

I may have stumbled onto something

by Jim Brady

Several years ago Laura asked me to join her in a tying demonstration at Leonard Recreation Center. I don't normally like to do tying demos but it's hard to refuse Laura. By the time the evening was over, I came away with a new fly. She was tying a bunch of modified black woolly worms for a friend. The variation she was tying was unknown to me but I made a mental note of the pattern.

Laura said her fly was called the "Smith Allieworm," first tied by Al Kittredge for browns in the Smith River. Somewhere along the line it was found to be terrific for bream. She added a beadhead because her friend wanted to fish in deep water. I fish two local farm ponds regularly and neither are deep so I dropped the bead. Instead, I tied a standard black woolly worm on size 12 nymph hook, with one exception: a short, hot orange tail. A short tuft of "flame" orange egg yarn was added for the tail. I tied a half dozen, hopped in my truck and headed for a local farm pond. I strung up a leader with a dropper and fished two different flies with Laura's version as the lead fly. Ten minutes into the session I knew something special was happening. The fish couldn't help themselves. I cast, let the leader sink and almost immediately struck back to a twitching leader. But they didn't touch the dropper. I replaced it with another hot orange woolly worm and scored double after double walking the pond's perimeter. At one point I had too much line in the grass and flipped the leader out of the way back into the pond while I put the loose line back on the reel. Before I could begin cranking, I scrambled to react to a large swirl and tightened quickly to another large bluegill. I have been fly fishing for bluegills for over fifty years but never experienced anything like this.

Over time I've developed a systematic approach to finding what flies the fish in the North Toe River would eat. I'd go through a regular sequence of flies until I found the best for that day. Then George Daniels came to our banquet and upset my approach to tying nymphs. All of a sudden everything had to have something called a "hot spot." Hot spots are a strong contrasting color worked into the fly pattern, usually to the thorax. One of my workhorse patterns is a beadhead pheasant tail. As I was about to tie off the thread on another, I paused and looked around for something to fashion a quick "hot spot." My eyes fell on a spool of fluorescent orange thread left over from preparing for an Alaskan trip ten years ago. I simply tied off the brown tying thread, tied in and then quickly tied off the hot orange thread. I was left with a collar of hot orange thread on an otherwise typical pheasant tail nymph.

The new version was greedily accepted by the fish, especially the wild browns in the North Toe. The strikes were fast and sure. I can't say the fish preferred the modified PT over the regular version because I was having so much fun I didn't change back to the previous version. I can say the wild browns really liked the new fly and I place the response of wild browns in high regard.

This past winter seemed to fade early before it threw us several more weeks of cold weather. I was frankly going stir crazy trying to get some time on Helton Creek but the thermometer didn't cooperate. So I compensated, in part, by watching a lot of fly tying videos. I found one by Tightline videos (aka Orvis) describing how to tie the "guide's choice hare's ear." This is a hare's ear nymph/soft hackle mongrel that looked interesting enough I tied two and tossed them in a nymph box. The fly is finished off, oddly enough, with a few wraps of fluorescent orange thread right behind the beadhead.

I finally made it to Helton recently to find low water and uncooperative fish. The only hint there were fish in the creek after thirty minutes of work was a scale impaled on the point of a red Copper John, my best fly on Helton. I worked a few favorite spots but nothing doing. I headed upstream towards the old mill. On the way I stopped at a stretch of heavy pocket water that is usually kind to me. I tied my yellowish orange stonefly on as the heavy lead fly but washing it through a really good looking pocket produced nothing. I could feel it bouncing off the bottom but neither it nor the dropper was attractive to the fish. In a "What the Hell" mood, I cut off the dropper and put on the modified hare's ear. On the first swing through the same pocket I previously fished, the rod bent down hard and a nice rainbow jumped out. This was repeated twice as I worked the fast water. I didn't think much of it but at least I had broken the ice.

I drove up to the mill and carefully worked the pocket water downstream of the bridge. Nothing. I crawled underneath the span to work the pocket above the bridge. The first cast covered a typically productive drift, but no response. Then I flipped the rig upstream of the sole large rock in the run. As the flies approached the rock I struck back to a strong swirl. The fish abandoned its lie and sped downstream towards the pool under the bridge. If he made it, the hook would tear out and that would be that. Somehow I turned the fish and saw it was a big brookie. I forced him into the shallows and found the barbless hook imbedded up to the bend. I laid the fish next to the measuring marks on my rod and estimated him at 15 ½ inches, complete with a hook jaw. I twisted the fly out and we both took a breather.

My mind wandered (that never happens!) on the drive home and the common theme of the hot orange thread floated to the surface. I've always known that fly fishing depends on the fish's visual recognition of the fly or nothing happens. If he can't see it, he can't eat it. But hot orange? There's nothing in nature that corresponds to it, especially the coloration of immature aquatic insects. When I got home, I scanned several books for any reference to the color vision of fish. Sosin and Clark, in *Through the Fish's Eye*, wrote that "any color that contrasts with its surroundings is sensed quickly by the fish and provokes its curiosity" (1). They also said that different species likely have different sensitivities to different colors. Perhaps trout can pick the bright orange speck out of a chaotic, turbulent flow because they excel at seeing and nabbing small food forms in fast currents.

In any event, I had only my own very limited experience to serve as a basis for any conclusions about a trout's attraction to flies with a touch of fluorescent orange. Laura's friend, on the other hand, would not continue to ask for more if they didn't produce. And I recently saw a PT identical to mine but with a bright red hot spot in Frontier Anglers' 2017 catalog. They call it a "Red Neck," and describe it as a great dropper hung off a dry fly. Hmmm, must be a case of great minds thinking alike. Seriously, the idea of adding a hot spot with nothing but hot orange thread is simple and appealing but its effectiveness needs a lot more testing. That is where you, dear reader, come in. Try this trick on your favorite nymphs and let me know how you do. Perhaps your experience will confirm if I really have stumbled onto something.

Reference

1. *Through the Fish's Eye*, Mark Sosin and John Clark, Outdoor Life Books, 2nd printing, Harper&Row, New York, 1975; p. 51.