

2-15-07 "Fly Tying Season Starts with Vilified San Juan Worm"

Like many other anglers, I spend much of the winter looking to the fly tying vise as a cure for cabin fever. It is there, in the comfort of the garage, that entomology and art collide, that works of fur, feather and hair come to life. While wrapping the thread or selecting the hackle, it's easy to get lost in it all and to daydream of warmer days to come. Though it's often angling success that drives us to the vise in an effort to replace certain patterns that we've managed to deplete, there's an aspect of past failure on the river that whets the fly tier's appetite to an even larger degree. Despite the simple fact that the fish always have the upper hand, the optimistic angler pushes that needless thought to the wayside assuming that the creation of new patterns will outweigh all odds. With this anticipation, we amble to bench night after night simply waiting for an epiphany to occur. Most often, while I wait for this stroke of genius to strike (it hasn't yet), I spend my time replenishing fly boxes that have become mere skeletons of what they once were. Often it's the standard, tried and true patterns that are in short supply and as a result, that's where the work begins. Interestingly enough, while I'll need more Woolly Buggers, Griffith's Gnats and Parachute Adams and though I can always use a ton of Pheasant-Tails and Hare's Ear Nymphs, this winter's tying didn't start there. Nope, this year like many in the past, started with the production of a fleet of San Juan Worms.

Easy to tie, worms can serve as a prime warm up, an opportunity to get the hands working and the bobbin skills honed. On top of that, they're highly effective and a pattern that any nymph fishermen might want in the box. Since my personal supply had been diminished in 2006, an attempt to bolster the worm arsenal only made sense. Ironically, as I created pink ones, red ones, some with beads and some without, I started to consider the great debate that surrounds this well known "fly".

As one who attempts to profess the finer points of fly fishing technique along with ideals of fair chase and proper streamside etiquette, belief in the concept of using worm imitations while fly fishing might seem a bit out of whack. After all, isn't there supposed to be a certain degree of purity that goes hand in hand with this age old sport?

To many, a true fly angler is viewed as someone well versed in aquatic insect life and trout behavior and is able, through combining the two, to match the hatch and fool fish with flies tied of natural materials. To those of this train of thought, the concept of using a large round indicator with a chenille worm dangling below might seem unscrupulous and a show of complete disregard for essence of the sport. Obviously, this is where the great worm debate begins.

On one hand, the infamous San Juan Worm was designed to represent an aquatic food item on which trout feed. Such worms are prolific in many trout waters and while they don't undergo the same metamorphic changes that caddis and mayflies experience in their life cycle, they are still an important forage much like scuds, crayfish, leeches and pellets. Also, considering that a worm is tied much like any other classic pattern, regardless of it's simplicity, it does fall into the category of a hand tied fly that can be fished in traditional fashion with a barbless hook.

Of course, on the other hand, worm haters would beg to differ on all the above mentioned points. Worms are not flies, or at least shouldn't be considered such due their make-up of 100% synthetic materials. Unfortunately, while there is a certain magic to flies constructed from nothing but feathers and hair, ruling out synthetics would limit us to no end. This would mean no beadheads or rubberlegs, no Zelon or mylar flash. Could you

imagine hopper season without the use of foam? Obviously, exceptions must be made yet where the line is to be drawn remains the big question. Perhaps chenille used to tie a worm is acceptable while utilizing it to construct a marshmallow or piece of corn is not. Other anti-worm activists would argue that the fly is too effective, just doesn't seem right, or that it can't be fished dry. Once again, all points are valid though the idea of a foam floating worm does sound interesting whether it's right or wrong. So the debate rages on with no conclusion in sight. I will continue to tie worms because I can't tie much of anything else and I'll use them when conditions see fit. So long as the fish can be released unharmed I probably won't lose much sleep over the matter.