of the "Big Spider, The Neversink Skater." He described the fly as simply a pair of hackles wrapped around the hook shank. It is not simple as he suggests, and I was never sure that he completely understood the true nature and construction of the skater. Certainly the fly that he drew and pictured is not the skater. The fibers are spread out too widely at the perimeter, and the hackle lacks the distinctive knife-edge of the true skater.

Nevertheless, John Atherton had a lot of interesting and useful things to say about fishing spider types. One hint in particular is worth remembering. It comes into play when the fly sometimes falls flat on its back. If the line is gently tightened, the fly quickly stands upright on the tips of the hackle. It is a slight but deadly motion that resembles nothing so much as a big mayfly bursting through the surface film and getting ready to take off. I wish that I could prescribe a way to make the fly fall on its back. I cannot. If the fly falls on its back it is accidental, but it happens often enough that you should remember to use that slight deadly motion described by Atherton.

I have said some things here that may have suggested that the skater is the universal fly. I want to dispel that notion. There is no such thing as a universal fly. When the skater is good it is absolutely spectacular; when it is bad it is just as worthless as any other fly can be. Over the years I have tried to observe closely the conditions that make it useful or not useful. On some waters—the Letort, for example—it is rarely successful, and yet on another limestoner in the same vicinity I have done very well with it.

The fly seems to work best on waters that have large concentrations of fish, as in freshly stocked public or private waters. Mr. Hewitt insisted that it is especially attractive to big fish, in support of which he cited his own experiences and those of John Atherton, who is reputed to have caught, with the skater, 32 landlocked salmon on a single trip. As a specific imitation it is very good for a hatch of big mayflies, as in the case of the eastern green drake. I have never tried it but I think it would be successful during the famed Limbata hatch in Michigan.

The only safe rule I can offer is that the fisherman should carry a few at all times and try them when everything else fails—or try them *before* everything else fails.

Tips For Using The Skater

☐ *Grease the leader as well as the fly. Use as short a cast as you dare in order to have as little line on the water as possible. You will be able to control the fly and do more tricks with it. In calm, smooth, clear water long casts are sometimes necessary to avoid spooking the fish. An 8½ or nine-foot rod—if you can find one light enough—is ideal for this fishing. In rough water, if you make a careful approach it is often possible to keep all the line off the water.*

You can use a tippet as heavy as 4X for trout and bass, but not lighter than 5X. The strike to a skater is often violent, and you must resist the impulse to strike back violently. Pause after the fish has taken, then tighten up gently to set the hook.

For salmon fishing a six-pound-test leader is safe and still permits the fly considerable freedom of movement.

The skater is a fragile fly. Its success depends greatly on keeping it dry and shapely. Frequent blowing on the fly to restore its shape and longer pauses between casts help to get rid of excess moisture. Perhaps the best plan is to carry a very small can of silica gel powder, usually obtainable at florists. The fly can be submerged in the powder, then shaken to remove the moisture, after which it can be fluffed out to its original shape. Alternatively, keep a few flies handy to exchange a wet one for a dry one as needed.

The skater can be ruined if carried in the wrong kind of box. Use a very shallow box with a felt liner in the bottom. The felt will prevent the flies from sliding and piling up against one another. Place the flies head-down on the felt. They may be overlapped with one another without harm. Do not let the fiber tips touch the sides of the box, or they will become bent and distorted. The box should be thin enough so that the lid presses down slightly on the flies to hold them in place.

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