Tying a Wet Ant

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Objectives

Participating young people and adults will:

1. Practice effective use of a tying bobbin
2. Practice attaching and winding thread on the hook
3. Practice following a tying pattern
4. Practice evaluation of tied flies to improve technique
5. Practice attaching a wound hackle
6. Have fun while learning

Roles for Teen and Junior Leaders

1. Demonstrate tying the fly while explaining each step
2. Assist participants who are having problems with any step in tying the ant
3. Evaluate flies and assist in improving second or third attempts
4. Encourage young people as they learn tying skills
5. Constantly observe the participants to avoid frustration or problems in learning basic skills

Potential Parental Involvement:

1. See "Roles for Teen and Junior Leaders" above.
2. Arrange for or provide teaching location
3. Arrange for or provide tying materials and/or equipment
4. Arrange for or provide transportation
5. Arrange for or provide refreshments.

Best Time: Any time

Best Location: Well lighted, comfortable setting

Time Required: 60 to 90 minutes

Equipment/Materials

tying vice
tying bobbin
dubbing needle
black hackle
#8 to #10 wet fly hooks
large demonstration hook
light nylon cord
hackle pliers
bobbin threader
black tying thread
head cement

References

See references in introduction

Safety Considerations

No special considerations

Evaluation Activities/Suggestions

1. Observe and correct:
   a. The way the hook is placed in the vice
   b. How the participant attaches the thread t o the hook
   c. How the participant winds thread to form the body parts.

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6. Discuss personal experience in fishing sinking ants

7. Evaluate the proportion and appearance of the fly and make any positive suggestions to improve it.

d. How the participant attaches and winds the hackle
e. How the participant finishes the head of the fly.

Youth Development Objectives
Participating young people will develop:
1. Fine motor skills
2. Observation and problem solving skills
3. Hand-eye coordination
4. Increased self concept and self esteem
5. Exploration of recreational and vocational skills

Lesson Outline

Application

I. Wet black ant pattern
  A. Hook selection
    1. Regular or heavy wire
    2. Size 8 to 12
  B. Body
    1. Two sections with narrow waist
    2. Lacquered tying thread
  C. Hackle
    1. Black hen or webby cock
    2. One or two turns only
    3. Tied in at waist

Have participants **GATHER** around one vice where each one can see clearly. If the group is too large, set up several demonstration vices and have teen leaders or other assistants demonstrate with you. **DESCRIBE** the pattern and the process as you create a model fly for the participants to use as a reference.

II. Tying process
  A. Place hook in vice
    1. Clamp securely
      a. Shank up and horizontal, point down
      b. Clamp bend in jaws
      c. Tighten jaws
    2. Test security
      a. Press down on eye
      b. Release tension with finger
      c. Hook should make a tuning fork sound
  B. Attaching the thread to the hook
    1. Hold thread across shank near bend
    2. Wind several turns forward
    3. Cross over those turns coming back
    4. Press threads together with nails of thumb and finger
    5. Let bobbin hang or attach hackle pliers to thread
  C. Winding the abdomen
    1. Proportion
      a. Abdomen about 1/2 length
      b. Waist or thorax about 1/4 length
      c. Head about 1/4 length
    2. Make small ball in center of abdomen area
      a. Wind tying thread smoothly

REPEAT the process of placing a hook in the tying vice and have each participant do the same thing, checking or having assistants check to be sure that the hook is properly secured in the vice ready for tying.

DEMONSTRATE this process using a large hook and light nylon cord. **EMPHASIZE** passing the thread over the shank going away from the body and under it coming back toward the body. **NOTE** that this process will be used in attaching thread to the hook in every tying process and that keeping a fair amount of tension on nylon tying thread stretches the thread and makes a secure tie.

ILLUSTRATE the proportion of this tie by using the demonstration fly or by using a large drawing or enlarged picture of a well-proportioned example. Keep the demonstration fly available for young people to examine as they tie their own sample.

NOTE that winding only a few turns of thread back and forth

b. Build up several layers for the middle of the abdomen
c. Apply lacquer to the base

over each other builds up a swollen center to the abdomen and makes it possible to build a smoothly tapered body.

