

February 2011



### **Driftless Days . . .**

We have a small informal fly tying club around town, and we generally get together on a Saturday morning at least once a month during the winter to tie a few flies and swap lies. If the weather is reasonable, we sometimes forego a few of the lies and find some winter water to fish later on. Normally we have our sessions at Chris' workshop out in the country which, aside from being an attractive building in the woods, smells like fresh framing timbers, brewing coffee, wet dogs, split-cane fly rods under construction and a cosy wood fire in the stove, all of which make for proper fly tying ambience. Winter fishing doesn't begin until late in the morning or early in the afternoon as a rule, so there's no time conflict to speak of. Sometimes folks come to just hang out and don't do much fly tying at all. Ostensibly, they come to steal patterns while acting like they're not. Others take advantage of the opportunity to catch up on whatever's going on at home in the way of winter tying. Another half-dozen or so #16 Adams always helps to speed the plow for spring. And an Adams is always a good decoy pattern to tie in a group setting, as no one is going to find out much about your secret patterns.

I use a special Woolly Bugger pattern on my drying patch for a summer decoy. Trust me, it really does work. Theodore Gordon is said to have draped a cloth over his tying vise when guests arrived so folks could not see what he was working on.

But our group is not quite that secretive. Sometimes we have a dozen or so people show up, and sometimes just two or three, but whatever the turnout, the sharing of patterns is extensive. Chris' shop is on top of an occasionally nasty winter hill, and sometimes the fly tying turnout depends on the weather.

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Late last fall one of our Driftless tiers, Jerry Grehl, demonstrated a streamer pattern called "The Brook Trout Streamer". Jerry is a transplanted Eastern Catskills fisherman, having lived out east all his life before retiring to southern Minnesota, God only knows why. Jerry is so "Eastern" he once met the poet Robert Frost, which has got to be the penultimate New England signature touch. Jerry's a deadly nymph fisherman and enjoys subsurface flies whether they be nymphs, wet flies or streamers. He tied flies for part of his living in the seventies, abandoning it after a

few years only when it began to prove more work than he could deal with on top of his regular job. He's a "classic" tier and a walking encyclopedia of flies and fly patterns, and a real gentleman to boot.

The "Brook Trout Streamer" was designed by Lew Oatman and is said to resemble small brook trout fry, so like many streamer patterns, it's a baitfish imitation. It's also a beautiful and somewhat complicated fly, and most folks might not even have all the requisite materials on hand to tie it, which is one problem with classic streamer patterns. As Jerry demonstrated the pattern, his conversation was peppered with names like Ray Bergman, Frank Hornburg, Polly Rosborough, Carrie Stevens and Dan Bailey to name just a few, all classic fly tiers and streamer pattern innovators.



Jerry has an interest in patterns other than the Woolly Bugger as concerns streamers, something one doesn't see that often, come to think of it. He even made a slightly disparaging remark about the "ubiquitous Woolly Bugger", going so far as to suggest that Carrie Stevens would turn over in her grave if she saw one. I normally fish streamer patterns only in the winter months, but I've caught my fair share of trout on a couple of my own Woolly Bugger color and design variations, as most of us probably have. His startling comment on the grave of Carrie Stevens rather got my attention. I hope she's OK.

The original Woolly Bugger pattern is thought to have originated with a fisherman named Russell Blessing of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania in 1967, which on the surface doesn't give it much antiquity. Mr. Blessing tied the pattern to attract bass, and it's supposed to resemble a hellgrammite or Dobsonfly nymph. The pattern's precise origin is somewhat obscure, but it clearly is a diversion from the Woolly Worm, which itself is an evolution of the old British palmer fly, dating back to Izaak Walton, Charles Cotton and perhaps even earlier. So Woolly Buggers, or at least Woolly Worms, have been around for a long time. Jerry conceded that a pattern that has lasted through the Oliver Cromwell to Barach Obama era must be a fairly good one. Izaak Walton, surely at one time or another, must have tied something from his little bag of fur and feathers to the end of his Woolly Worm to make it an official Woolly Bugger. He probably just forgot to write about it in the *Compleat Angler*.

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Looking to tie something different than a standard winter Woolly Bugger pattern and pass muster with Jerry, I checked one of my recipe books and decided to try a Light Spruce. It's a pretty streamer fly, I'd never tied one before and I happened to have all the materials necessary to do it. The Light Spruce is purported to have originated in 1918 and was tied by Milo and Bert Godfrey, who were residents of Oregon. The Godfreys were fishing the upper stretch of the Lewis and Clark River in northeastern Oregon when they came up with their pattern. Last summer I

happened to read *The Journals Of Lewis And Clark* and that was another reason I thought the Light Spruce might be fun to try. The Light Spruce is a featherwing pattern, and as Jerry had mentioned with the Brook Trout Streamer, it takes a little bit of practice to mount the wings



properly. They seem to want to “roll” every which way until one comes up with a method to mount them securely and pointing in the right direction, but I discovered that comes around with practice. Catching a few of the feathers when tying the hackles to the shank (Matuka-style) helped a lot. I had it down reasonably well by the third or fourth attempt.

The pattern calls for a matched pair of Badger hackles for the wings (some recipes calling for two matched pairs for a total of four), Badger hackle for the head tied “collar” style, peacock herl for the upper third of the body, red wool or red yarn for the lower two-thirds of the body and four strands of peacock sword for the tail. I tied mine on a #10 3XL streamer hook, but I think you could use any streamer hook you wished. They’re tied as large as a #2 for steelhead fishing, but the smaller versions are generally used for trout.

