

# Tied Together

BY CATHERINE SCHMITT



CATHERINE SCHMITT (2)

*On the banks of the Penobscot, fly-tying remains an art and an important tradition. Against the backdrop of the world's most ambitious salmon restoration project, it is also a way to spread the conservation ethic.*

TOM MONTGOMERY



**“W**E DON'T TIE FLIES THAT DON'T catch fish,” says Don Corey, president of Penobscot Fly Fishers, in a classroom on the second floor of the Bangor Parks and Recreation

Department. It's early January and outside the window a wet snow is falling. It's the start of the club's annual seven-week beginner fly-tying course, and our first fly is a Maple Syrup.

A classic beginner's trout fly, the Maple Syrup was created by Alvin Theriault of Patten, who perfected the fly on the West Branch Penobscot River. A lot of the patterns on streamer-type flies started in Maine, and the Penobscot has its own fleet of legendary salmon flies. That's why I'm here, to learn about this legacy. And, of course, to learn how to tie flies. In the dark depths of a Maine winter, a fisherman needs something to do until opening day.



CATHERINE SCHMITT



ANDRÉ VEZINA

*Amateur and pro: The author ties her first fly, top. Above, a prime example of an award winning presentation fly, tied by Ari-Heikki Rintaniemi of Finland for FQSA's fly tying contest.*

There are just as many instructors as students (seems members of the Penobscot Fly Fishers also need something to do on a winter's night). I'm paired up with Alan Gray, second vice president of the club, who would be my coach for the rest of the class. The

Maple Syrup is relatively simple, and we also tie a Woolly Bugger. Two hours go by fast, vises and bobbins are put away, and I head home through the snow with my flies stuck into a piece of pink Styrofoam.

I am taking part in a long history. Fly fishing was known to have been practiced on the Penobscot River as early as the 1830s. Throughout the 1800s, as the other rivers of New England lost their salmon to dams and pollution, salmon angling was virtually confined to the Penobscot and mainly to the Bangor pool below the old Bangor Dam. According to author Anthony Netboy, no one believed a salmon would strike at an artificial fly until Fred W. Ayer of Bangor proved them wrong in 1885. The fly rod, too, has its roots on the banks of the Penobscot, where Hiram Leonard of Passadumkeag created a fly rod that became the world's standard in the late 1800s. And it was here, just upstream from where we practice fly-tying, that the Penobscot, Veazie, and Eddington Salmon Clubs were established. Through the years, these clubs have been defenders of the river, successfully preventing the construction of two major dams, fighting for cleaner water, and passing on their legacy to the next generation. And they are still voices for the river, even though they haven't been able to fish for salmon since 1999. Rumors of a short Fall catch-and-release salmon fishery on the Penobscot ripple through this group with cautious hope (see sidebar, page 57).

The following week the temperature soars to 39°F. The snow is sent packing by a cold, steady rain. Marcus Hale, treasurer of the club, is teaching us the Hornberg Special. He tells us that it is a good fly for catching landlocked salmon. There's talk of canoes, the Cabin Fever Reliever event held every winter, knife sharpeners and cross-country skiing. In this strange winter, snowshoes and skis haven't yet been dug out of storage, and everyone seems to still be waiting for the season.

Over the next couple of weeks, we learn Joe's Smelt, Lady Di's Frog Popper (this bug I can see myself using on smallmouth bass in the Penobscot, between Passadumkeag and Greenbush), Mickey Finn, and a Blue Winged Olive. There is a routine: upon arrival everyone mills about, gets a cup of scorching hot coffee, snags a homemade cookie, and brings equipment to their places at long tables in the classroom. Corey, or another member of the club, ties a fly at a table in the front of the room, giving personal insight as the rest of the group trades ribs and jokes. Then the students take materials and go back to their seats to tie. It helps having a personal coach, and Alan and I chat away the evening. He works at the University of Maine, too, and we exchange campus gossip as he tells me to keep the thread taut and work on my half-hitches. Marcus Hale sits across from me. Both Marcus and Alan are encouraging, let us make mistakes and tie our own way.

By mid February it's practically balmy at 41°F. Tonight's fly is an Elk Hair Caddis. ("If you can't catch it with an elk hair caddis, you might as well go home.") I

## Penobscot Developments

### FALL FISHERY

For the fly tiers who have patiently, and lovingly, carried on the tradition of making hand-tied flies, the six-year long wait is over. The Maine Atlantic Salmon Commission voted unanimously last June 22, to reopen a stretch of the Penobscot River near Bangor to catch-and-release Atlantic salmon fishing for one month this fall.