STRESS the value of lacquering layers of thread as the fly is tied to give it a shiny appearance and to make it sink readily when fished.

3. Wind a football-shaped abdomen
a. Wind back and forth over central ball
b. Taper toward both ends
c. Lacquer after each layer applied

DEMONSTRATE how to add tapering ends to the abdomen as it is being tied by adding layers to the ball at the center and working the thread off the ends of the ball toward either end of the abdomen. **RE-EMPHASIZE** saturating the body thread with lacquer as each layer is laid down to create a hard, shiny body.

D. Thorax and hackle
1, Keep thorax area thin
2. Wind thread 2 way forward on thorax
3. Select a black hackle feather
a. Soft or webby hackly preferred
b. Hackle fibers slightly longer than gap width
c. Strip fibers from base of hackle

DEMONSTRATE how to select a hackle feather from a cape. **PLUCK** a feather and prepare it for tying by stripping away the fibers from the base of the feather, leaving an ample amount for tying and winding without being crowded. **EXPLAIN** why using a hen hackle or a webby rooster hackle is desired in this wet fly.

4. Tie in hackle in center of thorax
a. Hold firmly in place
b. Top of hackle toward tier
1) Shiny side
2) Convex side
3) Top surface of feather
c. Several tight turns of thread wound over hackle base
d. Trim butt of hackle feather

DEMONSTRATE how to tie in and trim the hackle feather, showing the "right" and "wrong" sides of the hackle feather.

5. Wind one or two turns of hackle around thorax
a. Grasp tip of hackle with hackle pliers
b. Wind hackle in same direction as tying thread
c. Keep the hackle sparse!

DEMONSTRATE how to wind the hackle around the hook, taking only one or two turns of hackle. **EMPHASIZE** the importance of keeping the hackle confined to a small section of the thorax and keeping the thorax area thin. **EMPHASIZE** the importance of keeping the hackle sparse for an effective tie.

6. Tie down hackle tip
a. Two or three turns of tying thread
b. Trim tip of hackle feather

DEMONSTRATE how to tie secure the tip of the hackle and trim the hackle feather, and walk the participants through the process verbally.

7. Carry thread forward to head area.

E. Wind a head
1. Technique similar to making abdomen
a. Building up layers of thread
b. Lacquer after each layer
c. Smaller version of abdomen
2. Finish head at the base of hook eye
3. Whip finish thread at head
a. Whip finishing tool
b. Monofilament loop
c. Dubbing needle or finger manipulation
4. Apply final coat of lacquer to all thread

SELECT and **DEMONSTRATE** a whip finishing process. [*Attaching a loop of light monofilament (6-10 pound test) to a match stick makes an effective and easily used tool that can be mastered easily by most youngsters*.]

III. Critique, evaluation and coaching
A. Evaluation criteria
1. Neatness
2. Proportion
3. Hackle amount and placement
4. "Fishability"

EVALUATE flies as they are finished, holding a **private** evaluation with each participant. Be sure to **USE** an "oreo" technique to evaluate and encourage each of your participants.

B. Fishing the wet ant
  1. Primarily a panfish fly
  2. Cast to likely area
  3. Permit the fly to sink
    a. Try counting to determine depth
    b. Repeat count when strikes occur
  4. Retrieve
    a. Hand-twist retrieve
    b. Slow strip retrieve
    c. Rod tip action

START with a positive statement about the fly. **MOVE** to an area that needs improvement, starting with the most important or basic element first; then **FINISH** with another positive statement designed to encourage the participant to build a better fly on the next opportunity. If time permits, have the participants **tie** another fly of the same pattern, using the coaching critique as a guide to making a better pattern.

OFFER suggestions on appropriate conditions and locations where the fly might be fished locally.

Summary Activity

Have participants compare their ants with the model and determine how they could improve on their imitations. Discuss how to fish the ant, particularly for panfish.

Lesson Narrative

The wet black ant is an excellent panfish pattern that can be used occasionally to take other species as well. It provides superior practice in manipulating the bobbin or tying thread, attaching the thread to the hook and winding a sparse hackle with minimal material cost. It also provides an introduction to the use of a whip finishing tool, like a monofilament loop, to finish the fly without knots. The pattern is usually effective on bedding panfish or actively feeding panfish (like bluegills), almost regardless of the accuracy of the tie or the presentation used.

