

I like to think that I have evolved as a fly tier as most do, having gone through all of the stages, phases or fads over thirty years of practice. I began tying local patterns on my home river, and became just creative and artistic enough to have been considered an “OK” tier. I learned to spin deer hair into bombers and bugs, palmer hackle and even took a course once in marrying feather wings. That suited me fine and kept me busy through my late twenties.

However, when I began guiding full time, fly tying became somewhat of a chore. I was tying upwards of a thousand flies a year and most of them ended up as offerings; as that is the normal way of things when fly fishing for steelhead in the great lakes. I never wanted to tie commercially and if the truth be known, I don’t even enjoy tying as much as I should, but buying flies, in my opinion, cheapens the whole experience for the sport (client). But more than that, I’ve developed a confidence in my own patterns and styles that just flat out make me feel better about fishing them.

Having said all of that, over the past 5 years or so, it has become less of a chore due to the changes that I have made in my tying regiment. No longer do I tie flies to impress others (unless it is by hooking a bunch of fish on one). No longer do I tie flies that take a baseball game to prepare. I now scrutinize material and how it reacts in water more closely and I look at how the fish that I am angling see the offering more than how I or someone else sees it. The criterion that I have developed over time has allowed me to streamline my patterns, tying just those that I need and that are proven. Now, I am not saying that one should not be creative. In fact, I appreciate art as much as anyone but when it comes to fly tying, I believe that the best way to approach how we tie is to ask ourselves, “*What am I tying for?*”

I have met several tiers over the years that truly tie to impress others and spend hours perfecting even the simplest patterns. They create flies that look realistic or just plain beautiful but in the end, a slate drake that took 25 minutes to tie can be snapped of on a branch as quickly as one that took 7 minutes. If you only fish occasionally and your propensity is to create life like, complex patterns, than have fun at it. However, if you want patterns that take just a few minutes and catch fish, look at the tried and true patterns that have stood the test of time and expand on those concepts.

I stand in the blue collar camp of tiers and tend towards patterns that use only a few materials (five or less, not including your tying thread), take little time to tie (less than ten minutes) and can represent more than one food item. So I thought it might be fun to provide my list of all time favorite “blue collar flies”. I could have made the list far broader but if you want just a dozen patterns that will get you through a season in most of North America’s fresh water and minimize your time behind the bench, I think you will find this list would get you by. The list is in no particular order as several have already been profiled in my fly tying section and the remaining flies will appear monthly with pictures and recipes.

1. The Pheasant Tail and its allies: If there was ever a pattern that exemplifies simplicity with performance, it's the Pheasant Tail. The original used just two materials, pheasant tail and wire and if tied correctly, takes about five minutes. Variations of the pattern (as described in "Pheasant Tails" on my fly tying page.) can match just about any aquatic insect that lives with just minor modifications. But no matter what you are trying to accomplish, they maintain simplicity.



2. The RH Caddis: The RH series fall just inside my own criteria as the pupae and the emerger can be tricky. Overall though, the series meets all of your needs in a caddis hatch and by modifying the colors, represents everything from micro caddis to the great September sedge.



3. The Usual: Like the Pheasant tail the Usual exemplifies simplicity. You can't get any more streamline than one material and you can't get much more versatile than a fly that fishes equally well floating high on the surface, low in the film or deep, under an indicator. Once the tying steps are perfected, this pattern will take less than five minutes to complete. I made the list in no particular order as I struggle with which would make number one. However, if pressured, the Usual would be in the running for top spot.



4. Woolly Buzzer: Where would we be without the Woolly Buzzer? I'll bet that fish all around the world ask that very same question, only without a smile. Seriously though, the "Buzzer" has become the Eppinger Dare Devil of the fly fishing world and in fact, may have greater notoriety within the fly fishing fraternity than the ole' Dare Devil ever did. No matter where you go in the fresh water game world, the Buzzer has been there. Bass, trout, bluegill, steelhead, and Atlantic and Pacific salmon have all fallen for her charm and the list of other species could easily go on. I once caught Spanish mackerel and blue fish for four days straight with white and red Buzzers and nothing else. Not that I needed to try anything else. From what I understand about the origin, the Buzzer came to life sometime in the late 60's to represent a hellgrammite but has evolved and grown into an icon among flies. Whether you wish it to be hellgrammite, crayfish, leech or just an attention grabber, she's up for the challenge and no matter the situation, she'll seldom let you down. It's easy to fish and easy to tie making it the go-to fly for novice tiers and fishers alike. I was once asked by a client, "I you were dropped off in unfamiliar territory with a fly rod, reel and ready to fish line, but could have just one fly to get you through the week, what would it be?" Without hesitation, my answer was the Woolly Buzzer.