The season will run from Sept. 15 to Oct. 15, although the commission retains the option of closing the fishery at any time to protect the river's salmon population. Only single-pointed, barbless hooks may be used and anglers must immediately release any caught fish unharmed without removing them from the water.

The logic behind the fall fishery is two-fold: Biologists are pleased that 1,000 plus adults had been counted in the Veazie Dam fishway this spring and based on scientific evidence, the commission concluded that a catch-and-release fishery held in the fall would pose no long-term danger to the salmon population. The fishery would also provide a boost to the fishing community and the local economy.

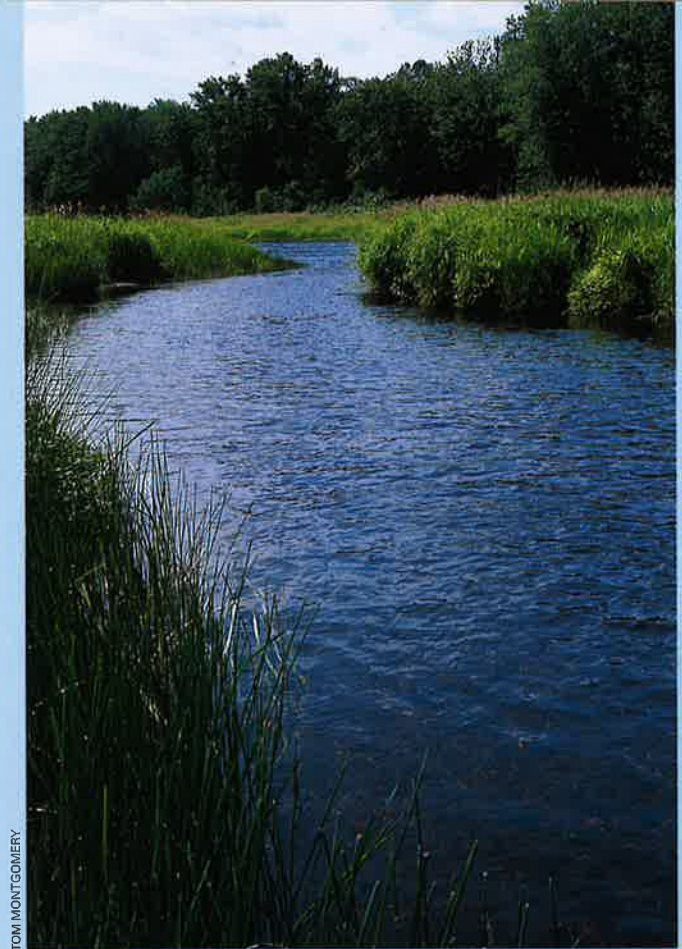
### PROJECT UPDATE

The Penobscot project, widely acclaimed as the 'last, best chance' to save Atlantic salmon in the United States continues to gain momentum. In June, a joint effort by Senators Olympia J. Snowe and Susan Collins (both R-Maine) was instrumental in securing \$2.5 million in the Department of Interior's Fiscal Year 2007 Appropriations Bill in support of the Penobscot River Restoration Project. Also in June, Mike Michaud (D-Maine) of the House of Representatives helped pass a resolution that allows the Army Corps of Engineers to legally become engaged as a partner in the project. At the same time, the Senate approved \$100,000 in initial funds in the Fiscal Year 2007 Energy and Water Appropriations bill. This is a critical step forward as the Corps has expressed strong interest in being the federal agency to remove the dams.

missed the previous week because I was sick, and I'm eager to get back to the bench. This class is an escape, a chance to work with my hands, and talk about rivers. I love this fly and I crank out a boatload of them.

I thought I'd learn some about fish in this class, but I didn't expect to learn so much about other animals, about the insects we're tying and the animals that provide the materials. Most of my previous bug knowledge came from early encounters with mosquitoes and gnats in my New Jersey backyard, crushing lightning bugs into a neon yellow smear on the driveway. It wasn't until taking a river ecology course as a graduate student that I finally learned the difference between a shredder and a scraper, how important insect larvae are to stream ecosystems, and how their numbers could be used to monitor water pollution.