Wet Black Ant Pattern

The wet black ant can be tied on nearly any style hook in sizes from about size 8 down to size 12 or 14. For teaching purposes, size 8 or 10 hooks are preferred. They give the youngster a bit more room and margin for error.

Wet Black Ant
  Hook: #8 or #10 wet fly (Mustad 7957B or equivalent)
  Tail: none
  Body: black tying thread in three sections
  Abdomen: about 1/2 shank length, football shaped, lacquered
  Thorax: about 1/4 shank length, very thin, lacquered
  Head: about 1/4 shank length, football or ball shaped, lacquered
  Hackle: black hen or webby cock, one or two turns only
  Head: black tying thread
  Lacquer: clear

Tying Process

Demonstration (or demonstrations) of the tying process for the pattern is (are) critical to helping the beginning tiers understand the pattern and process. Make sure that all members can see clearly, even if several demonstrations must be set up. Discuss each step in the tying process, giving any helpful hints as the demonstration progresses. Having several partially completed flies in different stages of construction is often extremely helpful as a reference set for the beginner.

Pass out the appropriate hook to each participant and demonstrate (again) how to place it in the tying vice. Beginners often experience some difficulty clamping a hook securely in the vice. The vice should be set up with the jaws pointing toward the tier's dominant hand. Before the session begins, check each vice to see that it is adjusted to close securely on the size hook being used in this tying session. Illustrate how to clamp a hook in the vice as the participants do their own. For best results, the hook should be clamped at its bend with the shank horizontal to the table surface and the point directly below the shank. Many fly tiers like to clamp the hook at the bottom of the bend to give themselves plenty of space to work around the shank. Although the amount of pressure needed to secure the hook in the vice seems modest to experienced tiers, it requires considerable force to cam the jaws tightly. Check each hook for security in the vice and tighten it if necessary before the youngster starts to tie. Demonstrate the "tuning fork" test and have each youngster make sure they have their hooks secured before attaching the thread.

A knotless tying approach is used throughout the manual. As a result, the flies are tied with considerable pressure on the nylon tying thread. This stretches the thread, giving a tight and secure tie. Give each participant a length of tying thread about 12 to 18 inches long. Have them pull steadily on the ends until it breaks. This will give them an idea of how hard they can pull on the thread before it parts. After that is accomplished, have them adjust the length of thread exposed from the tip of the bobbin so they are working with less than an inch of thread between the bobbin and the hook shank. (Many experienced tiers use only a couple of millimeters of working thread.) This makes manipulations of the bobbin easier and smoother with less motion required for each turn of thread. Holding the bobbin with the tip exposed and the spool inside the hand allows the tier to control the tension on the thread more precisely than can be done with the bobbin alone. Allowing the bobbin to hang freely between tying operations maintains tension on the thread without the need for knots.

Attaching the thread to the hook is one of the first basics to be mastered in this tying method. Since the abdomen is the first part to be tied, the thread should be attached near the end of the shank or in the middle of the abdomen area for this pattern. To do so, the tier holds the tag end of the thread along the hook shank and spirals several open turns of thread toward the eye, then crosses over those open turns back toward the bend of the hook. This produces a series of Xes and anchors the thread under itself effectively. Most tiers find that taking the thread over the shank going away from their bodies and under it coming back toward their bodies is easiest and most effective. Demonstrating the process using a large hook and a brightly colored piece of light cord is worth hundreds of words of explanation.

Once the thread is attached, allow the bobbin to hang in place and use the thumbnail and a fingernail on each side to compact the turns into the center of the abdomen area before cutting off the tag end of the thread. Be sure to let the bobbin hang freely or to attach a pair of hackle pliers to the thread to maintain some tension on it at all times.

When the participants are ready to wind the abdomen of the fly, remind them that it should take up about one-half the length of the shank and that it must be built up from the center outward. Having a fly tied to this stage or in several stages of creating the abdomen will assist the young people in getting their flies tied properly. Guide the participants to work back and forth over the central area of the abdomen until they have built up a small ball. Once the ball has been formed have them work back and forth over the ball, tapering the ends to form a football shaped body somewhat pointed at both ends. Stress the need to wind a smoothly shaped body. Remember that one of the main objectives of this session is to learn how to manipulate the bobbin and thread effectively. Have them apply coats of lacquer to the thread layers, producing a hard, shiny surface.

