
Fly-tying Hints and Tips

By Derek Young

Learn to Whip Finish by Hand

When using the whip finish tool the head has to be finished at the eye of the hook. If done by hand the whip finish can be completed *anywhere* on the hook - even at the bend of the hook if the fly has been tied in reverse style. Always whip finish towards the hook eye.

Set Hook in Vice and 'Ping' It

When the hook is set in the vice, pull the eye with finger nail and let go. If it 'pings' and doesn't move it is secure and will not work loose when tying on materials.

Cutting Wire

Never cut wire with your tying scissors. Use a cheap second pair of scissors for that job. Better still, secure wire and wiggle/agitate wire until it breaks off (leaving a burr) making it more secure when tied in.

Freeze New Purchases

Each time you purchase or acquire a new cape, new feathers, new pheasant tails etc put them in a plastic bag in the freezer for at least a week. This will kill off bugs/bug eggs and thus avoid contaminating your existing stock.

Threading Bobbin Holders

Instead of inserting a wire bobbin threading tool into your expensive ceramic bobbing holder, simply push the end of the thread into the bottom of the tube, put your lips over the top and suck up the thread or silk through the bobbin holder.

Accurate Head Varnishing

Obtain a small (00) artist's sable hair brush to apply varnish to head of fly. Wipe clean after each use to prolong life of the brush. If varnish accidentally blocks the hook eye, insert the bottom end of a hackle stem and pull through to unclog the eye.

Disposal of Waste Materials

Purchase or make a vice waste bag, that fits onto the vice stem. Or keep a small plastic container near to put waste materials into. An old ice cream container is ideal.

This will keep your partner happy as they won't have to Hoover up after you!

Material Spring

As we were only given 2 hands, a material spring that fits to the vice is great for holding ribbing and thread out of the way whilst tying.

Fly Clips

Fly clips inserted into holes drilled into a block of wood are ideal for holding finished flies while the head cement dries. A cheaper alternative is a wooden clothes peg!

Palmering/Hackling

When winding your rib (in the opposite direction) to your palmered /hackle body, wiggle the wire/tinsel from side to side as you wind as this allows the hackle fibres to spring out of the way and not become trapped.

Naphthalene Crystals (Moth Balls)

Split a packet of naphthalene crystals into lots of smaller plastic bags, with a few pin holes in them, and disperse them amongst your capes and feathers to help prevent bug infestations.

Dubbing Brush

A clean lolly pop stick or coffee stirrer with Velcro (the hook part) stuck to the stick is great as a dubbing brush. Saves picking out fibres/strands with a needle.

Packing/Compressing Deer Hair

When a biro/pen runs out, take it to pieces and keep the hollow shaft of the pen (in various sizes). The eye and shank of the hook will slide inside the tube allowing you to push/compress the deer hair as required. This tube can also be used to push hackles out of the way when forming a nice neat head.

Storing a Dubbing Needle

Use a 35mm film storage canister with a hole for the needle in lid and filled with wire wool to store your dubbing needle. As the dubbing needle, I use an old hat pin, is put in/pulled out, the wire wool should keep the needle point clear of varnish.

This is very useful for those of us who use a needle to apply varnish to the heads of flies.

Securing Wires/Tinsels

Two children's hair bands fitted to your wire/tinsel spools will keep them secure on the spool. Pull the wire/tinsel between bands to stop them unravelling and ending up in a bird's nest.

Stripping Peacock Herl

Lay the peacock herl on a hard surface, holding one end with your thumb and the other end with your middle finger, then rub the quill with an ordinary pencil eraser to rub off the fibres/flue.

Identifying Weighted Flies

After tying your weighted fly and varnishing the head, put a small dab of coloured paint or varnish on the top of the head. This will differentiate between weighted and non-weighted flies sitting in your fly-box. Use different colours for different weights.

Keep a Small Magnet Handy

How many times have you dropped a hook or gold bead on the floor or in the waste materials bag? I keep a magnet on an extendable shaft near to hand to pick it up. Saves scrabbling about on the floor.

Strengthening Peacock Herl

Peacock herl is very brittle at its point. Before winding peacock herl around the hook shank, lightly coat the thread with varnish or super glue, then wind the herl around the hook shank. Another option is to either wind the herl around the thread or wind the thread around the herl before winding both around the hook shank.

You can test the breaking point of the herl by holding the herl at the stem end and gently pulling towards the tip whilst gently applying pressure until it breaks off.