So I came to fly-tying class knowing that I would be trying to mimic these bugs (imitation is the sincerest



TOM MONTGOMERY

The Penobscot River Restoration Trust, which ASF helped found, is actively seeking to raise \$25 million from a combination of public and private sources to purchase the dams. Maine's Congressional Delegation has been instrumental in securing more than \$4 million dollars in federal funds for the project. Private fundraising efforts have thus far resulted in an additional \$4.5 million toward completion of the project. With another \$2.5 million proposed in the Department of Interior bill and the NOAA Fisheries bill to be announced soon, good progress is being made.

form of flattery . . .). But by trying to create the body parts of a caddisfly or nymph, I gained a greater appreciation for how these animals are put together, and through them I learned about the fish. Fishing is as much about the prey as it is the predator.

And I found myself feeling closer to other animals, too, and the places they live. Deer, mallard, peacock, rooster, elk, seeing how an elk's hair grows from the skin, the different parts of a feather, the coarseness of a calf's tail. This is a natural art, recreating the art of nature, and I feel connected to the river.

The mercury drops to 28 on February 23 and we're tying a Blue-Winged Olive and a Gold Ribbed Hare's Ear, but first we get a brief lesson in dubbing. Don shows us how to whirl hare's mask and yarn in a coffee grinder to make the dubbing, then how to wrap it around the thread. We're learning lots of little time- and money-saving tips, and it helps to demystify the

art. The hare's ear uses a turkey feather and fur from a hare's face. These are nymphs, fished between the bottom and the surface.

Marcus says, "We just come here to eat cookies and goof off." Later he tells me we should go fishing this spring and he'll teach me how to cast. He tries to coax Alan into coming along. Alan changes the subject and tries to get a rise out of me by throwing the hare mask in my face.

This was supposed to be the last night, but somehow the class keeps continuing. Without much of a show about it, we all agree to come another week. It's the end of February and everyone is restless. Anything is better than wondering when winter will end, and if it ever really started.



ANDRÉ VEZINA



MARTIN NEPTUNE



MARTIN NEPTUNE

*A dragonfly (left) and the Penobscot River at sunset (above), are natural elements that are reflected in the region's salmon flies. The Tsunami fly (top left), tied by Michel Leblanc for FQSA's international flytying championship, is an excellent example of how flies can tell a story.*

It's the last day of class, and we have the gym for an hour to practice casting. Outside the weather has turned bitter cold. Don looks at me and asks if I want to try. Having an audience makes me uncomfortable, but I don't want to be lame so I say yes and head to the far side of the basketball court. Don coaches me, back and forward, aim for the windows, snap harder, stand sideways so I can watch the line, back and forth. He's a good teacher, and I get it, in principle. I know I just need to practice by myself. I need a fly rod. I need a big field and a trout-stocked pond and a sunny day all to myself. I am anxious for spring, for even as this weird, warm winter comes to an end, I can't wait to be back on the river.

Kids start to show up with sneakers dangling from gloved hands, and we pack up the rods and head into the classroom. The second-to-last fly is a Parachute Adams. Since it is similar to the Elk Hair Caddis, I know I'll like it. "People have good luck with these," Don says as he begins to tie and give a final speech about the class.

"We try to expose people to many different types of flies and different materials. Don't get discouraged. You're not going to be proficient at every kind of fly. If I can leave people with anything, it's not to be afraid to ask questions. Find someone who knows about fly-tying and ask him what you need. Ask one of us."

I want to ask what it's like to pull a salmon from the Bangor Pool, to capture energy and nutrients in the form of a sleek slab of silver on its way from the sea to the rivers of the great North Woods. I want to ask what it's like to stand there on the banks in front of the

Penobscot Salmon Club in the early morning hours of opening day, waiting for a shout of "fish on!" I want to know if the stories are true.

I mess up my first Adams because I forget to tie the hackle on before dubbing the body, but I nail the second one. We use moose hair for the tail, picking out five or six coarse, black mane hairs. It's the first and only time we've used moose, and it feels like closure, like a cycle completed.

The last fly is a Muddler Minnow, and Don shows us how to spin deer hair. It is supposed to mimic the fat blunt head of a sculpin and is fished on the bottom. I tie one Muddler, pack up my things, and go home. I'll see my fellow tiers again, at the Sportsmen's Show, at meetings of the Penobscot Salmon Club, and hopefully, on a bright September morning for opening day.

*Catherine Schmitt is a Bangor-based scientist and writer. She is a regular contributor to the Journal.*