5. The Prince: Its elegance and regal name aside, the Prince has to make the list as it is still simple to tie and requires only five different materials. (Four, if you choose not to use the collar.) I have been told that the Prince originated to represent the slate drake nymph and assumed, by its appearance that that was the case but I later learned by a very reliable source that it came from the caddis world and was tied to represent an emerging pupa. Regardless, of what it does in the water, it performs in still waters and rivers and suggests everything from stone flies to scuds. It's versatile and can be equally effective as a floating, swinging or deep nymph.



6. Pre-formed bass poppers: I decided many years ago to get into tying bass poppers as the patterns that I was purchasing were expensive and often did not meet my standards with hook quality. So, I started with balsa and cork and turned out a bunch of bodies but not before I made a ton of mistakes and reached my threshold of frustration. Then, into my world came pre-formed, high density popper bodies. Available from several manufacturers, these bodies are good quality, come in a variety colors and patterns and are flat out easy to use. All you need is a good quality glue or epoxy and you are in the game. Once you lay out your material and organize your bench to accommodate the potential mess created by using glues, one can crank out a dozen of these guys in an hour. I actually find these very satisfying to make and in the end, if you use poppers a lot, you will save a ton of cash.



7. Zonkers: Although somewhat generic in term, "Zonker" refers to just about any streamer tied with rabbit strips (packaged as "rabbit zonker") as the main body. They can become very elaborate and time consuming but can also be equally simple. Rabbit zonker has become the standard for big, in your face streamers due to it's characteristics in the water. When fished properly, it looks so life like that it almost breathes and with an almost endless variety of colors and patterns, it can represent anything from a leech to big creek chub. Further to that, I'd be hard pressed to name a fresh water game fish that wouldn't eat one.



8. Partridge and Orange/Green and other soft hackles: North Country wets, or spiders as they were often referred to, have been around for long time but for whatever reason, seem to have fallen out of favor among all but the most ardent wet fly users. One of the stigma's attached to soft hackles is that they catch only small fish but I can tell you with certainty that this simply isn't true. I believe it has more to do with how they are presented and less to do with the pattern. At any rate, soft hackles have become a staple in my sub-surface arsenal and I continue to expand the pattern list. However, for ease of tying and simplicity, the Partridge series deserve high marks on the blue collar list.



9. The Clouser Minnow: Clousers have evolved since Bob Clouser first developed them in the late 80's but the original pattern continues to produce. Developed as a smallmouth pattern, I'm sure that Bob didn't envision the fly becoming what it has however, the pattern has become a staple for saltwater flats fishing, larger pelagic species like stripers, mackerel and blue fish and can hold its own as a trout streamer. The Clouser minnow makes number ten on my list but if pushed to place in order, due to its versatility, I think it would place in the top three.



10. The Nichola: Several years ago and friend and colleague, Rick Whorwood hosted a tying session at the shop. Rick talked about a fly that he had tied for the west coast and proceeded to take us through the steps. The pattern was foolishly simple but pretty and just looked fishy. However, the fly, for whatever reason made it into one of those boxes that I seldom visit and was left neglected until about four years ago. I was guiding a couple for fall steelhead and we were having a tough go of it. As we often do during tough times, I went hunting for a fly that I had not yet tried. I found the old box in my boat seat and in it was Rick's pattern. That fly accounted for the only fish of the day and I immediately, upon landing the fish photographed it as it was the only one that I had. I looked at the fly closer in the water and realized what a silly play it was to have misplaced it. I now tie the pattern in claret, black, silver doctor blue and purple and have taken fish on all of these with purple being the most productive. I fish this pattern about 50% of the time if not more as it can be easily modified to fish low, medium or high water. In short, it has become my favorite steelhead pattern to swing and definitely makes the Blue Collar club.



11. Elk Hair Caddis: The elk hair caddis gained popularity in the Western U.S. but soon became a staple anywhere that caddis can be found. The combination of the short, stiff hackle and the elk hair wings make it the perfect combination to dead drift or simulate the animated skittering often displayed by caddis flies. It, like many patterns has gone through some modifications but the original remains the standard. It requires just three materials and is easy enough to tie that it has become a standard pattern for beginner fly tying classes. Further to the simplicity of the original pattern, I'd be remiss to not profile my favorite offspring of the elk hair. An old friend,



John Ponsford was a master at simplifying emergers and dries. (I don't think John owned a nymph) He introduced me to the caddis that I still use in 80% of the situations when trout are on adults. John's pattern calls for a peacock herl body and the standard elk hair wing and that's it. Making it just a *little more* blue collar.

I suppose the ultimate test would be to go through a season with an assortment of just these patterns in an array of sizes to suit the different situations; but I'd be up for that. If you fish only trout, I'm certain that you would be in good shape with this group, maybe eliminating the popper. However in my region of the great lakes, where the seasons and species are diverse and long; ranging from spring steelhead to smallmouth bass and even more, this group would prevail. Heck, with the introduction of Magnum rabbit zonkers, one could even chase Muskie or pike with a little creativity.

I'm not saying to throw away the rest of your flies and start from scratch but by using models, such as this list, it may help to streamline you tying and, at the same time simplify your choice making process.