

Fly Fishing Renegades Are Cleaning Up — With Kitchen Mops

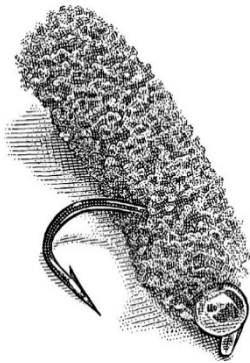
Wall Street Journal article by Justin Scheck

In a slap at purists, some enthusiasts use mop strands to out-catch rivals



A wild brown trout caught by Simon Cooper using a mop fly. PHOTO: JUSTIN SCHECK/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Standing in a chilly Adirondack river, Lance Egan made a bold move in his bid to win the U.S. National Fly Fishing Championships in June. He tied on the mop fly.



In a tradition-bound sport, where purists lure fish with tiny ersatz insects crafted of feathers and fur, the mop fly doesn't look much like a bug. In an affront to tradition, it instead looks exactly like what it is: a fuzzy strand cut from a cheap mop and tied to a hook. Mr. Egan uses fluorescent greenish yellow.

For more than a century, the aim of fly-fishing purists has been to woo trout with imitations of the insects they eat—whether olive-hued mayflies floating downstream after mating or emerging midge pupae; never part of a mop.

The catch is fish love the mop fly. "When it works, you roll with it," says 38-year-old Mr. Egan of Lehi, Utah, a top competitive fly fisher.

Others aren't biting. "I don't want to sound, like, arrogant, but I'm almost too proud to fish it," says Pennsylvania competitive angler Sam Plyler.

Mr. Plyler says the mop fly is great at catching trout, eliciting aggressive, un-trout-like behaviour from fish usually content to wait for food to drift their way. In fact, he says, it is too good. The mop fly tilts fly-fishing's delicate balance between man and trout. "Where do we draw the line?" Mr. Plyler asks.

The mop-fly debate points to a contradiction at the heart of fly-fishing. If catching fish is the sole goal, then earthworms, nets, even sticks of dynamite are more effective than man-made flies. Fly-fishing handicaps anglers to effectively level the competition.

“It’s an absurd sport,” says Simon Cooper, whose fly-fishing school sits near South England’s River Test, arguably the birthplace of modern fly-fishing. “If you were fishing to eat, you wouldn’t be fly-fishing.”

Andreas Topintzis let out a profanity when he recently saw a mop fly for the first time. He is general manager of the Salisbury and District Angling Club, which controls miles of English “chalkstreams,” spring-fed rivers that are a bastion of fly-fishing tradition.

The club has an egalitarian ethos that casts aside British fly-fishing’s upper-class exclusivity. All are welcome for a modest fee when their name comes up on the membership’s four-year waiting list. Members, however, are urged to conform to trout angling “the true way,” Mr. Topintzis says: Cast upstream and only with flies imitating specific insects.

Traditional flies customarily comprise natural materials. One favourite of Mr. Topintzis, the Klinkhammer, is traditionally made from seal fur and rooster neck feathers to mimic a metamorphosing caddis fly. He also likes making flies from the buoyant feathers “that are around the duck’s bottom.” In contrast, Mr. Topintzis says, the mop fly is silly.

The mop-fly debate is rooted in the Victorian era. In the late 1800s, angler Frederic Halford popularized handmade flies that float on a river’s surface and deemed them the most sporting trout-catching method. He studied the trout diet through “endless autopsy of fish and the patient searching of their entrails,” a friend wrote in a 1914 recollection recently republished by London’s Flyfishers’ Club.

Mr. Halford’s followers blamed the early-20th century work of G.E.M. Skues for dragging down the sport. Realizing trout eat more submerged bugs than floating ones, Mr. Skues advocated flies that sink to the riverbed. A 1938 debate between Mr. Skues and a Halford loyalist failed to mend the rift, says Mr. Cooper, the fly-fishing instructor.

The modern rise of competitive fly-fishing renewed the dispute. Anglers developed new bottom-hugging flies—including the mop fly—that attracted fish and derision. A predecessor to the mop fly, the so-called squirmy wormy, was made with rubber from a ball. It has since been “shamed and ridiculed,” says its American inventor, David Hise, who calls himself the king of trash flies.

The Czech fishing union banned the squirmy wormy from competitions after a U.S. team used it to win a European contest. “I never will fish with this, and I hope every clever and real fly fisherman is in the same boat,” says Martin Musil, a nuclear-power-plant worker who heads the union.

The mop fly originated with a visit about 10 years ago to a North Carolina dollar store that sold a chartreuse mop with thick microfiber nubs. “I just saw that thing and thought it would work,” says Jim Estes, a 72-year-old retiree. He cut off some pieces and tied them to hooks weighed down with metal beads. Trout devoured them.

He passed them to his stepson, a competitive angler. Local guides soon caught on. On some rivers, says North Carolina competitive angler Michael Yelton, “you could just go in there and mop up.”

Fly Fisherman magazine compared its invention to the advent of punk rock.

On a recent afternoon, Mr. Cooper, the English fly-fishing instructor, tried one for the first time. “It looks like a food pellet,” he said. The farm-raised trout in his pond ate it up.

Mr. Cooper, whose company Fishing Breaks manages miles of chalkstreams, was sceptical the wily brown trout of his rivers would be so easily lured after a life in the wild.

Wearing a fishing vest embroidered with his name across the back, Mr. Cooper stood behind a shrub and plopped a mop fly upstream past two trout. The bigger one attacked. “I think we can conclude the mop fly is a magnificent invention,” he said, reeling in another mop-caught trout. He asked where to buy the mops.

Mr. Topintzis, the traditionalist, was less smitten.



Andreas Topintzis, general manager of the Salisbury and District Angling Club in Britain, holds a grayling caught by a companion using a mop fly. Mr. Topintzis prefers using traditional flies. *PHOTO: JUSTIN SCHECK/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Strolling the River Avon, his goal that day was to catch trout using an imitation of the “pale watery,” a bulge-eyed, mosquito-sized mayfly. He caught some small trout. He encouraged a visitor to try a mop fly, which caught a sizable grayling, a local fish.

“I can see why it’s effective,” Mr. Topintzis said, declining to try one himself. A club member who approached called the mop “a maggot,” and another embellished the image with mention of a sheep decomposing nearby.

The mop fly is allowed in many competitive angling contests, including the U.S. fly-fishing championships. It is allowed by FIPS-Mouche, a sanctioning body based in France. European and U.S. contests follow its rules.

Wading into the American championships in June, Mr. Egan had no qualms. Along with other flies, he tied on a mop and won. “Proper technique trumps fly pattern,” he wrote later on [Facebook](#).

“Anybody that balks at a fly like that doesn’t understand fly fishing,” he said later. “I believe it is a competition, but it’s between you and the fish.”