

Master Of The Art

Mark Defrank of Uniontown is more than just an average fly tier

By Rod Schoener, Herald-Standard

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The practice of fishing with a fly, or feathers and fur affixed to a hook to attract fish, has been traced to as early as two or three centuries A.D.

Since that beginning in antiquity, the sport of fly-fishing and the art of fly tying have evolved with the ages to where they are today.

A fly is a hook that has been dressed with fur, feathers, thread and a host of other materials, natural and synthetic, to resemble aquatic insects or small fish and many terrestrial insects that find their way into the water and end up as a meal for hungry fish.

Uniontown's Mark Defrank is more than an average fly tier; he is a master fly tier who has won awards in fly tying competitions as well as having some of his creations included in various publications.

Defrank's latest contributions to steelhead fishing are listed in the fourth edition of John Nagy's 'Steelhead Guide' with his Blue Steel Caddis honored among Nagy's new "Dirty Dozen."

The "Dirty Dozen" listed in Nagy's book consists of his top picks for Great Lakes steelhead fishing.

Defrank's member of the "Dirty Dozen" is a fly he dubbed the Blue Steel Caddis.

Four of his other creations also appear in Nagy's book.

Mark's Wiggle Hex is a jointed mayfly nymph pattern that mimics the natural movement of the insect.

The Grim Reaper, which is Defrank's most popular selling steelhead fly, is also listed, as is his Silver-Side Minnow - a streamer constructed of a flashy, holographic synthetic material and peacock herl.

His other fly that made Nagy's book is the White-bellied Bugger.

Defrank explained that Nagy, who is also a master fly tier, includes flies in his book that he has fished with more than average success, plus he picks up information on other flies from various fishermen and steelhead guides.

The most common flies used today are designed to imitate the various lifecycles of aquatic insects.

Nymphs, which are usually unattractive to the human eye, represent the larval fly of the insects that live on stream bottoms.

Wet flies are just as their name implies - wet - because they are fished under the water surface and are intended represent flies that have died or those that have just emerged from the larval stage and are working their way to the surface. Once they fully emerge, they become airborne, fly about and some rest atop the water.

Therefore the dry fly was created.

Streamers are the other type of flies most commonly created by fly tiers. They are usually larger than nymphs and dry flies and are intended to represent aquatic creatures such as minnows, leeches and crayfish.

Trout fishing purists prefer to match the hatch, creating flies and nymphs that duplicate the actual hatch at the time.

This type of fishing requires a great deal of patience as hatches are not a daily occurrence on many streams. Therefore most fly fishermen will use flies that simply attract trout and take advantage of a trout's need for food.

For that reason some non-traditional flies, including nymphs, dry, wet and streamers, are tied in bright colors with flashy materials added to get the trout's attention.

While most fly fishermen practice catch and release, the word "catch" is still important, so they fish whatever will produce results.

The majority of fly fishermen are also fly tiers and tie at least some of the flies they use.

To fool the most difficult of trout, Defrank has created many of his own patterns and is continually improving old ones.

He has been tying flies for 30 years, 18 of which have been commercial and competition tying.

At one point he operated a local fly shop but has since gone mostly to Internet sales.

His sales are global. "I get a lot of orders from Europe and Canada. Right now I've been getting quite a few orders from the West Coast, as it is their steelhead season. At the moment the West Coast is hot.

"The more guys who see the product and are happy with it the better. They are usually repeat buyers."

Defrank noted that his best sellers overall are steelhead flies.

He tries to keep a supply of his best sellers on hand, but he will tie any fly a customer requests.

He hand ties every fly he sells himself.

When asked whether he enjoys tying simpler or the more difficult fly patterns, Defrank said,

"Probably the more difficult ones. They are more challenging."

When tying, he noted, "It is more efficient to tie one certain pattern than one of these or two of those because you have to get out so many different materials; it takes longer.