Once the abdomen is tied, wind the thread forward over about half of the waist or thorax area, laying a smooth and even layer of thread. Let the bobbin hang and select a hackle feather. Using either a black hen hackle or a soft, webby cock hackle cape, pluck one feather that has hackle fibers a bit longer than the gap width of the hook. Strip the fibers away from the quill at the base of the hackle, leaving the better part of the feather for tying. The tier should keep the convex (top or shiny) side of the hackle feather facing toward himself or herself and hold it firmly in place while winding several turns of thread over the quill. Once the quill is tied in place, trim the base of the quill away flush with the thread. With the thread only a

couple of turns in front of the hackle feather, leave the bobbin hanging in order to wind the hackles.

Grasp the tip of the hackle feather with the hackle pliers. Lift the hackle until it is perpendicular with the hook shank and wrap one or two tight turns of hackle around the hook. Holding the hackle pliers in one hand, take several turns of thread around the hackle to bind it in place. Let the bobbin hang to maintain pressure on the thread and trim the remaining hackle feather away. This should leave a sparse amount of hackle in a neat ring around the hook in the center of the thorax or waist.

Carry the thread forward in close, even wraps nearly to the center of the head area. Repeat the process used in making the abdomen to create as slightly smaller ball to represent the enlarged head of an ant, lacquering layers of thread to make a hard, shiny head. Finish the fly using a whip finish. Several methods of whip finishing are available. A tier can use a whip finishing tool, a small loop of monofilament, a dubbing needle or even his or her fingers to wind the thread over its standing end. The monofilament loop is extremely easy to use. Simply lay the loop end of the monofilament over the head with the loop toward the eye of the hook. Wrap 6 to 10 wraps of thread over the loop toward the eye. Holding a finger on the wrapped thread to keep it in place, cut the thread leaving a short piece of extra material. Pass the free end of the thread through the loop and pull the loop and the thread through the wraps. Tug on the end to snug the thread down tightly, trim the end of the thread and apply a drop or two of head cement or lacquer to finish the fly. This technique is nearly foolproof as long as the loop does not break and the tier does not allow it to loop over the eye of the hook. Several excellent whip finishing tools area available commercially, and once their use is mastered, they save an inch or two of thread on each fly. All whip finishing methods are best learned by demonstration and coaching.

Critique, Evaluation and Coaching

Very few beginning flies are going to be models of excellence. The techniques used, attention to detail required and novelty of the process conspire to challenge the beginning tier. Each fly should be evaluated as it is completed, taking care to include positive comments as well as pointing out areas that need improvement. The general neatness of the fly is important. The body parts should be smooth, well proportioned and properly finished. Pay particular attention to the head and the whip-finishing job, a key element in durability of the fly when it is fished. It is difficult to get too little hackle on the fly if a single turn of the feather is used, but most beginners tend to use too much hackle. In this pattern, they should merely suggest legs and provide a bit of movement when the fly is fished. Heavy hackling tends to reduce the fly's effectiveness as a fish catcher. Remember that even poorly dressed ants with odd shaped bodies are likely to be effective in catching the panfish for which they are intended. The ideal fly should cover the linear part of the shank with about half of the shank covered by a fat, football shaped abdomen, a quarter covered by a thin thorax with a light ring of hackle, and about a fourth covered by an enlarged head that ends right at the base of the hook's eye. Encourage the participants to tie an additional fly of the same pattern (either the same size or a smaller one) immediately to take advantage of the critique provided. Watch (or better, assign a teen assistant to watch and assist) when they reach potential trouble spots to assist as needed.