Other versions include the Dark Spruce, the Golden Spruce and the Silver Spruce. The Silver Spruce variation is generally tied specifically for steelhead.

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I wanted to show my fly to Jerry at one of our early winter get-togethers, but he didn’t make it that morning. After all, it’s a fair drive from where he lives in southern Minnesota, and the roads were bad once again. A few of the other fellows were familiar with the pattern and we managed to have an interesting discussion about it even though The Sage was not in attendance.

Later in the morning, I cut out early to get in a little afternoon fishing, which I guess didn’t come as much of a shock to anyone. No one followed me out the door to ask where I was going. It was quite cold and windy, but it hadn’t snowed at all yet.

The stream I selected was not far away from Chris’ shop and I made my first cast well before noon. I began fishing with one of my old Woolly Bugger patterns, as there were no rises or flies on the water at all that I could detect. It was the same Woolly Bugger that had been hanging on my drying patch all summer long, though I’d already used it two or three times in late October and early November.

And true to form, the old thing worked about as well as I could expect and I caught a lot of trout in fairly short order. For some reason they were really pounding a streamer that day, which happens from time to time. It was the kind of day when trout might move five or six feet to take a pattern, and those, needless to say, are generally very good winter outings. At some point after an hour or two had gone by I released another nice trout, but when I made my next cast I noticed that the fly was gone. I must have broken it off the tippet somehow when I released my last

trout, or I might have broken it off on the cast. At any rate, when I reached down into my vest pocket to grab my streamer box and tie on another fly, I discovered the box was gone.

The vest flap was securely fastened over the pocket I always keep my streamer box in, and for that reason I got the feeling immediately that I might have lost it quite a few streams back. I don't carry it at all in the summer or fall, and only get it back out and into the program when I switch to my winter vest, which I'd done about a month back. I hadn't needed the streamer box until that very moment, as the time or two I'd needed a streamer since donning the winter vest I simply used the old buzzard on my drying patch. I thought about it for awhile and realized I could have lost it on any of four streams I'd fished prior to the one I was on.



I also realized I'm never going to find that streamer box, or at least I certainly don't think so. It might be the first fly box I've ever lost for good. I would guess it had somewhere between forty and fifty streamers in it.

As I stood there in the water fuming and wondering what the hell to do, I remembered the single Light Spruce fly I'd tied for the morning gathering, back in the car trunk with the rest of my traveling fly tying kit. It was a half-mile walk back to the car, and I thought I'd decide whether or not to keep fishing on the walk back. When I got out the Light Spruce, I decided to fish a little while longer and give it a try. I snipped the 5x tippet from my leader and tied it on with 4X, just for an extra measure of insurance. If I lost the Light Spruce my streamer fishing would be done for the day, which would have been a shame with trout hitting as aggressively as they were. If you're going to keep fishing, you may as well do it right if you can.

Normally, I can always think of an excuse to keep fishing. It's really not hard to do.

On the way back downstream, I flipped it in the water just to see what it looked like and how it would move. It had a strangely light swimming motion and a sort of "wobble" to it I liked. I could also make it dart and pause effectively, and it was quite bright in the water with the Badger hackle wings. It looked like a minnow, which I guess is what it was supposed to look like.

When I got back down to the top of the riffle stretch where I'd left off, I made a short roll cast in the very top of the current and let the fly bounce around a bit, just to look at it some more. The first fish came six feet from the far bank and simply ate it. I saw the whole thing. I landed the trout, a nice fourteen inch rainbow, and thought, well, *that* was interesting. If it never worked again, at least I could say I caught one nice trout with it on my first cast.

I caught two more rainbows in rapid succession. Then I made a long down-and-across cast, and a fourth fish hit the fly hard as it swung to the middle of the stream. I knew it was a good fish, and I took a little extra care in playing it as I only had the one streamer to work with. After a fiesty battle, I landed a sixteen-inch male brook trout that hadn't spawned yet.

The largest brook trout I've ever managed to hook and land was sixteen inches, which I'd done

just twice before, this trout being only the third fish to reach that magic number. Like the other two, it was simply a stunning trout. Even though the brook “trout” is actually a char, I guess I will continue to call them “trout” for as long as I fish for them, as do most others. On my next cast to the same location, I raised and hooked another fish which threw the fly with a spectacular leap. That was a brook trout too, and it was a good inch or two longer than the one I’d just landed. From my vantage point it looked like a hen fish, which was quite interesting, having just landed the big male. I didn’t mind missing the strike, though I’d liked to have had a closer look at the fish.

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Since that afternoon’s initiation with the Light Spruce, I’ve landed quite a number of additional trout with it. In fact, this afternoon I caught an even dozen fish with the Light Spruce. I showed it to a goose hunter that was curious about winter fly fishing, and he thought it was a beautiful



fly. I can’t really tell if my luck has involved the pattern itself, or whether trout simply happened to have been hitting aggressively when I’ve used it and would have hit about anything I threw. I have a suspicion I’ve caught a few trout I wouldn’t have caught without it (or something similar to it), but I can exactly say why.

I’d like to think I’ve stumbled on an effective Driftless area streamer pattern that I can add to my repertoire. On a hunch, I tied a dozen of them a week or so ago. I love the way it casts.

And I know Jerry will be happy with that, especially as it’s definitely not a Woolly Bugger.

## **Be Vigilant!**

*“Red” Canoe  
Trout Unlimited  
Iowa Driftless Chapter*

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