"If I can sit down and tie 100 flies of the same type, I prefer to do it that way. I usually try to estimate how long it takes to tie a dozen flies. I can usually tie about a dozen of a more complicated pattern in an hour. There are some patterns that I can tie 60 in an hour."

As far as his personal fishing preferences, Defrank said, "I like to fish wets and nymphs. The only time I go to drys is if there is a hatch and the trout are keyed in on something. I'm not one to put a dry fly on and go searching the water with it. I like catching fish."

For anglers who want to fish the hatch, Defrank suggests purchasing Orvis' "Streamside Guide."

How does one get started tying flies? For Defrank it all began in the eighth grade at Laurel

Highlands Junior High School, where the late Buck Craig, who was a teacher, started a fly tying club.

"When I first started, it was an on-and-off thing," Defrank said, "but now I've been doing it commercially for 15 to 18 years."

When Defrank began to tie flies, the materials used were more natural - fur, hair, feathers, etc. Today's flies incorporate a lot of wire, flashy synthetic fibers. In recent years a lot of the natural furs have been replaced by synthetics, and some are still natural with synthetic materials mixed in to give flies more sparkle and flash.

Where fly-tiers were once at the mercy of nature, now feathers and animal hair are dyed a multitude of colors.

Defrank noted that the basic fly-tying tools haven't changed much since he began to tie flies.

"The biggest change is the improvement in vices, especially the rotary vice," he said.

A rotary vice allows a tier to rotate a fly 360 degrees while working on it, making many steps in the process much simpler than they were in the past.

All that is really needed to start fly tying is a vice, a pair of scissors, a bobbin to hold the thread and a hook.

Once the basics are mastered, other tools that can be added to round out the tool box include hackle pliers, a bobbin threader, hair stacker, dubbing needle, dubbing twister, half-hitch tool and a whip-finish tool.

There are other specialty tools that can be added, but most tiers learn about them as their skills improve.

Many fly tiers got their start with Defrank's instruction at fly tying classes sponsored by Dunbar Sportsmen's Club. Mark also offers private lessons in fly tying at all experience levels upon request.

Information on fly tying is not hard to find as there are literally hundreds of books printed on the subject, including many that target beginners.

The Internet also contains a plethora of information for budding fly tiers.

When not at work at his fly-tying bench, Defrank can be found on the local trout streams or one of many Great Lakes tributary streams, looking for steelhead runs.

"When fishing locally, I like to fish Dunbar Creek and Meadow Run but floating the Yough in a one-man boat is my favorite," Defrank said. I also like to fish the Casselman River in Maryland, and Cattaraugus, N.Y. is my favorite for steelheading.

He then noted that the bait and put-and-take areas of Meadow Run are great places to fly fish but noted that it really gets hammered, pressure-wise. But fish can still be caught with a little effort working the stream.

In discussing his Web site, - <http://www.defranksflies.com> - where he has posted photos of many patterns that he sells, he noted, "Several patterns on the Web site are run-of-the-mill dry fly and nymph patterns, but not a lot. I'm going to continue to put my own patterns on - flies that you're not going to find anywhere else.

"I'm not going to offer all the common patterns because everyone is selling imports. I can't compete with the imports. In order for me to make the Web site work, I have to be unique."

He stressed that the key is getting people interested. He goes on the premise that once they

purchase something, they see the quality, they are happy with the service and they will come back.

Throughout the years Defrank has also competed in and won several fly-tying competitions. He explained that most of the competitions were held at fly shows and promoted by specific sponsors. Magazines such as "Fly Tying" and other similar publications used to host competitions.

Defrank also won in state competition when it was held in conjunction with the annual outdoor show in Harrisburg. He lamented the fact that the state contest was discontinued two years ago. There is no national fly-tying competition to speak of, but manufacturers of fly-tying materials and supplies sponsor national teams of fly tiers that demonstrate fly tying at sports shows around the country.

Fishermen who would like to contact Defrank can do so by calling him at 724-317-8582.

To view the selection of flies on Defrank's Web site log in to <http://www.defranksflies.com>.

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