Fishing the Wet Black Ant

Try to conclude the tying session with tips on fishing the fly. Note that its primary use is as a panfish fly, particularly for sunfishes like bluegills and pumpkinseeds. The fly is cast to a likely area, like an opening in a weed or lily pad bed, submerged cover, the pilings of a dock or a rocky area. If the water is shallow, a retrieve can be started immediately; but most of the time it works best to allow the fly to sink a bit before starting to retrieve it. Watch the fly or the line for signs of a hit as the fly settles and be prepared to strike. In deeper water, the depth of the fly can be estimated by counting slowly as it is allowed to sink. This allows the angler to get back into the "strike zone" easily once fish are located.

The ant can be retrieved in several ways, but it is usually best to retrieve it slowly. The hand twist retrieve can be very effective on active panfish. The retrieve derives its name from the motion of the hand as it gathers line. The line is grasped between the thumb and forefinger, then the hand is rolled to allow the line to be held by the palm and the little finger. Repeating this process can produce a retrieve that is extremely slow or one that moves along several inches each second. Some anglers (and some fish) prefer a strip retrieve. This method involves holding the line lightly between the index finger on the rod hand and the

grip of the rod while pulling line toward the body with the line hand. It can be very slow, fished in short jerks or fished quickly to match the mood of the fish. Simply clamping down on the line with the index finger of the rod hand provides ample line control to set the hook when a strike is felt. In some situations, the rod may be used to provide a sweep toward the surface or a series of twitches during the execution of another retrieve. The key is to try several different approaches until one that works effectively on the fish is found.

Sometimes the angler can see the fish as it stalks or charges and takes the fly. Most of the time, the strike will be indicated by a pause or slight tug on the line. A short pull on the line or a quick lift of the rod tip will usually result in a hooked fish.

Exhibit or Sharing Suggestions

1. Prepare a poster, models or photographs to show the steps in tying a wet black ant.

2. Study fly fishing books or magazines to see what other types of ants might be useful for panfish and other fishes. Share the results of your studies with your group or other interested persons.

3. Prepare a method demonstration on tying the wet black ant and present that demonstration in an appropriate setting.

4. Prepare a photographic story of tying a black ant from the beginning of the tying process to using the fly in fishing.

5. Record your experiences with tying and using flies in a tying and fishing journal. Share that journal with others in an appropriate setting.

6. Make a series of flies and fly pattern cards that can be exhibited at a fair or similar gathering.

7. Try variations of the ant to see if you can develop something that works more effectively for the fish in your area. Record your experiments and experimental patterns in a journal and share your findings with others in your group.

Community Service and "Giving Back" Activities

1. Consider ways of helping other young people learn how to tie flies, setting up tying clinics or instructional programs for interested people.

2. Tie a set of flies that can be used as auction items or door prizes in community events or fund raisers.

3. Donate flies to a local fishing program.

Extensions or Ways of Learning More

1. Observe fish and the foods that they eat on your local waters. Using what you know about tying flies, try to develop a pattern that imitates or suggests a food the fish seem to prefer. Research existing fly patterns to see if someone has developed a fly that does what you want. Modify existing patterns or create your own pattern in an attempt to catch the fish you are seeking.

2. Collect stomach contents from fish you like to catch. Observe the contents of those stomachs and record what you find in a notebook. Determine if their food habits are the same all the time or if they change with the time of day and season. Use references to entomology or other fields to assist in identifying what the fish are eating and attempt to create a seasonal reference to their favorite foods.
3. Observe fish actively feeding on a local stream, pond or lake. By careful study, see what they are eating and how they feed. Do they take everything that is a potential food item, or are they selecting something from a set of food choices? What characteristics seem to determine which food items are taken and which ones are rejected? How can that apply to your fly tying efforts.

Links to Other Programs

The link to the rest of the sportfishing program is obvious. Fly tying is a natural link to fly fishing as well as to crafting other types of tackle. Rod building can be a means of having an excellent fly rod at a lower cost. The feathers, furs and other materials needed by a fly tier can lead to interests in hunting, trapping, waterfowl, poultry science or other seemingly unrelated fields. Understanding aquatic ecology as well as keen observation skills are important to success in both tying and fishing flies. This can provide entry into the sciences, either as a future vocation or as an avocational activity. Fishing flies can lead to an interest in several fields of engineering. Tying flies can be a great introduction to economics and marketing for young entrepreneurs. Finally, the hobby of tying flies is both craft and art. It can lead into many other areas of activity from writing and photography to science.